

***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	343
Child Protection	198
Children in our Care	373

**KEY PRIORITIES**

Our priorities over the past eleven 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 focuses on gradings of Red, Amber and Green (RAG rating) where all Red risk assessed children and families receive face to face visits; Amber a blend of face to face and virtual; Green primarily virtual. This tool is totally fluid and is reviewed as cases progress within the system. Family Time for those children in care has been offered face to face to ensure that children are not deprived of their right to see their parents when it is deemed safe for them to do so. This has been well received and acknowledged by the judiciary for those children in care proceedings, in particular, where we have joined up with Lancashire and Blackpool to ensure our offer for family time is similar across the county. Some of our older teenagers have enjoyed using social media and their smart phones to stay in touch with their social workers and social workers have fed back that this communication has sometimes brought about better communication and engagement. This practice for some young people will be here to stay.
- There have remained in place strong links with our schools and settings during the past eleven 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. Social workers are now ensuring that a positive and clear message is conveyed to families that every child should be back in school from 8<sup>th</sup> March 2021 and we will do everything that is practically possible to support this.
- 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 in November 2020, which had a focus on the Local Authority as Corporate Parents. More recently we have undertaken a thematic audit of social work supervision and planned workshops are in place for March 2021 to embed good practice and support what is expected from managers and staff.
- Our Self Evaluation Framework was refreshed and prepared for our Ofsted conversation which took place on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2021. We had a good story to tell right across our services. We know our core business well and know where there are areas of concern and where more innovation is required. The conversation itself went well with good engagement from us all as an

SLT. Children's social care were able to demonstrate the journey we have been on to reduce caseloads/achieve timely assessments and explain our strategy to reduce the number of children in our care. As the relaxing of lockdown unfolds incrementally we are prepared for an upsurge in contacts and referrals into our Children's Advice and Duty Service (CADS) and have reflected on the impact last June when we prepared for the same thing. We expect similar patterns, but our staff are working together and will ensure the same consistent quality of service. This demand will be reviewed weekly by head of service and service manager, but CADS is fully staffed now with permanent experienced social work staff – which has taken some time to achieve.

### **What our data tells us**

The Children's Advice and Duty Service 12 month review of the impact was formulated in January 2021. Our performance has stayed true to the model with a third less referrals being generated at the front door. Our partnerships have remained strong despite this and agencies have felt supported by the CADS offer and those rich conversations to determine threshold have been well received. This has been borne out by our feedback. Other LA's are very interested in our CADS model and some have already visited us virtually with more to follow. As CADS was implemented in November 2019 there were 1216 open safeguarding cases and in November 2020 there were 831 open safeguarding cases. 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.

The timeliness of our assessments has increased to 91% 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 373 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 People's Services:**

#### Participation

The Youth Forum is taking part in a national NHS consultation regarding the impact of Covid on children and young people's mental health, the opportunity will also be extended to Children in Our Care and Care Leaver forums to ensure we capture voices from a wider cohort.

The Forum also met with key health professionals to discuss how they can improve the mental health and well-being of children and young people in the borough. They will be investigating mental health first aid training for young people to act as peer support within the secondary schools, youth organisations and CIOC senior and leaving care forums.

The YPS SEND (ASD) 'Kids Next Door' group have taken part in a the National Children's Bureau Consultation for Children and Young people with SEND about the impact of the pandemic. Their comments will be forwarded to the Department of Education along with their peers.

The BwD Youth Forum met with Kooth to discuss the impact of the resource in BwD. Discussions are taking place regarding the recruitment of young people to become Kooth ambassadors. They will meet again at the end of March to discuss a campaign and recruitment.

In November the National Make Your Mark results were revealed. In BwD, Support Our Mental Health and Child Poverty are the top 2 issues. The Youth MP presented the findings at the Children's Partnership Board and a meeting has been arranged to discuss how professionals and young people can support these campaigns and improve the outcomes for children and young people in the Borough.

For more information on YPS activities please see website and for regular updates see our social media campaign.

[www.bwd-yps.co.uk](http://www.bwd-yps.co.uk)



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### Detached Work

Young People's Services (YPS) have been commissioned to deliver a detached street level employability and education programme during the current restrictions. Staff from YPS, IMO and Youth Action are engaging with YP across the borough about their current status and signposting young people to a range of agreed opportunities such as Blackburn College, Prince's trust, BYZ Youth Employability Hub, Apprenticeship and employment opportunities.

