Responding to COVID-19: issues affecting services for children and young people

Briefing Note: 4, 21/05/20

This is the fourth in a series of briefings to share findings from our ongoing intelligence-gathering on the impact of COVID-19 on the children's sector, based on issues that professionals are seeing in the course of their work. If you would like to be involved in this activity, please contact Scott Compton at The Children's Society. The form has been running since 6th April 2020 and has had a total of 122 respondents to date. What follows reflects the key themes identified over the course of two weeks, between 27/04/20 – 10/05/20. However, this briefing also reflects some of the wider themes and ideas raised throughout the time the form has been in the field. All the briefings in this series are accessible online.

We will continue to collect, collate and analyse responses through the pandemic. Please help us to collect as much evidence as possible on how COVID-19 is affecting frontline children's service providers by completing or sharing the evidence collection form.

This briefing is based on contributions from 21 individual respondents, over the course of two weeks, representing the following areas. **NB**: respondents are able to choose multiple areas.	No. of respondents	Geographical reach	No. of respondents
Children's social care	8	South West	5
Child protection/safeguarding	7	London	3
Mental health	5	Y&H	2
Education	4	Wales	1
Youth services	4	Northern Ireland	1
Family support	3	South East	1
Health	2	North East	1
Early years provision	2		
Other	5		

Theme 1: Reaching children in need of support

A number of respondents raised concerns about the ability of professionals to reach out to children and young people in need of support, and in particular to reach the most vulnerable. The responses highlight a number of factors which may be acting as barriers between professional support and children and their families, including the following:

Vulnerable young people not in school
A key issue relating to reaching children and young people in need of support appears to be the difficulty with the low numbers of vulnerable young people entitled to a school place attending. One school nurse reported *"Only circa 15% of our most vulnerable [children and young people] are attending school; this of grave concern regarding safeguarding and mental health issues"*.

A separate respondent working in children's social care in the West Midlands, linked low school attendance to the fact that social workers have no power of enforcement, and that parents are understandably worried about protecting their children from the virus. This respondent argued that *"We need more clarity from government for schools and social care to enforce this when absolutely necessary for the safety of wellbeing of the child".* This question of enforcement has also been raised in previous weeks by social care staff. It is clear that a lack of clarity remains about what professionals can and should do when a young person that they believe should be in school is not attending.

Digital technology

The issue of children and young people not having access to digital platforms and the internet at home continues to be an issue. In addition, it was reported that many social workers and children's social care staff still do not have access to appropriate technology to complete home visits. This risks children and families being left with no contact with professionals.

Furthermore, whilst it was noted that in many instances services have been adapted to incorporate more online delivery, in some cases they are still not adequately equipped to deliver effective interventions: *"it is not easy to provide therapy through a work mobile. A laptop enabled with an encrypted platform with a good camera would facilitate engagement and maintaining the therapeutic relationship".* Additionally, in previous weeks issues of lack of private space for conversations and building relationships being hampered without face-to-face contact have been raised. One responded expressed concern that reaching young people through digital technology could carry additional problems from some groups of young people including; young people with autism spectrum disorder, disabled young people and young children.

Stretched resources

A number of concerns were raised around access to adequate PPE and guidance for using it. It is clear that a lack of PPE is still acting as a barrier to social workers being able to carry out safe home visits. One responded reported that they were "*still expected to complete home visits",* without access to PPE or even hand sanitizer. On responded mentioned that staff were not being redeployed in an intelligent way which meant that some services were finding themselves left short whilst others were overstaffed, *"teams have been redeployed to critical services so unable to provide the service their team usually delivers. Also, critical services are reporting not needing additional capacity from redeployed* staff".

As the lockdown begins to be eased it is important that professionals are supported and feel safe to resume home visits to families. Enhanced provision of PPE and clarity around the policy on home visits will support this.

Thresholds

One respondent stated that in order for their service to maintain a good level of contact with the children and young people that they already see, *"new cases have not been admitted unless they are high risk".*

It is important to note that issues relating to reaching vulnerable young people have been a prominent feature of responses over the course of this project. These issues have been raised from respondents working across the children's sector.

Possible solutions:
- The Department for Education should support schools, colleges and local authorities to work together to ensure that children who are able to attend school are encouraged to do so by identifying and addressing specific barriers to attendance. In instances where young people are not attending school due to risk to health, regular welfare checks must be carried out and the outcomes of these checks recorded and monitored.
- The government must roll out and extend its digital support package, with appropriate digital devices and 4G internet delivered to all children known to social care - but also seek to ensure digital access to other vulnerable groups not supported through social care services. Schools and colleges should be supported to apply for and distribute digital support to children and young people they consider in need of support.
- The government should make an easily and quickly accessible fund available to support those working across the children's sector to obtain or upgrade digital infrastructure to meet their required needs.

