

Further evidence from the All Wales Heads of Children's Services for the Children, Young People and Education Committee

Further to the above committee meeting on Monday, May 18th, 2020 in relation to the response of Local Authority Children's Services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular since the start of the lockdown period, we provide the following information at the request of the committee members. The committee requested further information in relation to the contact that Local Authorities are routinely having with children and young people within their areas.

The following information is a collective response and not specific to one Local Authority.

From the start of lockdown, Children's Services in Local Authorities have continued to function by seeing children, carrying out assessments, undertaking safeguarding investigations and embraced digital technology - much of which was an enhancement of work that had previously been started. It has not been our experience that children have not been seen, and our social workers have been extremely determined to ensure that children have still been seen during this period. One local authority reports that over 1000 face to face visits had been undertaken to children and young people by social workers between the start of lockdown and mid-May and this continues to increase daily. This is a common picture across Wales.

This is replicated at all levels of services within children's social care including our Youth Justice Services, early help and prevention, family support and youth services, with staff embracing the new ways of working which they had to adapt to very quickly. It is also clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has been an extremely stressful and anxious time for children, young people and families that we have been supporting. It is our view that children's services staff have gone over and above to meet our statutory duties as well as provide additional emotional and practical support when many partner agencies have withdrawn from face to face contact. Our teams have been determined that children, young people and their families would be seen and supported, and they have found innovative ways to continue to keep children and young people safe in these unprecedented times.

Arrangements for contact during lockdown have been developed within the context of clear guidance published by Welsh Government. The key messages on contact advised:

- Face to face contact arrangements for seeing children is no longer advised and safe alternative contact arrangements should be made
- In the majority of cases, face to face contact between social workers and families should be suspended
- The frequency of contact with children, care leavers, families and carers should not be reduced unless there are grounds to reduce the frequency of contact based on information about the care needs of the child
- Ensuring that children at risk are safeguarded and continue to be protected however is of paramount importance
- Local authorities and social workers will need to make informed, professional judgements about visiting children at risk, which balance risks to children, care leavers, families and carers and risks to the workforce
- Alternative arrangements that comply with the safe distancing advice, utilising digital and virtual means where appropriate should continue in line with Public Health Wales advice on social distancing
- Court ordered contact arrangements should be assessed on a case by case basis taking into account a range of factors including the UK government's social distancing guidance and the needs of the child. It may not be possible, or appropriate for the usual face to face contact to happen at this time and keeping in touch will, for the most part, need to take place virtually

Local Arrangements

Statutory requirements have formed our baseline standards for seeing children and contact frequency. In addition each case is considered on its own level of risk, the care and support plan for the child, their wishes and best interests, ensuring their wellbeing and working in partnership with parents, carers and other professionals. The reality is that the use of digital media has facilitated increased levels of contact during the pandemic.

Challenges and creative solutions

Regular telephone contact is being made with children and families. Direct messaging by text or 'What's App' is being widely used with older children and care leavers and there has been extensive work done to ensure that children and young people have access to the appropriate digital technology in order to keep in contact, including examples across Wales of purchasing iphones and ipads and extra minutes and data.

Staff have had 'What's App' deployed on work issued phones so that they can ask families to show them around their homes where they attend a property but cannot safely enter, for example when a family report to be self-isolating, as well as speaking directly to the children in those properties. Social workers have also worked with parents to enable them to make contact with their children with appropriate safeguards in place, and this includes parents recording messages/reading bedtime stories for their children where appropriate.

Young people have reported very positive experiences e.g.

- One 14 year old stated that they enjoyed learning from home as they gets to spend more time with their carers, getting to take breaks when they want, eat the food they like and complete school work at their own pace
- One 15 year old stated that they were glad that there was a lockdown as it means that their family is safe.
- A care leaver wanted to praise their Personal advisor as she 'had rang me every day to make sure that I'm ok - she is amazing'
- Two young siblings have flourished in their foster home during this period and report that they 'love being outdoors all the time with X (foster father) and learning to build dens and climb trees. We have sent you photos of our adventures'

Working with schools

We have worked with schools to identify vulnerable learners that can access the care hubs. This has provided an additional layer of welfare checks and support for vulnerable children. Social workers have identified high risk cases across their caseloads and worked with families to offer support through the school hubs. Where families have chosen not to accept this offer, this has informed decisions about increasing contact with those families using the resources of social workers, support workers and social care workers within Children's Services

Risk based approach to supporting face to face contact

Our initial approach was to replace all face to face supervised contact with digital platforms. This has been continually reviewed and a number of authorities have developed a risk based framework to identify cases where it is appropriate and safe to support face to face contact. We continue to review our approach within the context of national guidance, the needs of individual children and families and ensuring the safety of our workforce through the appropriate supply and use of PPE.

The examples that follow portray the work that has been undertaken across Wales, and provide committee members with a flavour of the work that has continued;

- There have been examples of outstanding pieces of work to ensure that the final contact between birth parents and their children took place before adoption, and similarly, excellent work to begin introductions and move children to their forever home during the pandemic by undertaking detailed risk assessments so as to ensure that there are no delays created for the child.
- A young person who had to move placement during lockdown has been visited face to face by their social worker on a daily basis in their new placement
- Social workers have undertaken many home visits to children in care, in and out of county and have participated in activities with them, for example, taking them for walks, learning BMX bike tricks, baking and art and crafts work
- A personal adviser has been providing support to a care leaver who made the decision to stay in university accommodation alone during lockdown despite suffering from anxiety and low mood. The PA worked with the young person to develop a safety plan of support and continued to have contact numerous times a week vis What's App. Video, emails and texts and have long conversation discussing a range of topics
- There has been a wealth of support to foster carer families who have been shielding by social workers going to the supermarket for groceries and collecting medication. Families have made comments that this was vital for their mental and physical health as the social distanced contact with the workers provided them with a link to the outside world.
- Workers have attended at foster carers homes to help with setting up technology so that they can support to undertake video contact with families for babies, children and young people.
- Out of hours and weekend helplines have been set up by fostering teams social workers to offer 24 hour practical and emotional support and advice to foster carers
- The Mind of my Own App has been launched and has been set up for children and young people to be able to share any worries/positive things quickly with their worker
- Community based assessments of parents and their new-born children have continued and have enabled children to remain in the care of their parents. They have continued to be supported by social workers and family support workers through face to face work at the home

- A social worker joined a child's birthday party at the foster carers' home via What's App video
- We have continued to identify and assess risks to children, and have sadly had to remove children under Emergency Protection Orders and proceed to issue care proceedings
- Across Wales, social care staff have supported families with hundreds of visits to foodbanks and deliveries of food packages
- Staff have supported families to have a break by taking children out walking.

These are a few of the numerous examples of how children's services have remained in contact and have continued to see children, young people, families and carers during the lockdown period. We hope that this provides assurances that ensuring contact and seeing children has been a priority from the beginning of the lockdown period and will remain our priority going forward.

Should you need any further information or examples, please do not hesitate to contact us.