

	<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b> 15 July 2020
	<b>Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Support during the Covid-19 Pandemic</b>	

<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	N/A
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b> (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
<b>No. of Appendices:</b>	0
<b>Background Papers:</b>	N/A
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## 1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This report provides a summary of the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on children in care, care leavers and foster carers, detailing Brent's response as a Corporate Parent during this period.

## 2.0 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review and comment on the content of this report.

## 3.0 Detail

- 3.1. Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown has impacted on children in care and care leavers in various ways. A number of children, foster carers and young people had to self-isolate in their placements or accommodation when they or someone in the household displayed flu-like symptoms. Following risk assessments, face to face contact between children and their birth families was restricted to video and telephone calls. Although most young people were content with the new way of contact, there were some, particularly younger children, who understandably struggled not seeing their parents face to face.
- 3.2. The impact of loneliness, being unable to attend educational settings, visit friends or family face to face during the lockdown has been evident. Young people, particularly care leavers who reside in their own accommodation, have struggled with boredom and anxiety caused in part by inaccurate information on social media on how to keep themselves safe. Most of their leisure activities and hobbies have been put on hold as well as the routine structure of their day to day routine such as going to school, college, university or workplace.
- 3.3. Covid-19 has also had a financial impact on care leavers - young people have found they need to spend more on food shopping as they have been trying to buy from independent stores. They have had higher utility costs due to being inside for prolonged periods and using higher internet data costs. Some care leavers have lost jobs they previously held so are having to work to budget from a smaller amount of money.

#### **4.0 Support Provided during the Pandemic to Looked After Children, Care Leavers and Brent Foster Carers**

- 4.1. Children who are looked after have continued to be supported by their allocated social workers during the Covid-19 lockdown with the majority of statutory visits being done virtually. Although some children and young people have been reluctant to engage via video chat, it has been evident that for most they have been comfortable with this new way of working. For those who are more reluctant or where there are complex issues of risk, face to face visits have taken place, following a risk assessment that is regularly reviewed by the social worker and their manager.
- 4.2. Contact between children and their families has been carefully risk-assessed taking into account various guidance including Public Health England, from the President of the Family Division (family courts), the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) and the National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC).
- 4.3. At present, the majority of children are being contacted and seen through phone and video calling where child are of an age/level of understanding that this is possible. For the time being face-to-face contact is prioritised for children under

the age of 3, for children with additional needs where virtual contact would not be beneficial/manageable and where there is court directed contact. Where face-to-face contact has been agreed, a maximum of 6 people can attend in line with government guidance (this is inclusive of the contact workers and any interpreter).

- 4.4. Social workers have demonstrated creativity in engaging children and young people virtually and have taken a flexible approach to ensure that children and young people are as comfortable and relaxed as possible. Some examples from social workers' visits to children demonstrate this engagement during the lockdown period:

*The children appeared to be managing with the Lockdown rules. During my video call the children showed me round the garden and how they have moved things around because they are planning on getting a garden pool soon. All three children appeared very happy. They were showing me what they were doing and telling about how hard they are working to ensure that they keep their school work up to date. The children are very cheerful and enjoy talking to me on the phone.*

*'E' looked smiley and happy, sat in her room, eating a packet of crisps. I asked her to put the blinds up in her room, to let some of the light in. She did so as I was speaking, and asking her why she is avoiding my calls, and not really responding to my text messages. E said, 'because you're old'. I laughed and said I haven't always been this old! I am likely to be one of the youngest social workers she has had, and we have such a great bond! E laughed and agreed. I joked that I can ask for another social worker who will be even OLDER than I am. She said she knows, doesn't want this. I empathised with her situation, and asked if she is just avoiding me because she doesn't like phone conversations? This has always been something that she has said. E said yes. I then asked if she would prefer speaking face to face, and she nodded. We agreed to have our next meeting soon, and I would text her of the day and time I plan to come down and see her.*

