

PEOPLE: A GOOD QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL OUR RESIDENTS

Children's Social Care

NUMBERS OF CHILDREN IN CARE & CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE INFORMATION

Our current figures as regards Children's Social Care statistics are as follows:

Child in Need	355
Child Protection	190
Children in our Care	378

KEY PRIORITIES

Our priorities over the past nine months and since the onset of the pandemic has been 'Business as Usual' but we have delivered our services in different ways.

- There has remained a clear focus on our statutory services and our duty to assess, plan and intervene for all children subject to child in need plans, child protection plans and in our role as Corporate Parents. Social work staff and our support service staff have maintained direct face to face visits for those families most at risk. Our risk assessment tool has had a refresh and been revisited for all of our families to ensure assessments are realistic and supported and sanctioned by line managers in all parts of the service. Other alternative forms of contact with children and families have been used to stay in touch and to form relationships and make assessments. Virtual visits, garden/doorstep visits, face time and the use of social media has been used responsibly to work as effectively as possible with families.
- There have been strong links with our schools and settings during the past ten months of the pandemic. Using the same risk assessment tool to determine an offer to our most vulnerable children and families has been a good example of children's social care and education colleagues working together.
- Work has been undertaken to further embed our Quality Assurance Framework through thematic audit activity and routine audit activity. This is key to aiding our level of understanding of both outstanding good practice and practice which requires improvement. Our third practice week took place November 2020 which had a focus on the Local Authority as Corporate Parents.
- We are updating our Self Evaluation Framework across all parts of children's services. This exercise is cathartic in terms of it highlighting the journey travelled within children's services and education and helps us to prepare for the sharing of the journey we are on with Ofsted.

What our data tells us

The Children's Advice and Duty Service 6 month review held in June 2020 highlighted a job well done. There has been a downward trend in the number of open cases in the safeguarding teams from 1216 in November 2019 to 831 open cases in November 2020.

The 12 month review is taking place this month (December 2020) and will enrich our understanding as regards the embedding of the model. Overall our front door service is deemed to be a success story and can be held as an example of good practice. A strong message remains in place to the public, and with our partners that our service is ever present, social work led and is very much accessible and open if anyone has concerns about the welfare of a child. This has proved to be effective.

The timeliness of our assessments has increased to 90% a significant improvement from the average twelve months ago which was in 2019/20 61%. Our social work staff have continued to prioritise their assessments of vulnerable children and our compliance levels have increased despite the impact of Covid.

Our looked after children figure has seen a reduction from a steady 400 during the first 6 months of this year down to 378 currently. The demand for external commissioned placements has not seen any increase. This has ensured that budgetary demands have not increased and this is despite the impact of Covid. A joint commissioning strategy is now in place on a tripartite basis with health and education to support joint funding for our most complex children where this is relevant.

There has been a great deal of scrutiny and the driving of plans to ensure right across our service that the right children have the right level of intervention for the right length of time. This work has been supported by the implementation of CADS; by the strong early help offer; by the strong edge of care and adolescent offer; and by our staff ensuring cases are closed promptly or stepped down to the right type of plan to safeguard that child and family; by discharging care orders through the courts where appropriate.

