

Report Title:	Update on the delivery of core and statutory social care services during the Covid-19 lockdown and lessons learnt for the future delivery of services
Contains Confidential or Exempt Information?	No - Part I
Lead Member:	Councilor Carroll, Deputy Chairman of Cabinet and Lead Member for Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Health and Mental Health
Meeting and Date:	Overview and Scrutiny Panel - 11 June 2020
Responsible Officer(s):	Lin Ferguson (Director of Social care and Early Help)
Wards affected:	All

REPORT SUMMARY

This report will update the Panel on how core and statutory social care services and early help services have continued to be delivered during Covid lockdown, in order to ensure the safety and welfare of our most vulnerable children, young people and families. It will highlight how work has been prioritised, what has worked well, what has brought challenges and the opportunities that have emerged for future service delivery.

The report will show how we were able to deploy a more agile and flexible workforce in order to respond, in a new way, to service demands. Despite the challenges, significant progress has been made in using Information Technology creatively in order to 'meet' with service users and conduct key meetings. Staff in all areas have risen to the many presenting challenges with enthusiasm and a passion about doing the best they can for children and young people.

This period can be characterised by a level of collaborative working that has demonstrated how working together can significantly improve outcomes for those with whom we work. The willingness of our early help staff, very early on in the crisis, to provide wrap-around support to those Children in Care who were identified as at risk of going missing or experiencing a placement breakdown, has meant that to date, no child in our care has experienced a placement breakdown and their rate of going missing and/or becoming involved in exploitation has also reduced. Strong collaborative working between RBWM educational and social care staff and schools has resulted in having more vulnerable children attending school than the national average.

However during this time, contacts into the Single Point of Access (SPA) reduced and there has been an anxiety that other agencies have not been reporting through concerns in the usual way. However it is reassuring to note that contact rates are

now more in line with where they were pre-lockdown. Domestic abuse referrals in RBWM have overall not seen the anticipated spike and it is therefore predicted that once lockdown is eased, contacts and referrals in this area may increase. Conversely there has been a spike in serious injuries to babies across Berkshire, prompting health visitors and social work staff in RBWM to collaborate on a 'safer babies' project.

It is important that we sustain the positive aspects of what we have 'unlocked' during this time. However it is essential that new opportunities do not compromise basic social work and other professional practice - there is a growing acceptance that there is a place for greater virtual activity, but this cannot replace the need to see and work with our vulnerable children, young people and families face-to-face.

However we need to focus on the aspects of what has worked well during lockdown that can be taken forward in order to enhance our future offer to children, young people and families. If we go back to the way things were pre-lockdown, we will miss the opportunity to make and or sustain the changes needed to become a modern, transformative and forward-thinking Council.

Introduction

1. On 23 March 2020 the Prime Minister announced that the UK would move to a position of lockdown, with all but essential staff working from home. This presented immediate challenges in relation to how children's social care staff could continue to deliver core and statutory services to the most vulnerable children, young people and their families in the borough, whilst also adhering to the strict new requirements. However this period of lockdown has also presented an opportunity to unlock new ways of working, a number of which have the potential to inform future delivery of services.

2. Since the start of lockdown, all staff across the service have had to quickly adapt to working in a very different way - from management to business support, from office staff to front line staff and from those who are 'tech savvy' to the technophobes amongst us. This has required all staff, whatever their roles, to pull together and work more collaboratively than ever before, in order to ensure that our core and statutory functions have been met.

Immediate response to lockdown

3. In response to the clear message from the Prime Minister, Achieving for Children (AfC) made the swift decision that face-to-face work with service users would temporarily cease, apart from situations of 'risk of immediate significant harm'. This was mainly where a Child Protection Investigation was required, due to reports that a child in our borough was suffering, or was likely to suffer significant harm. Robust leadership and a strong commitment from staff was required in order to ensure that

alternative methods were put in place for children, young people and families to be seen and that those at greatest risk prioritised for assessment, intervention and support. A risk assessment was completed for every child and young person with whom we work, based on a rating system (red-high risk, amber-medium risk and green-low risk). This information continues to be held on a spreadsheet and is a live document that the service regularly updates, as the risk level changes for particular families. Staff have continually tracked our most vulnerable children and young people (reds and ambers) since 23 March 2020 and work closely with other professionals in order to ensure that the right support is offered by the right service at the right time.