YPS also coordinate a weekly detached project alongside key partners, Blackburn Rovers Community Trust and Blackburn Youth Zone, to deliver a minimum of 3 detached sessions per week. The project visits areas identified by the Police, Community Safety, Elected Members as Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) hotspots and areas where YP congregate in breach of Covid restrictions. Youth work staff educate YP on restrictions, opportunities to engage in positive activities and challenge/support them around behaviour and life choices.

### SEEDS (Adolescent Support Unit):

Despite the continuing restrictions relating to Covid 19, The SEEDS has managed to engage young people by utilising virtual sessions which have included cooking, reading with young people, bike rides and supporting their emotional wellbeing. Anti-bullying Week and World Suicide Prevention Day were recognised and young people explored "be kind" skills and concepts in sessions. The SEEDS was nominated for a 'Worker Bees' Award, acknowledging the commitment and creative approach in maintaining relationships with young people irrespective of Coronavirus restrictions. Demand for both the outreach work and the short-breaks service is consistent and feedback of young people's experiences remains positive, and families/carers continue to value the services provided by the SEEDS.

### **Engage Team:**

The Engage team have continued to achieve positive outcomes for children they support. The team have now introduced a new feedback process created in consultation with the children and families they work with, and have received fantastic feedback about the support the team provides.

The Engage Team continue to offer all of the children we support face to face visits in recognition of their wishes and the positive benefits this brings, whilst also making use of creative approaches and technology. The team continue to raise awareness of exploitation to partner agencies via training to the Police, Children's Services staff, Adolescent services and schools.

### **Youth Justice:**

The Youth Justice Service continue to work alongside colleagues from the Community Safety Team in planning the co-funded music project delivered by charity 'We Are Noise', for young people in the Darwen area. In recognition of some of the issues of anti-social behaviour in the town during the past 18 months, through our engagement with some of the young people identified, we are aware that this resource is of genuine interest to a number of them and is regarded as a fantastic opportunity to engage them in a constructive and meaningful pastime. The commencement of this

project has so far been delayed due to the recent lockdown, however, plans remain in place for it to begin when practicable to do so.

In January, all staff at the Youth Justice Service completed Trauma Informed Practice training. Following on from the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs) training rolled out across the council, the two days training delivered by a Chartered Psychologist, Forensic Child & Adolescent Specialist, built upon this foundation, providing a theoretical and research based insight into the impact of trauma upon young people. This looked at various life stages, including pre-birth, emphasising how trauma impacts upon brain development and attachments and the consequences of this in the context of the Youth Justice Service's work. The training paves the way for the service developing its assessment model and response to young people who have experienced trauma in order to better support these individuals with the aim of achieving increased engagement and better outcomes. Following this training, the Youth Justice Service Manager is contributing to the Public Health Departments review of trauma informed practice being adopted and applied in services across the borough.

## **PERMANENCE SERVICES**

The number of children in care has reduced significantly to 373. The number of babies and very young children under 6 has seen a particular reduction. 68% of looked after children are in foster care, 74 children are in foster care with members of their own family.

Delays in court proceedings as a result of Covid from 26 weeks to 72 are creating considerable placement pressures. The fostering service continues to be able to place babies and very young children with in-house foster carers but it has become increasingly difficult to source placements through the independent fostering sector. Fostering Exchange Days between L.A's and the independent sector are now well established and we have had some success in placing a small number of 'harder to place' children. Foster carer recruitment has been significantly affected by Covid restrictions.

The influx of 14/ 15 year olds with serious mental health problems has subsided in the last month. A number have required specialist residential provision but have not been eligible for Tier 4 hospital admission. One 16 year old has been placed in secure provision.

Currently only 2 BwD children (siblings) waiting to be linked with adopters. Adoption Exchange Days which help to place older and harder to place children have been shelved due to Covid but an online version called 'link and play' has been developed and the children waiting will access this.

The improvement in placement stability achieved in the first half of the year was sustained in Quarter 3 and currently stands at 8% which is better than the national local authority average which is 11%. In January / February 2021 there was an increase in the number of foster placements which became fragile but with timely and enhanced support a number have re-stabilised.