ADOLESCENT SERVICES

YOUNG PEOPLES SERVICES

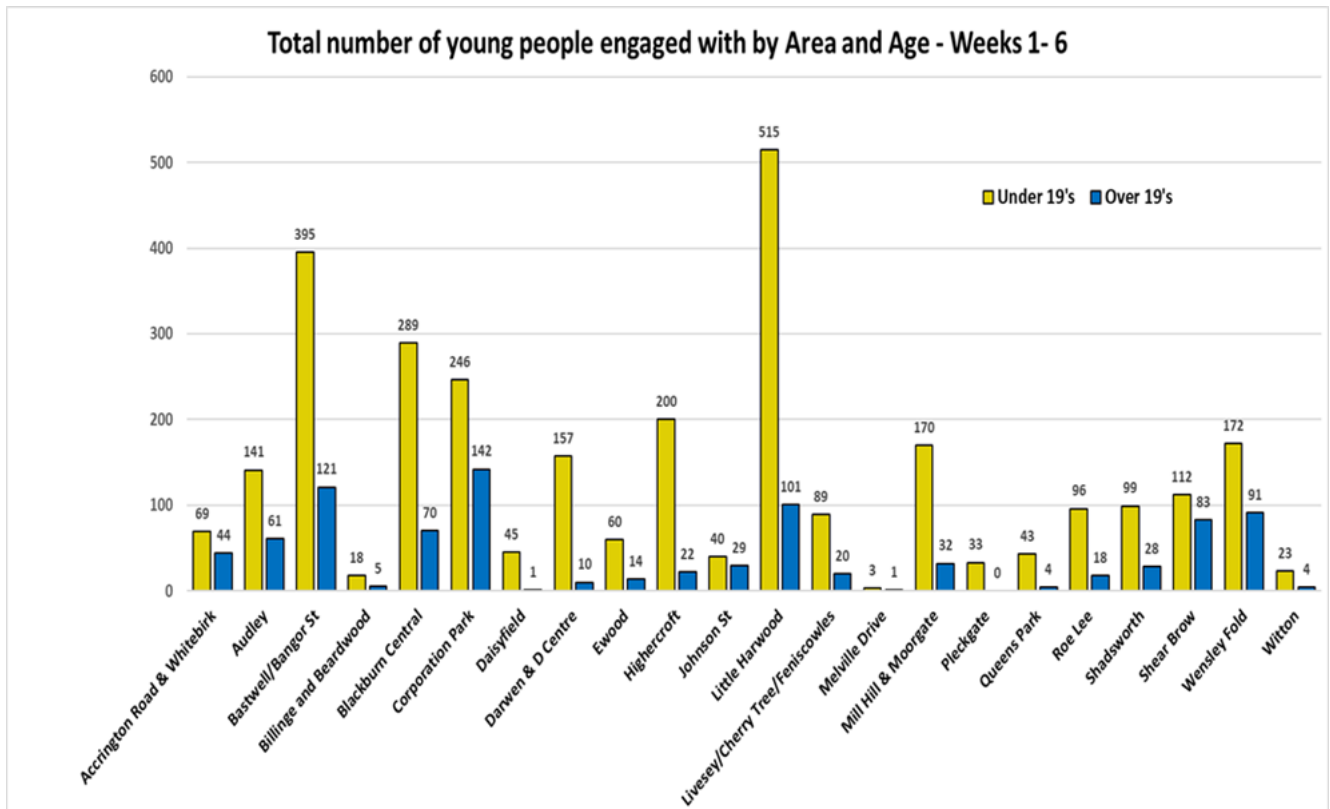
October Half Term HAF programmes

YPS delivered 2 x HAF programmes over summer. One for our Targeted Youth Support Service and one for our SEND provision. Both projects were praised by the visiting DfE representatives and as such YPS were asked to provide similar provision over October half term.

COVID Detached Project

Young Peoples Services led a multi-agency detached project in October and November – requested by BwD Public Health. The project included five additional VCFS providers (BRCT, BYZ, CANW, Youth Action and IMO). Every evening and weekend a minimum of two youth work teams hit the streets to pass on Covid safety messages to young people and young adults. The detached team used intelligence from various sources (Police, Community Safety Team, Elected Members and Neighbourhood Teams) to actively target areas where young people/young adults were congregating.

The team handed out masks as well as tough messaging on how to stay safe and play safe. The project evidenced an increase in compliance. Chart below details areas visited and numbers of under and over 19s engaged with below:



SEND Commission

YPS's SEND project has received lots of positive feedback from parents/carers/YP and visitors over the last few months. As a result of this positive feedback YPS have been asked to take on an additional SEND commission providing a range of leisure and informal education sessions to a group of up to ten ASC YP who need intensive support. The project commenced in December 2020.

YOUTH JUSTICE

Following persistent problems of anti-social behaviour amongst a small group of young people in and around Darwen Town Centre, a project is being set up to target these specific individuals to engage them in more constructive use of their leisure time. Through Youth Justice engagement with these young people, and that of partners in Community Safety and Blackburn Youth Zone, it has been established that a number of these young people have developed a particular interest in music production through an organisation operating from the Meeting Places venue, called 'We Are Noise'. Through a combination of funding from the Youth Justice Service and a successful bid for match funding from Lancashire Partners Against Crime (LANPAC), an initial 12 week programme is due to commence in the new year, allowing eight young people to access the service twice a week for two hour sessions. During these sessions they will cover various aspects of music production, allowing them to express their creativity in a constructive environment, with the hope of channelling their efforts and energy in a productive and engaging way to improve their future prospects. Successful completion of the course will be rewarded with a recognised Arts Awards and potentially lead to ongoing involvement with the project.