4. Throughout this time, managers have made decisions, in agreement with staff, about what constitutes 'risk of immediate significant harm' on a case by case basis and staff have been deployed accordingly so that they were available for responding, in person, to these situations. In the early weeks of lockdown, this was primarily in relation to Child Protection Investigations.

5. Information Technology (IT) is a challenge for the Council, but all key staff were given immediate support so that they could complete their work virtually. Despite these challenges, this was successful in the main. This constituted a mixture of RBWM deployment, AfC accessing some devices and particular staff being willing to use their own equipment.

Visiting Children

6. Staff were quickly issued with interim practice guidance on working in the new Covid-19 environment and any decision to see a child or young person face-to-face was subject to risk assessment and overview by a senior manager. Staff who had to undertake these face-to-face activities due to safeguarding concerns, were issued with appropriate PPE and clear advice about keeping themselves and others safe. Where a decision was made NOT to undertake a face to face visit, staff were asked to complete a 'COVID 19 concerns form' which was also agreed and authorised by a senior manager and recorded on the child's electronic record.

7. In the early weeks of lockdown, in the vast majority of cases, face-to-face visits were assessed not to be required and staff had to adapt to new ways of working with children, young people and their families. They quickly developed creative ways of doing this virtually by using IT platforms such as 'WhatsAPP', Zoom and Google Meet.

8. Over time, the number of face-to-face visits to children, young people and families has incrementally increased, based on our rating system, but the same rigorous risk assessment and safety process continues to be employed **in all situations**. For example, Health Visitors have started running weigh-in clinics again for those babies for whom there is most concern. These clinics are a combination of drop-ins and

appointment based, but with stringent social distancing and other public health measures in place.

Getting vulnerable children and young people into school

9. We know that for the majority of vulnerable children and young people, being in school is a key protective factor. In light of this, significant collaborative work continues to be undertaken between social care and education colleagues in order to encourage as many vulnerable children and young people to attend as possible. As there has been no requirement for them to attend, many families have made the decision not to send their children to school, for a variety of reasons. However, over the period of lockdown, the number of vulnerable children and young people attending school has increased, due in part to the tenacity of teachers, social workers and others. The majority of schools within the borough have responded well to receiving vulnerable children and young people into their schools throughout this time and where this has not been possible, ensuring that children and young people for whom they are responsible, have sufficient educational provision to access at home.

10. It is reassuring to see that the number of vulnerable children and young people attending schools within the borough is higher than the national picture. Before the half-term break in late May, 55.4% of Children In Need were attending school and 45% of Children subject to Child Protection Plans. For those who have remained at home, social workers have liaised with schools and families to ensure that there has been sufficient educational input going into these homes.

Child protection and taking protective action when required (including court action)

11. For the weeks immediately after lockdown started, contacts into RBWM AfC's Single Point of Access (SPA) dipped significantly. In February 2020, the SPA received 923 contacts. However contacts reduced to 862 in March and went down to 689 in April. Regular communication was undertaken with all agencies in the borough in order to remind them to refer through any children, young people or families, as they would normally do. It is reassuring to note that weekly contacts into the SPA have now increased to just under expected levels. This will continue to be closely monitored on a weekly basis.

12. During lockdown, a small minority of children have unfortunately had to be removed from the care of their parents due to significant safeguarding issues and these challenging situations were dealt with sensitively and professionally by our social work staff. This demonstrates that business as usual has continued throughout this time.

13. All court hearings have taken place virtually, with all parties joining via secure IT platforms. The exception to this has been contested final hearings where on a case by case basis, a decision has sometimes been made to hold the hearing face-to-

face, with appropriate social distancing and other safeguarding measures in place. Although there have been some short delays in getting expert assessments, there has been no overall impact on planning for children.

Multi-agency CPCs and statutory reviews and other meetings

14. Throughout lockdown, we have continued to hold Child Protection Conferences, Core Groups, Statutory Reviews for Children in Care and other key meetings. No meetings have been cancelled during this time and our performance data shows no visible impact on timeliness of meetings. Meetings have been conducted virtually using 'google meet' and 'whatsAPP', in order to meet with children, young people and parents/carers, prior to these meetings. Social workers have been proactive at liaising with parents/carers to ensure they have the use of appropriate technology and are assisted to be able to attend. Rather than sending paper reports out, these have been emailed securely to families and other professionals. Although initially challenging, virtual meetings have been better attended than pre-lockdown face-to-face meetings and feedback from many family members and professionals has been that they have been successful.