Children in care and care leavers have been RAG rated since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and ratings are reviewed weekly. 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.

Foster carers have also been RAG rated to ensure that those caring for the most complex children have been provided with the highest levels of support from the professionals involved.

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.

Overall, care leavers have shown themselves to be very resilient and have managed to maintain college and / or training placements and remain in stable placements. However, the percentage of

care leavers who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET is a growing concern and a priority for the Leaving Care Service.

## **Education**

To support schools and settings following the full reopening of schools at the beginning of September, a multidisciplinary Education Response Team was established comprising of colleagues from Public Health, Health and Safety, Human Resources, Education, Education Risk and Business Support. Schools have received measured, sensible and professional support to be able to help manage their complex and challenging scenarios. The team has managed over 1,400 confirmed cases in schools and settings resulting in over 13,000 children being sent home to isolate and over 1000 staff.

It is important to note since the beginning of the academic year - BwD schools were safe places to be with strong and robust infection prevention and control measures in place. During term 1 when many schools experienced high infection rates, the local authority was satisfied that schools were following the guidance, with 98% of cases due to community transmission, which was affecting pupil and staff attendance. During term 1 of this academic year there was continuous pressure on school leaders to maintain face to face teaching, exacerbated by staff absence due to the need for self-isolation.

Prior to the recent national lockdown, the vast majority of children in BwD were in school, with the overall BwD pupil attendance rate at 85.3% on the 17th December compared to the national rate of 76.7%. In total schools reported 389,740 lost days of education since the start of the academic year. This equates to an average of nearly 15 days per pupil. The rate for pupils with a social worker was 74.2% on the 17th December. Attendance of pupils with an EHCP was nearly 10% above the national average on the 17th following extensive work with schools to ensure that the most vulnerable pupils are attending school wherever possible. There were 1,661 pupils absent for COVID related reasons on the 17th December, down from a high of 3,529 in mid-November. This is primarily due to pupils having to isolate following contact with positive cases. Teachers and support staff have also been affected, with 8% absent on the 17th December. This had also fallen since mid-November, when up to 13% of all staff were unable to attend school, having an impact on the ability to deliver lessons in some settings. In December over 90% of schools reported that they had remote learning in place and over half were delivering more than 4 hours of content every day, and three quarters delivering at least three hours every day. Immediately after the Christmas break, 100% of schools reported that they were able to provide the minimum amount of remote learning to those pupils not on site.

Following the national lockdown on an average day, just under 15% of all pupils are in school in BwD, very slightly above the national rate. This varies by phase, with around 22% of Primary pupils and about a quarter of pupils in Special and alternative provision being educated on site, but only about 5% of mainstream Secondary pupils. Less than 3% of pupils in Independent provision are in school. Pupils with an EHCP are significantly more likely to be in school in BwD (43%) than their peers nationally (35%). Attendance of pupils with a Social Worker in BwD (39%) is broadly in line with the National average of 41%. In both cases, there is less variation by phase, although primary and special schools pupils with additional vulnerabilities are still a little more likely to be educated on site than secondary pupils. About two-thirds of children of critical workers identified by schools are taking up school places. These represent the largest number of pupils on site, about 2500 of the 3200 attending each day. There are approximately 400 children with an EHCP and 300 with a Social Worker on an average day. As on 2<sup>nd</sup> March attendance data was:

	National	BwD
Overall attendance	19.2	19.9
EHCP	48.5	62
Social worker	53	54.3

The schools effectiveness team throughout lockdown have worked with all schools and settings within BwD to monitor attendance and remote learning of our vulnerable learners. Working directly with colleagues in social care as needs arise.

Since the announcement of the wider school opening on March 8<sup>th</sup> – the Education response team have worked with schools and setting to ensure they are fully prepared. A full headteachers briefing was held with the Education response team, health and safety, HR and Education leads within the council to ensure all school leaders were fully prepared for March 8<sup>th</sup>. To date there has been no reports from schools or setting not able to follow government guidelines for the wider opening of schools and settings from March 8<sup>th</sup>. Attendance of our vulnerable learners will continue to be monitored in the initial stages of the wider re-opening of schools and settings.

The collective work together with all schools and settings, the education team and wider council continues to be a strength during the pandemic.