*C was in the front room with the foster carer when I called and seemed excited to have the call. He took the phone and went up to his room. C was wearing a blue t-shirt and navy tracksuit bottoms. C showed me a balloon in his room and started doing kick-ups with it while we spoke. We started chatting about basketball and NBA teams and played a game where C had to name as many as he could in 5 minutes, I set a timer and wrote down the teams he named and he managed to name 25 out of 30! He was pleased with this and at the end of the call I said we could play the game again next time, he suggested he could also name Formula 1 teams and then listed all of them and the drivers while we spoke! When he gave the phone back to the foster carer he told her about how well he did naming the NBA teams.*

- 4.5. Social workers, managers and service managers have been involved in placement moves for children and young people who required changes of placement, transporting and settling them into new placements and undertaking Placement Agreement Meetings.
- 4.6. The LAC and Permanency Service has maintained a log of all children, foster carers and young people who have self-isolated either because they had symptoms or where household members had symptoms/shielding. Maintaining this log has helped ensure that children, foster carers and care leavers are receiving the necessary support and intervention.
- 4.7. Upon governmental guidance that a lockdown on movement was to be put into place, a risk assessment of Brent foster carers was undertaken, noting those who were particularly vulnerable due to underlying health conditions or their age. Additional information was gathered regarding which carers would be affected by school closures or put at a disadvantage financially due to their employment status. Regular communication detailing the support available and clarity around government guidance in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on contact, education and social interaction has been shared weekly (or more often where necessary) via a newsletter. Feedback from foster carers has been that they have felt well supported during this pandemic by the team and senior managers.
- 4.8. In addition to emotional support, an offer was circulated that foster carers can approach their supervising social worker if they began to experience hardship directly linked to being furloughed, losing employment or purchasing additional equipment. No carers have taken this offer forward to date and the majority report they are managing well on the resources they have. Allowances were paid slightly early to allow for any delay in processing, which the carers have positively appreciated.
- 4.9. The LAC and Permanency Service has been working effectively with LAC Health partners to ensure that the health of looked after children and young people is prioritised during this time. Initial Health Assessments have continued to be undertaken face to face with Brent paediatricians. This was a decision taken by the health service and it is understood that Brent is the only local authority in the country where this has continued. Review Health Assessments have been undertaken virtually using a new application that has been rolled out across the Trust to conduct these virtual appointments safely.
- 4.10. The Brent LAC Health team has been completing virtually some review health assessments for out of borough children and young people. This has had a positive impact on the timeliness of these assessments. There has also been an improvement in timeliness with other local authorities completing assessments for our young people because these are being done virtually or over the telephone.
- 4.11. LAC health professionals have provided a telephone follow-up service to children and care leavers who have been identified by the LAC and Permanency service as in a household that is self-isolating due to Covid-19 symptoms.

- 4.12. Brent Virtual School (BVS) for Looked after Children has provided online learning opportunities to children in care as well as virtual workshops to foster carers to support them during the pandemic. The BVS has been sharing useful online resources to support educational outcomes as well as encouraging school attendance of LAC as a vulnerable group. Approximately 20% of the children in care have been attending schools to date. BVS has issued guidance around trauma, loss and coping strategies to foster carers shared in weekly newsletters.