Stability and education of Children in Care

15. Going into lockdown, there was an anxiety that there could be placement breakdowns, due to the additional stress being put on placements. This was particularly in relation to the risks associated with young people going missing. At the start of lockdown, those placements most at risk of potential breakdown were identified and wrap-around proactive support was offered by professionals like youth workers and family coaches and progress was monitored closely. Furthermore, Kickback members (CiC Council) made contact with all CiC, outlining the risks of going missing, particularly during this period. It is positive to be able to report that missing notifications for CiC have reduced since lockdown, along with risk gradings associated with risk of exploitation. In February 2020, three CiC went missing, amounting to 15 missing episodes. In May 2020, this was reduced to one CiC, with two missing episodes and there have been no placement breakdowns during this period. Whilst credit, in part, should be given to the timely wrap-around support that has been put in place, the commitment and dedication of our carers during this time has been outstanding.

16. Social workers and foster carers have reported seeing some 'wonderful' behaviour from our CiC during lockdown - this has included young people shopping for their foster carers, reducing their 'missing episodes' as noted above and generally exhibiting kindness and thoughtfulness. CiC have stayed in contact with their social worker, youth worker and others on a virtual basis, with staff using a range of IT platforms to keep in touch and to ensure that key pieces of work have been progressed.

17. It is also positive to be able to report that during lockdown there has been increased interest from the local community in becoming foster carers for RBWM. Three fostering assessments have already started and two more are at the initial stage. In addition, there are five sets of family members being assessed as specific foster carers for children and young people from within their own families - 'connected carers.'

18. Throughout this time Fostering and Adoption Panels have been completed virtually. Attendance has been excellent and twice as many panels as usual have been able to take place.

19. The Virtual School is a dedicated school focused on continually improving the education, training and employment opportunities for CiC and Care Leavers. The Virtual School liaises closely with those schools attended by our CiC and during lockdown, they have also had to work in a different way in order to ensure that our young people have continued to have access to good educational opportunities. The Virtual School has provided laptops and tuition to support home learning, offered support from outreach learning mentors, collected weekly school attendance data (including for CiC living in other areas), prioritised weekly contact with carers and schools to monitor the quality of education that CiC are engaged in and negotiated returns to school with a support package where this has been appropriate or necessary. All associated meetings have continued to take place virtually, including Personal Education Plans (PEPs) for CiC, where 100% have been completed on time during this period. The Virtual School has also provided on-line training, with over 100 school staff attending a recent training session on 'building resilience'. Additional funding was also sent to schools to support Covid-19 adjustments eg 1:1 tuition. Education for previously looked after children has also continued during this time. For example an Adoption Hub with logins funded by the Virtual School has been set up and shared with Designated Teachers and others, providing on-going support to this cohort of children.

20. Since the start of lockdown, more CiC have incrementally been attending school. In week 1 of the summer term, 14.2% were said to be attending on a full time basis and this increased to 30% in week 5. The number of CiC rated as low risk (green) has increased during the summer term and the number rated as medium risk (amber) has decreased from 28.6% in week 1 to 18% in week 5. Those CiC rated as high risk (red) for risk to placement and engagement in education have increased from 3 to 5 and although the numbers are low, there are robust plans in place for each one. The percentage of CiC engaged in education, whether at school or at home has increased from 85% in week 1 to 90%. It is reassuring to note that persistent absence has reduced from 15% to 10% for our CiC cohort. For those CiC who have not been attending school, the main reason quoted has been anxiety from foster carers about children and young people getting infected and bringing the virus back into their homes. However significant collaborative work is taking place to ensure that more CiC will be attending school from June 2020.

Domestic Abuse

21. A surge in domestic abuse incidents was anticipated as we entered lockdown and as a consequence, a fortnightly multi-agency Domestic Abuse Response Group was set up and has been taking place since this time. Despite the National Domestic Abuse Helpline reporting a large rise in calls and contacts, data shared by local partners has shown that we have not seen this same increase locally. Thames Valley Police has not reported any noticeable increase in domestic abuse reports in RBWM and this is reflected across Berkshire.

