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Managing through COVID-19: the experiences of children's social care in 15 English local authorities

Briefing paper

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Background

The research captures the responses of 15 local authorities to the lockdown that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic:

Bath and North East Somerset
Blackburn
Cornwall
Coventry
Hampshire
London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
London Borough of Lewisham
North Tyneside
Northumbria
Salford
Stockport
Suffolk
Wakefield
Wokingham
York

All respondents were senior managers in their agencies, including directors and assistant directors of children's services, heads of service and principal child and family social workers.

Most of the data were collected through interviews, although three authorities provided a written response to the questions sent to all authorities in advance. The work was conducted between 11 May and 5 June 2020 so the changes that had been introduced had been in place for around two months. Their effectiveness was being assessed at the same time as plans were being made for what was still an uncertain future. When the report was drafted it was sent, in mid-June, to the those who had contributed to check its currency, and their comments were reflected in the report. (Annexes contain reflections from agencies in the independent and voluntary sectors.)

Key findings

The social work workforce

- The proportion of social workers who were working from home was reported to range from 80 to 100 per cent. In most authorities some office space was open and specific teams, such as those carrying out duty and assessment tasks, were more likely to be working from there but on rotas to give social distance.
- Meetings continued to take place but were held virtually, as were supervision and other keeping-in-touch contacts.
- Overall it was thought that the transition from office to home had been successful although it was widely recognised that some social workers had struggled to be able to balance working from home with the responsibilities of

caring for families or working in an environment that was not conducive to carrying out confidential and stressful tasks.

- Over the two months expectations were being realigned and practice adjusted, including how best to oversee and quality assure social workers' contacts with children and their families, many of which were being done at a distance.

Referrals to children's social care

- In most authorities fewer referrals requiring a children's social care response had been received in the weeks immediately following the introduction of lockdown measures, but they had started to increase as time went on.
- Higher numbers of referrals were associated with domestic violence and more cases than in 'normal' times were said to involve a higher level of complexity.
- Overall, during April and May most authorities had conducted fewer investigations, instigated fewer proceedings, created fewer child protection plans and placed fewer children in care than in a similar period in 2019. There were indications that this was changing and that the number of children taken into care in some authorities was rising.

Work with families

- Most contacts with families were virtual. Where social workers made home visits, they were usually advised to wear personal protective equipment (PPE), but there was an exception in one authority where the guidance stated that this was not necessary if there was no confirmed COVID-19 case in the household and where social distancing could be maintained.
- It was thought unacceptable to adopt a completely virtual approach to a new referral, even when the family was known to children's social care.
- In nearly all authorities risk assessment procedures guided decisions on whether a piece of work should be carried out virtually or in person. It was often described as a RAG (red, amber, green) rating, that is determining the risk posed to the child or young person based upon the information available. In only one authority did social workers continue to make home visits for all their cases.
- Visits were sometimes conducted on doorsteps and in gardens; if it was necessary to see inside the home this was then done by video, as was the case if social workers were doing this from home.
- There were no reports of feedback on these changes having been collected consistently from parents and children/young people. The respondents' impression was that most families had accepted the change and many young people had embraced the opportunity to use technology to connect with social workers. There were indications that it was harder for younger children to adjust and there were problems where parents did not have access to smartphones and other technology.

- The President of the Family Division had stated that where coronavirus restrictions caused contact arrangements between parent(s) and children to be varied, there should be safe alternative arrangements for the child. In all the authorities, contact centres had been closed to families for at least some of the time. Contact between children and birth parents was predominantly virtual, usually with the support of courts, parents and foster carers. In some authorities, pre-adoption contact had been suspended until it was possible for this to take place face to face. As the lockdown conditions continued into June, arrangements were being put in place to reduce unnecessary delays to adoption.

Foster care

- In most cases the concerns that a combination of placement breakdown and foster care illness and/or shielding would lead to a critical placement shortage were not realised, although some authorities had been under more pressure than others.
- A few authorities had planned to convert council buildings into residential accommodation if the demand for placements outstripped supply.
- Nationally, mother and baby placements and placements for older children and young people had been more difficult to secure.
- Authorities had usually managed any increase in demand by placing children and young people with family and friends, and by expanding the capacity of existing foster carers and providing additional support if necessary.
- Local authorities had provided considerable support to foster carers, many of whom were shielding or self-isolating and a significant proportion were over 70 years of age.
- In June, Barnardo's reported that the number of children needing foster care had risen by 44 per cent during the pandemic while the number of enquiries from people looking to become foster parents for the charity fell by 47 per cent.¹ Authorities in this study had not experienced this, with most saying that the number of children in care had remained stable and in some cases fallen considerably.
- Where young people did not comply with the call to stay at home, placements were put at risk and were the source of considerable concern to local authorities as these young people could then be at risk of exploitation and gang involvement.

Care leavers

- Authorities had abided by the request from the Secretary of State for Education that they ensure that no one left local authority care during this time. Care

¹ This was across England, Wales and Northern Ireland whereas this study was only conducted in England.

leavers were allowed to stay in their placements or semi-independent living arrangements if that was what they wished to do, although there were examples of managed moves.

- Leaving care teams were particularly concerned about care leavers who were already living alone and who could feel isolated, particularly if they did not have access to a smartphone or computer.
- Personal advisors attempted to maintain contact with care leavers and there were many voluntary organisations across the country that were providing practical as well as emotional support.

Unaccompanied young people seeking asylum

- The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people (UASYP) arriving in the country increased during this period, which had posed particular challenges for 'gateway' authorities but only a few local authorities reported additional accommodation problems as a result of looking after this group.
- One authority had identified accommodation that could have been used as residential accommodation if it had been needed but it was not required.
- Those who turned 18 and were in care placements were allowed to stay, although this did put additional pressures on placement supply.
- As with care leavers in a similar situation, there were concerns for those who were socially isolated, particularly where this would be aggravated by uncertainties over their status.