SEEDS

Over 65 young people and their families have continued to engage with the SEEDS despite having to adapt to the ever changing restrictions placed upon us all. A creative and flexible approach utilising virtual resources, local resources and tailored kits have helped maintain relationships with The SEEDS, minimise boredom and strengthen family relationships.

Irrespective of the challenges that The SEEDS has faced, positive outcomes for the young people and their families remains our priority. The service continues to go from strength to strength working with some of the boroughs most complex and vulnerable YP and their families.

During the past 6 months the SEEDS have facilitated two HAF programmes (Holiday Activity Fund), one in August where over 24 YP participated and a further one in October half term where 16 YP engaged with the programme. Young people took part in a range of activities, including 'bike' rides, country walks, night walk, trip to Blackpool Zoo, science museum, cross country running, archery, 'come dine with me' and craft sessions. As part of the program supporting families with food and a hot meal in the October HAF programme families and the YP were given choices of an 'air fryer', George foreman' grill or a slow cooker. They were then provided with relevant recipes, menus and ingredients so they could all cook together as a family.

Engage

During the past year, the Engage Team has expanded to cover Child Criminal Exploitation alongside Child Sexual Exploitation and missing from home. Through this new remit the team are already having positive outcomes in this new area of practice. Joint working with the Police, health and education has led to the success of Operation Florence, which resulted in charges against 18 individuals involved in criminally exploiting children. The Engage team have gained the views of children and their families to co-create a new Engage feedback process, and have received good ratings in all audits completed of the team's performance and most importantly their manner in which they work alongside young people to support them through extremely difficult and traumatic circumstances. Engage have adapted to the Covid restrictions with creative new ways of working, whilst ensuring they see all the children and young people they support face to face in recognition of the positive benefits this brings. The team have also delivered multiple training sessions to over 150 professionals within Children's Services, Police, education, health, housing and other key agencies to help ensure children are supported and safeguarded from exploitation.

PERMANENCE SERVICES – Alyson Hanson

Placement stability has improved in Quarters 1 and 2 despite anticipation that Covid would have a negative impact. In 2019 /20 13.1% of children in care had three placements or more and this has improved to 8%. High levels of support to children in care, care leavers and foster carers has succeeded in stabilising a number of fragile placements. Foster carers have fed back that managing adolescents has been especially challenging during Tier 3 and full lockdowns but carers have shown great perseverance and very few placements have disrupted as a result.

Placement stability will remain a strategic priority.

Delays in court proceedings from 26 weeks to 57 weeks on average means that children are in placement much longer and the delays are affecting placement throughput and creating considerable pressures locally, regionally and nationally. The fostering service continues to be able to place babies and very young children with in-house foster carers but in recent weeks it has become increasingly difficult to source placements through the independent fostering sector. There has also been a steady influx of 14/ 15 year olds entering care for the first time because their home living arrangements have broken down. A number of these have been in and out of hospital with mental health difficulties and suicide ideation.

Foster carer recruitment activity has been severely restricted during lockdowns and the overall number likely to have been approved this year will be low at 10 – 12 new households. Tri-partite funding is now in place for residential placements and for children in commissioned foster placements with an EHCP which will help if placement costs rise as a result of these pressures. Adopter sufficiency is much less of a problem. Currently only 2 BwD children (siblings) waiting to be linked with adopters.

Children in care and care leavers have been RAG rated since the start of the pandemic in March and ratings are reviewed weekly. Children in the red category include children in new or fragile placements, young people with a history of missing from home, young people experiencing poor emotional and mental health and various other individual circumstances rendering children vulnerable. The number of red and amber steadily increased slightly in July and August but fell in September when children returned to school and has been fairly static ever since. School attendance of looked after children is 92.08% are actual attenders and official attendance is 95.62

For care leavers episodes of missing from home, fragile living arrangements, poor finances and poor physical and mental health are features of those RAG rated red and to a lesser degree those rated amber. The red and amber young people have had high levels of virtual support from their PA's, and visiting has continued for the most vulnerable. Child Action North West has provided some additional support for a small number including counselling, virtual cooking lessons and other activities. Some care leavers have struggled financially. As those on benefits have had an uplift of £20 a week during Covid, a decision was made to uplift those dependent on their leaving care allowance by the same amount for a three month period. Overall, care leavers have shown themselves to be very resilient and have managed to maintain college placements and remain in stable placements.