22. The Dash (Domestic Abuse Stops Here) Charity saw an increase in referrals to their Children's IDVA service at the start of lockdown (mainly from schools) but referral levels are now back to the expected level. Adult IDVA and Outreach referrals have started to increase particularly from the start of May to date, when compared with the same time in the previous two months. However the Dash Charity currently have the capacity to deal with this. £35k was allocated by RBWM from the COVID-19 budget to the Dash Charity to fund an additional support worker to help with outreach to children and young people.

23. The AfC Single Point of Access (SPA) has seen a small increase in standard risk and medium risk domestic abuse cases, despite the number of contacts overall having reduced. However there has been a decrease in high risk cases. Adult Safeguarding have had some domestic abuse cases on the Safeguarding log and it has been relatively quiet, although they are starting to see an increase in referrals. However the two domestic abuse workers in our SPA have worked tirelessly to maintain contact with at risk individuals and they have received positive feedback from service users during this time.

24. The above picture of low reports and referrals is consistent with what is expected in lockdown because there is reduced opportunity/confidentiality for victims to contact police or other support systems. However, we have to be alert to the fact that once lockdown is lifted and schools and workplaces re-open, it is possible that there will be an increase in contacts and/or referrals. Should this occur, it is likely to impact resources in service areas within RBWM and plans are already in place in order to be prepared for this.

25. RBWM and the Dash Charity continue to share signposting advice via social media messages. The DA National Helpline number is listed on the COVID-19 Community Response webpage. Regular domestic abuse updates to stakeholders continue to come from the RBWM Domestic Abuse Coordinator including a domestic abuse newsletter sent out on 30/04/20 which includes a list of national DA/COVID-19 related advice and guidance. This list is being added to whenever new guidance is published. The newsletter is available on the RBWM domestic abuse webpages. Thames Valley Police have also been undertaking 'Hidden Harm' work. They have been working through a list of domestic abuse victims who have not contacted TVP but who they would have 'expected' to call. Eighty six individuals from this list were

contacted in May 2020, with fifty one having been contacted by LPA staff offering advice/checking in.

Vulnerability of babies

26. Unfortunately across Berkshire, there has been a spike in deaths (three) and serious injuries to babies under the age of twelve months. In response to this, our health visitors, social workers and early help staff within RBWM have been working on a 'safer babies' project, designed to ensure that key public health information about safer caring is discussed with all of the families with whom we work, who have children under the age of twelve months, those who are new parents or those who are pregnant.

Mental health of children and young people

27. There is concern about the emotional impact of lockdown on our most vulnerable children and young people. Staff from our Wellbeing Team have been providing triage support within our SPA, so that any emerging mental health concerns are picked up and addressed as soon as possible. RBWM AfC has been working closely with health colleagues in order to ensure that children, young people and families have appropriate mental health support. The successful Youth Service 'esteem group' has continued to run on a virtual basis, as a group, but also on a 1:1 basis.

28. Young people have been signposted to 'Kooth', an on-line emotional support platform. This has been well used by young people, with logins up by 33% in May 2020. Young people have spoken positively about the support they have received from Kooth. Along with the CCG, RBWM AfC is also working on a project designed to improve the pathways and support for children and young people with emerging mental health difficulties. The CCG funded 'Getting Help Team' is a new early intervention mental health team, still in its infancy, that will be managed by Berkshire Health, but will sit within AfC's Wellbeing Team. It is anticipated that this team will be fully staffed by September 2020 and will be able to provide direct support to children and young people, as well as offer advice to parents/carers and those working with the children and young people concerned.