## **5 Support Provided to Care Leavers during the Pandemic**

- 5.1. In relation to care leavers who have had additional financial needs, Brent Leaving Care Teams have provided emergency food payments where necessary and regularly topped up internet data costs.
- 5.2. Prior to the government's announcement about educational support to care leavers in EET, Brent had purchased laptops to care leavers who were self-isolating at a crucial stage of their education to ensure they were able to continue with home learning. For example, two young people have subsequently completed their course which may not have been possible otherwise. Since the Government's announcement about laptops for care leavers, 76 young people have received a laptop and a dongle to enable access to the internet.
- 5.3. Barnardo's, as part of a partnership agreement with Brent, has supported some care leavers who are NEET to obtain laptops and young people without a Smartphone to access one to ensure they have a positive way of connecting with friends and family. Additionally, young or expectant parents were also referred to Barnardo's who have provided 'baby bundles' and, where relevant, organised weekly food deliveries via the Council's corporate arrangements.
- 5.4. Brent Leaving Care Teams have encouraged young people to join the WhatsApp group which has expanded during this time. There has been regular conversation on this group, including games and quizzes. Pandemic updates have been provided within the group where relevant to ensure young people know the new guidelines regarding single person households being able to mix in a 'bubble'.
- 5.5. Young people, who have particularly struggled emotionally, have been referred to the Safe Base Brent Programme for online therapy. This programme has been expanded with increased hours of online counselling available for care leavers and is funded through Brent's Virtual School for Looked After Children. Additionally, details of online mental health and well-being support services such as 'Kooth' have been shared and promoted through the WhatsApp group.
- 5.6. The Brent CYP participation worker has used the WhatsApp group to publicise Care Leavers In Action (CLIA) events and has hosted a quiz via Zoom. Personal Advisors have ensured that they have completed regular phone calls to check in, in addition to their statutory 'FaceTime' visits to keep in touch and support care leavers. When workers have been on leave or absent from work, duty

workers have ensured they have been able to check in with that PA's young people.

- 5.7. Brent has continued to support care leavers in semi-independent placements due to delays moving into their tenancies that they had secured prior to the pandemic. This has meant that the Council had to pay for semi-independent placements for longer periods due to the impact of Covid-19.
- 5.8. Care leavers in higher education were provided with financial assistance in relation to accommodation and subsistence, who returned to London earlier than expected holiday terms.
- 5.9. A virtual CLIA session took place on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2020 with attendance of Gail Tolley, Strategic Director Children and Young People, who heard directly from 9 young people about their experiences during COVID-19. The majority of those within the group shared positive stories of what they had been doing during the 'lockdown' period which included doing podcasts with online cooking session; attending women empowerment sessions; completing university work; attending virtual choir (one voice); looking for employment (one member starting a new job the following week) and exercising. The two parents in the group shared that they were spending time looking after their children with one father sharing that he was reading daily to his daughter. One member of the group shared that they were experiencing financial difficulties and another that there were having difficulties using their laptop to access work, these issues have been raised with the social work team to resolve.
- 5.10. Additionally, a Virtual Care Leavers' Hub took place on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020 with attendance of 20 young people with 17 of those actively participating to various discussions including 'Black Lives Matters' and impact of inequality in communities. Young people also talked about what they have been doing during the lockdown and making recommendations to each other about online courses, music and various activities. Feedback from young people has been very positive on the Virtual Hub for care leavers. Therefore, the Leaving Care Teams plan to retain the aspect of virtual attendance to the hub in the future.

## **6.0. Actions going forward**

- 6.1. As guidelines ease some physically-distanced visits will take place face to face outside, where a staff member can safely visit a young person without using public transport. This has already started with a small number of visits including supporting a young person in court.
- 6.2. Brent will continue to support care leavers who were delayed in moving to their own tenancy to now start buying essential goods to start the transition to independent living.
- 6.3. Where it is not possible to visit young people at their home or placement the Civic Centre will be used on an appointment basis to carry out face to face visits or meetings. Many young people provided positive feedback about virtual contact and the Leaving Care Teams will retain more of this element of keeping in touch alongside face to face visits.

- 6.4. Brent foster carers shared that they are happy with the foster carers' online support group meeting and they would like it to continue. They find it easier to attend, as they don't have to secure childcare. Consideration is being given to continuing this virtual support group meeting every other month or quarterly when the lockdown is fully over.
- 6.5. Alongside other LAs, Brent is considering increasing the weekly subsistence allowance of £57.90 for older children in semi-independent placements and eligible care leavers by £20 per week in line with the increase in Universal Credit until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. This will increase CYP budget costs by approximately £100k. This is planned to be a one-off Covid-19 related spend until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. Should the UC increase be maintained by government beyond March 2021 the service will consider whether there is scope to maintain this for care leavers and older young people in care but this would be an additional budget pressure.

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