Education

Support to schools to manage COVID

In order to support the effective return to school for all year groups in September 2020 – the council facilitated an Education Response Team to support schools in managing the COVID pandemic. The Education Response Team is a Multi-Disciplinary team consisting of colleagues drawn from Public Health, Health and Safety, Human Resources, Education, and Business Support. Its primary role has been to support schools and settings following the full reopening of schools at the beginning of September. Colleagues in the team have their own specialism, but the real success has been that the team is greater than the sum of its parts, and that in the face of complex and challenging enquiries, schools have received measured, sensible and professional support to be able to help manage their anxieties and do the right thing for the children, young people and staff.

The team has dealt with over 1,400 confirmed cases in schools and settings resulting in over 13,000 children being sent home to isolate and over 1000 staff. Many of the confirmed cases have generated phone calls, and emails looking for advice, reassurance and guidance. Meetings have taken place with Headteachers and senior leaders to review cases where multiple cases have been reported or concerns have been raised.

Some of the practical aspects of establishing a new team are often overlooked when looking at how successful it has been. Systems have been established and developed where nothing existed before. The team now has a rich set of data that enables daily and weekly updates to be provided to a range of different audiences and service users.

The team has had to interpret, re-write and keep on top of guidance that is provided on a daily basis. Given the nature of the virus and the need to take swift and decisive action responses have had to be immediate and this has presented an added layer of challenge. Members of the team have carried out walk-throughs of schools looking at how they operate, forensically checking procedures and risk assessments to ensure that what they say, they do. In addition training has been provided for Madrasahs in BwD including providing a user friendly resource to help manage single and multiple cases in their settings.

A daily de-brief allows cases to be discussed, lessons from the day to be shared, and concerns raised to allow for a proactive approach to be taken to emerging issues.

Attendance

Despite our schools and settings dealing with cases of COVID they have continued to ensure attendance returns to the DfE are the highest in the region. Attendance of our children with an EHCP and vulnerable learners (those with a social worker) are typically in line with national average or slightly above / below.

Due to the excellent management of bubbles – BwD have the lowest number of children and young people on average that need to be isolated due to a confirmed case – this good practice has been highlighted by the DfE and RSC office.

Schools have worked hard to develop remote learning strategies that meet the needs of learners. Despite an indication schools and settings may receive a lower number of laptops from the DfE during the half term break – this was remedied and schools did receive allocation needed.

Electively Home Educated

Throughout the pandemic period, EHE families have all been contacted either via telephone or email on a regular basis to ensure that information about support services was shared with families and that families had a key contact person for any concerns or worries that they may have had. Initially home visits were cancelled unless deemed necessary for safeguarding reasons, these visits resumed towards the end of the summer term with staff undertaking COVID secure doorstep visits.

The increased contacts with families has enabled the service to review the information that the department holds about children who are home educated and enabled the production of a monthly data dashboard. This provides more detailed information in respect of children who are home educated, and allows the department to focus its resource particularly at those families or children that are more vulnerable.

The data dashboard has been shared interdepartmentally and resulted in staff across the Children's Social Care and Education workforce having a greater depth of understanding about home education and supported the targeting of resources in a more efficient and effective way.

The service did see a significant spike in the number of families choosing to home educate their children in September 2020, with families reporting that Covid was either the main reason for this decision or that it was a contributing factor. As at the end of December 2020, there were 232 children known to be receiving elective home education in BwD, an increase of 113 on the same period in the previous year.

A review of the home education service has been undertaken resulting in:

- A commission with a local school to undertake annual qualified teacher home visits to ensure that the education being provided is suitable, efficient and full time (as directed by the guidance).
- Half termly caseload discussion meetings have been implemented for accurate management oversight of each case.
- The development of a pathway between health and education to share EHE data

Further work to review the service is continuing, including reviewing existing policies, procedures and digital information and resources for families