29. It is exciting to be able to report that the Local Transformation Partnership (including the CCG and RBWM) has recently been successful in its application to NHS England and the DfE, to establish a new Mental Health Support Team (MHST) in one cluster of schools within the borough. MHSTs are intended to provide early intervention on some mental health and emotional wellbeing issues, such as mild to moderate anxiety, as well as helping staff within a school or college setting to provide a 'whole school approach' to mental health and wellbeing. The team will act as a link with local children and young people's mental health services and be supervised by NHS staff. Work will start in January 2020 for a January 2021 'go live' date. The vision is that over time, every school cluster in the country will have a MHST. *NB The first MHST in Berkshire will go live in a Slough school cluster in September 2020.*

30. In June 2020, schools within the borough will take part in an on-line questionnaire for children and young people, in partnership with the University of Oxford, looking at

mental health and wellbeing. This has been used successfully in Oxfordshire schools and outcomes will help to inform the focus of this important work in the borough going forward.

Early Help Activities

31. Early Help activity has continued throughout lockdown, albeit virtually. The number of children and young people receiving early help support has increased from 468 in February to 520 in April 2020. Since lockdown and the postponement of delivering non essential services like universal services, has meant that early help staff have been able to offer more targeted one-to-one work to our more vulnerable children, young people and families. Prior to lockdown, there were 'wait times' for vulnerable children, young people and families to receive the support they required. However since lockdown and the different way of working, there are currently no wait times for vulnerable service users. Children and families referred for support continue to be in contact with children's centre support workers via phone/video calls and messaging. A children's centre support worker had a young person allocated post lockdown, but they had not had the opportunity to meet, due to lockdown. This young person was not keen to video chat so it was agreed to have text communication and by using solution focussed questions, a very in depth text discussion took place with her about her worries. The young person said that she had enjoyed chatting and had been able to open up about her feelings, which may not have happened in a more intense and threatening face-to-face session.

32. The children's centre family support workers have been able to support families with doorstep deliveries including:

- 24 activity packs for children delivered to children struggling with being at home,
- 22 baby bank deliveries including new cots, clothes and birthday presents,
- 12 'link foundation' donations to support families with bunk beds, money to pay for utility bills, food and a replacement phone for a very vulnerable family,
- 4 families have been receiving 'posh nosh' meals twice a week from a top restaurant in Marlow,
- 14 food bank deliveries have been collected and delivered every week.

33. The Youth Service has continued to provide 1-1 support via video calling to an increasing number of vulnerable young people during this period, due to the postponement of non essential activities, like universal services, and there are currently no wait times for a vulnerable young person to receive the support they require. Those at higher risk of exploitation, substance misuse or foster placement breakdown have been seen on a more regular basis - in most cases 2/3 times a week. Return Home Interviews for those young people who have been reported missing have also been completed virtually. Feedback from some young people has been that they find this virtual interview method less threatening than face-to-face sessions.

34. A virtual Q&A session focussing on substance misuse, online safety and child exploitation for parents/carers is being organised for early June.

How have we quality assured activity during this time?

35. Up to date spreadsheets are being monitored and reviewed on a regular basis, so that we know the situation in relation to every child and young person with whom we work, in order to ensure that appropriate plans are in place. Managers have been given space and time to undertake 'dip samples' of cases, in order to review the quality of service provision during this time. Regular feedback is also requested from service users. Daily management oversight, regular audio service/team meetings and increased supervision have also helped to maintain the quality of front line work during lockdown.

Our staff

36. Our staff have worked tirelessly, in challenging circumstances, in order to ensure the needs of the vulnerable children, young people and families with whom they work are prioritised. Fortunately very few of our staff have had to self isolate due to Covid-19. Only three of our staff are not able to undertake face-to-face visits due to health issues. Staff were keen to undertake increased face-to-face visits to families and this was the catalyst for increasing the frequency and range of these visits. Throughout the period of lockdown, there has been constant engagement and feedback to understand how staff are responding to the crisis.

37. A recent staff survey, focusing on their lockdown experiences, found that 95% feel confident to do their job. When asked what was working well, the top three responses were support from management (including senior management), support from their teams and their ability to maintain contact with families. Interestingly, the recruitment of permanent social workers has been successful during this period, with five new social work staff starting over the next few months.

What has worked well during this time?

38. In line with the Signs of Safety social work model, the following has worked well:

1. **Virtual work with children, young people and families** -many children, young people, families and professionals have spoken positively about how successful 'virtual visits', group work and 1:1 sessions have been, in the main. This has meant that 'business as usual, but different' has been able to continue during lockdown. There has been a good level of engagement from children, young people and families. For example some previously difficult to engage young people have embraced the virtual way of working.
2. **Virtual meetings** -embracing virtual meetings has meant that 'business as usual' has been able to continue during lockdown, with no meetings being

cancelled. Families and professionals, in the main, have spoken positively about undertaking meetings in this way. There has been better engagement and 'presenteeism' in virtual meetings than pre-lockdown.