- The government must ensure that adequate PPE is available to all essential front-line staff.
- Redeployment of children's service staff should be done in consultation with professionals working on the ground. The impacts on services that have lost capacity must be closely scrutinised and any changes should be regularly reviewed.

Theme 2: Mental health and well-being

A range of concerns relating to children and young people's mental health and well-being were raised by respondents. Perhaps most worryingly were reports of children with significant support needs being unable to be referred for emergency help. A foster carer who had recently taken care of a child with high needs and challenging behaviours resulting from previous trauma, reported that the child is currently unable to access mental health and emotional well-being support *"that is urgently needed… This child is feeling forgotten and consequently experiencing extreme emotional outbursts".* The fact that the child was in an out of area care placement was suggested to have acted as an additional barrier to the young person accessing support.

There were further reports from an adoption agency that the current crisis was causing distress and triggering trauma amongst foster children, who are in need of urgent one-to-one support, with a high risk of placement disruption if such support is not put in place. In addition, a child therapist who works with vulnerable children in primary schools expressed regret that many children had seen their therapy abruptly end due to school closures and furloughing amongst staff: *"A poor ending to a therapeutic relationship is unethical and could undo all the progress made."*

One CAMHS professional in the South West also expressed concern that the reduced level of service provided by CAMHS could lead to Trusts raising thresholds, reducing clinic space or demanding greater flexibility from staff that compromises their professional standards. They emphasised that the Government must not lose sight of the need to deliver the commitments to improved mental health support under the NHS Long Term Plan.

More low-level mental health and well-being issues included concern around the pressures on young carers and how they will be encouraged to return to school and the impact of increased use of digital technology on children's mental health and well-being.

One respondent highlighted how lockdown had made it clear that having access to outside space is important for the mental health and well-being of young people in society. However, the same respondent pointed out that many young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and BME groups are finding it hard to access outdoor space due to social distancing measures and restrictions placed on using public transport. With young people and their families being told that they should avoid using public transport for non-essential journeys, those living in inner cities and without access to a car will be less likely to be able to access outdoor spaces and experience nature, which is important for well-being and recovery.

Possible solutions:
- NHS England must provide clear guidance and support for mental health services to ensure that they do not take decisions to reduce access to services as a result of COVID-19.
- The Government should consider changing its messaging in relation to public transport restrictions. People living in large urban cities who do not have access to a car could be permitted to make non-essential journeys to green spaces using public transport outside of peak hours.

Theme three: Transitioning out of lockdown

An emerging theme concerns how to handle the transition out of lockdown for children and young people in a way that is safe and best protects their health and emotional well-being. The most pressing issue appears to be around the return to school.

Whilst stay at home measures have undoubtedly had negative impacts on many children and young people, it was highlighted that for some, lock down has had some positive features. Some vulnerable children attending school have had weeks of 1-2-1 contact with teachers and other school staff and will be getting used to smaller class sizes and more in school support. For young carers, who often report feeling worried about their families at home during school hours, this time may have eased some of these anxieties and resulted in them feeling more *"settled"* and "*comfortable*".

Respondents made clear that the impact of social distancing on anxiety and well-being when schools return could be particularly pertinent for those with special educational needs and for those with vulnerable family members. One school governor remarked *"children at school need to feel they are not at risk of infecting family members in their households"*.

One respondent pointed towards the need for a sustained change in the delivery of education as children return with a greater focus on children's well-being and outdoor education. Respondents called for schools to be given a degree of trust and flexibility, rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach to getting pupils back into school and the need for adequate mental health support for pupils was flagged again, as was concern for teachers' mental health.

Possible solutions:
- The Government should address children and young people directly in their communications about Covid-19 as we begin to transition out of lock down. This must be communicated through young person friendly channels that are widely accessible - children and young people should be given the opportunity to ask questions directly to the Government.
- The Department for Education should plan for a re-entry programme for schools that prioritises children and young people's well-being, working out how a whole school and trauma-informed approach can best be used to tackle the long term effects of the pandemic and associated lockdown measures. Any plan must recognise the varied experiences that young people will have had during lockdown and not take a '*one size fits all approach'*.

Other issues

As well as the three key themes outlined above, a range of additional issues, were apparent in the survey responses over the past two weeks. The issues include but are not limited to:

- *The impact of continued social distancing and staff furloughing on trusted relationships between young people and professionals.*
- *Difficulties in accessing crisis support funds made available by the government. One responded highlighted that despite the announcement of available funding for advice lines it had not been made clear how and when this could be accessed.*
- *Increased risk of exploitation. One respondent expressed concerns that children were spending more unmonitored time online, being encouraged to do so by schools and government, which could place them at risk of exploitation.*