Residential homes

- Overall the residential sector was reasonably stable, but it had been subject to various strains.
- When young people moved into the sector during this time it was often because their behaviours could not be managed by parents or carers, which could destabilise the setting they entered. Similar behaviours sometimes overwhelmed the staff in these homes and it then proved difficult for the local authority to find alternative placements.
- When children moved to residential provision they had to self-isolate prior to the move and there were examples of residential workers self-isolating with children for two weeks.
- The residential workforces had also been under strain when staff were ill or vulnerable. Authorities had redeployed staff from other parts of children's services and sometimes supplemented this with staff from other services.
- Some authorities had maintained their residential short-break provision, including extending the use of a short-break service to provide self-isolation for children if this was required. Others had closed it, often because parents had

stopped using it in sufficient numbers and redirected the staff to provide additional outreach support.

Multi-agency working

- Multi-agency working was an area which was generally regarded as successful and gave hope that it would lead to permanent changes and improved understanding of one another's professional responsibilities.
- Close working relationships had been developed with public health services, stimulated by the pressures at the outset to determine responses to COVID-19.
- Improved attendance by schools, general practitioners and paediatricians at meetings and child protection conferences that were held virtually was reported by a number of authorities. It was widely believed that virtual attendance at such meetings would become an accepted feature of practice.
- Several initiatives had developed during this time with the intention of improving support to children and their families, identifying those most in need and embedding mechanisms to facilitate agencies working together to find solutions.

Cross-authority work

- All the authorities referred to various cross-authority groups to which they belonged but there was little feedback on how they operated. Some arrangements were well-established regional partnerships and others were sub-groups of national organisations such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services or brought together specific roles such as principal child and family social workers.
- Authorities had made arrangements between themselves so work could be completed that would have been difficult under the prevailing conditions such as visits to out-of-area placements.
- Some regions/authorities had established agreements during this time, such as placing embargos on staff moving from one area to another or stopping cross-border case transfers. However, some authorities had placed a liberal interpretation on such agreements when families' welfare demanded it.

Students and placements

- Social Work England's guidance was that placements could continue if it was appropriate for them to do so.
- Universities had taken a variety of approaches to continuing placements, but authorities found that students usually wished to continue.
- By mid-May most students who had been withdrawn were reported to have returned, with only a minority of universities maintaining that their students should not do so.

Recruitment

- Some authorities reported more than usual interest in posts and that recruitment had gone well during this period whereas others had found it more difficult with disappointing responses to advertisements, including those for newly qualified staff.
- It was suggested that some authorities had acted quickly as the lockdown seemed likely to persuade agency staff to avoid employment uncertainty and accept permanent posts and that this, in turn, had depleted the number of agency staff available.
- A temporary register, set up by the emergency Coronavirus Act 2020, allowed all social workers who had left the register in the past two years and were eligible to return to work to re-register. Only a minority of these authorities had sought to recruit in this way and two had employed staff as a result.

Support for local authorities through COVID-19

- The government had pledged an additional £3.2 billion to support local authorities through this time. Although informants were not aware of the overall costs that they had incurred during this period, they estimated that the amount they would receive would cover between 25 and 50 per cent of what they had spent.
- Guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) was said to have been slow to appear and then it came frequently and in volumes but failed, for example, to be explicit about the changes, which required staff to spend considerable amounts of time identifying and updating documents.
- There were references to telephone calls between directors of children's social care (DSCs) and DfE officials, as well as between the Chief Social Worker and local principal child and family social workers (PCFSWs). There were very few details of these meetings other than that the focus was on giving and receiving information.
- The amendments, introduced via The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, also known as Statutory Instrument 1445, came into force on 24 April 2020. Very few authorities were considering adopting any of the amendments and those that were would only do so in very limited circumstances and where it was seen to be in the best interest of a child.
- Three agencies were mentioned most frequently as providing support through this period. These were the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and its regional groupings, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Various regional groups for DCSs, assistant directors, PCFSWs and heads of service groups were also mentioned as providing support, as were some professional groupings, for example, local NHS clinical commissioning groups.

Planning for the end of lockdown

- Towards the end of the period when the data were collected, lockdown restrictions were easing and local authorities were planning for the coming months., including exploring the use of buildings and the number of members of staff who could be accommodated at any one time.
- It was assumed that some home working would continue for some time, if not permanently and thought was being given to how best to combine this with maintaining team working and an element of face-to-face working.
- In all the feedback from authorities there was a note of caution about a future when the extent of harm to many children would be revealed after many months when it had been hidden. It was expected that the number of referrals would rise rapidly once schools reopened.

Lessons for the future

- Some lessons to be taken from this period came from the initial weeks of lockdown and will be relevant if there are further local or widespread outbreaks of COVID-19. The lessons include ensuring a sufficient supply of PPE, revising the guidance developed in the light of experience, and assuming a more measured approach to work rather than operating in emergency mode.
- A proportion of meetings and other interactions will continue to be conducted virtually but these should be monitored to determine what it is effective and efficient to do and in what particular circumstances.
- The use of technology in contacting parents should be approached with caution, taking account of the family's ability to access it and their confidence in working in this way, and the service's capacity to provide support in doing so.
- The potential of technology to improve social workers' engagement with young people has been established, but it is important to recognise that it will not work for everyone and there will be those who do not wish to use it in some circumstances.
- It will be important to build on positive developments that have emerged such as those in relation to multi-agency working.

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