3. **School attendance/engagement in education** -the percentage of vulnerable children and young people in school has improved incrementally during the period of lockdown and is higher than the national average. The percentage of CiC engaged in education, whether at school or at home has increased from 85% in week 1 to 90% and persistent absence has reduced from 15% to 10% for our CiC.
4. **Personal Education Plans (PEPs)** -100% of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) were completed for CiC across RBWM in the Spring Term 2020.
5. **Placement breakdowns/missing CiC** -during this challenging time there have been no placement breakdowns for our CiC; 'missing' numbers have reduced, as has opportunities to engage in exploitation.
6. **Targeted early help offer** -pre-lockdown, our targeted families, ie, those more vulnerable families who require more support, had to 'wait' for services, due to service demand. During lockdown, non essential activity, like universal provision, was stopped and so this meant that our early help staff could be redeployed to work on a 1:1 basis with our most vulnerable families. Since lockdown, no vulnerable family has had to wait for a service.
7. **Collaborative multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working** -this has been particularly beneficial in relation to domestic abuse, mental health and reducing the risk to vulnerable babies. There has been a renewed willingness to work more closely together and 'working silos' have consequently reduced. Professionals and agencies have demonstrated a real commitment to supporting each other.
8. **Response from staff** -staff have shown their commitment, adaptability, creativity and willingness to work in a more flexible and child centered way. They have put their own fears aside in order to do the best they can for their children, young people and families.
9. **Staff support** - in a recent staff survey, 95% of staff who responded said that they have felt confident to do their job during this time and that support from managers and senior managers and their teams has been positive. Some staff have said that they now feel more connected to their colleagues because of more frequent meetings, catch-ups and touchpoints.
10. **Work/life balance** -staff have significantly reduced their travel time and this has not only saved money, but given staff more time to undertake their core tasks. Agile working has become the 'new normal'. Staff have said that the ability to work flexibly has given them a better work/life balance, which is a key staff retention factor. Staff have shown that we can be successful at working in a more agile way and that it is not necessary to be in an office environment in order to do their job.
11. **The use of IT** -In the main, staff have embraced the use of technology, even those who might have struggled with IT pre-lockdown. Anecdotally, the majority of staff are now more IT Savvy and have found a number of new creative ways to use technology.

What has not worked quite so well

39. In line with the Signs of Safety social work model, the following has given us some concern:

1. **Limitations of virtual 'visiting' and 1:1 sessions** -professionals like social workers and health visitors have said that although virtual work has been effective, they do not feel as if they can fulfill all of their role, due to the limited nature of virtual contact. A social worker said, *'there is nothing that gives you more information than seeing a child in his/her own home environment.'*
2. **Limitations of virtual meetings** -although in the main, virtual meetings have worked well, there have been some challenges. Not all families have had sufficient access to appropriate IT and have needed to be supported to be able to attend. Furthermore, Virtual Child Protection Conferences have not been ideal from a Signs of Safety perspective, because it is more difficult for parents to be fully involved in the scaling work that takes place on the board.
3. **Getting vulnerable children and young people into school** -although we have made incremental progress, we are committed to getting as many vulnerable children and young people as possible into school. However the fact that this is not mandatory, does not support our best efforts with some more entrenched families.
4. **Domestic Abuse** - there is a concern that even with our best efforts, some of those who have experienced domestic abuse during lockdown have been unable to make contact with support services. We are planning for an increase in contacts and referrals once lockdown is relaxed.
5. **Contacts into the Single Point of Access (SPA)** -there was a concern that contacts into the SPA decreased in March and April 2020, in comparison with pre-lockdown months. However contacts are now more in line with pre-lockdown data.
6. **Limitations for Care Leavers, in particular** -although many Care Leavers have embraced virtual contact with their personal advisers, they often need face-to-face support to complete particular benefit forms. A number of Care Leavers can become isolated and distressed because they do not have other support structures available to them, so face-to-face visits are essential and this has been a particularly challenging time for some of them.
7. **Contact** -not providing children with face to face contact with their birth parents and extended family members has been challenging. Whilst we are providing virtual contact, this can never replace face to face contact. However some socially distanced face-to-face contact has now resumed and this will be appropriately scaled up over the coming weeks.
8. **Court delays** -despite the courts embracing virtual hearings, there have been some built-in delays and delays in getting expert reports. This has meant some delay in decisions being reached for achieving children's permanency. However this has not had an impact on children themselves.

9. **Paper based services** -some services, like our health visiting service, are over-reliant on paper files and this has been a challenge during lockdown.
10. **Staff support** -some staff, particularly those living on their own, have found lockdown more challenging. It is also important for staff working in social care and early help worlds to meet together on a face-to-face basis and this opportunity has been very limited during lockdown.
11. **More intense way of working** -some staff have also said that working virtually means that they go from one meeting to another, often sitting in front of the computer without a break, for long periods of time. This way of working can be more intense and requires more concentration than face-to-face work. It has also been noted by some that there has been much more email traffic and sometimes too many staff communications from too many sources.

Lockdown has unlocked opportunities for future working and service delivery!

40. Throughout this period of lockdown, there have been many great examples of how staff have embraced working together differently - within their teams, in mobile and flexible ways and with children, young people and families. It is really important that we sustain the positive aspects of what we have 'unlocked' during this time. However it is essential that new opportunities do not compromise basic social work and other professional practice - there is a growing acceptance that there is a place for greater virtual activity, but this cannot replace the need to see and work with our vulnerable children, young people and families face-to-face.

41. However we need to focus on the aspects of what we have 'unlocked' during lockdown that can be taken forward in order to enhance our future offer to children, young people, families, our staff, the Council and AfC. If we go back to the way things were pre-lockdown, we will miss the opportunity to make and or sustain the changes needed to become a modern, transformative and forward-thinking Council.

42. The top opportunities for transformation that come from the experience of lockdown are:

1. **Contact with children, young people and families** -by taking the things that have worked well during lockdown, we have the ability to move to a blended model of face-to-face and virtual contact with children, young people and families. One size does not fit all and a blended model would offer a menu of intervention and support depending on the needs of those with whom we are working.
2. **Care Leavers** -once lockdown is eased, it is proposed that we could continue to offer virtual 'visits' to Care Leavers, as this works in the main, but have duty/drop-in times when young people can visit the office and get support to complete application forms etc.
3. **Virtual meetings** -here again, we have the ability to move to a blended model for Child Protection Conferences and other meetings. This means that some people could participate from an office and some virtually. It is

more likely that some multi agency professionals would be able to attend more meetings virtually, because they wouldn't have to travel/find parking spaces or have wasted travel time. Where appropriate, service users could have a choice about how they attend such meetings and this may encourage better attendance and engagement. Careful consideration would need to be given to how this could work in the longer term.

4. **Greater flexibility for staff working arrangements** -our staff have demonstrated that they do not need to be in an office in order to do their job. Staff have also been more able to work their hours in a more flexible way, sometimes outside of traditional core hours. More working from home would reduce travel time and costs, may promote a better work/life balance (a key staff retention issue) and reduces the requirement for significant office space. Staff could be in the office for key team/service meetings and on a duty rota basis, rather than all at once. Furthermore, we could build a service that is more responsive to when service users need our support, rather than offering traditional core hours only. This would require the enhancement of equipment, in order to make this viable in the longer term.
5. **Becoming a 'paperless Council'** -during lockdown, previously paper based activities have had to be delivered in a different way. For example invoices have been dealt with electronically, Child Protection Conference paperwork has had to be delivered electronically and certain services that have previously relied on paper based activities, have had to change their method of service delivery. There is scope, with an enhanced IT system, to enable more aspects of our service to be delivered remotely, which will significantly improve our efficiency and effectiveness.

Conclusion

43. Whilst the response to Covid-19 has been a challenge, it has forced our staff to work in different ways. This has shown that whilst some pre-lockdown ways of doing things will need to be resumed, there are a number of opportunities for doing things differently in the future. An analysis of how we can take forward the positive learning from this period will be undertaken, with a view to having a more flexible and adaptive approach to how we do our business.