

<b>Item No.</b> 7.	<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Date:</b> 8 July 2020	<b>Meeting Name:</b> Corporate Parenting Committee
<b>Report title:</b>		Report on the response to Looked After Children, Care Leavers and Foster Carers during Covid-19	
<b>Ward(s) or groups affected:</b>		All	
<b>From:</b>		Director of Children and Families	

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Corporate Parenting Committee note the response of Children's Services to looked after children, care leavers and foster carers during COVID19.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. On the 20 March 2020 the government announced that schools would close for all children with the exception of children of key workers and children who had a social worker. Shortly after this on the 23 March the government announced that the country would go into a state of 'lock down', resulting in a ban on non essential travel as well as not having contact with anyone outside one's home. This paper sets out the response undertaken by the department in respect to COVID19 and looked after children, care leavers and foster carers.
3. A number of work streams were created to address and respond to ensuring that we were assured of the safety and wellbeing of our looked after children and care leavers and continuing to do our utmost to support them to achieve the best possible outcomes.

## KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

### CHILDREN IN CARE

#### Risk Assessments

4. To understand our most at risk children during this time a department wide COVID 19 Risk Assessment and Safety Planning Tool was developed and used for all children and care leavers. The risk assessment considered two areas: the impact of self-isolation; and the impact of professionals not having face to face contact. Assessments considered: if the child was attending school; if they had underlying health conditions; current stability of placements; and likely impact of lack of face to face contact with parents and social workers. The assessments resulted in appropriate and proportionate safety plans being devised for every child and care leaver.
5. All risk assessments were risk rated which highlighted children and care leavers who we were most concerned about, for those who were rated red weekly video

calls were undertaken. However, for some children and care leavers we had to see them face to face due to placement instability or safeguarding concerns, in these cases risk assessments were undertaken and appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) was issued to allow social workers to visit young people to support them and foster carers. All children whose risk assessment resulted in a red rating are reviewed weekly at a Risk Management Panel held virtually. The panel is chaired by the Head of Service and has representatives from the virtual school, in house Clinical Service, Care Link, Health and Independent Reviewing Service.

### **Visits to looked after children**

6. The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, were published on Thursday 23 April and came into force on Friday 24 April. Social work visits and speaking to children are key to establishing the safeguarding and well-being of a child. Section 28 of the 'Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010' requires the minimum of a social work visit within one week of a new placement, thereafter every six weeks, and then in a long-term placement every three months. The Regulations (Section 13) amend this to only require a visit 'as soon as is reasonably practical' and also states the 'visit' can be 'conducted by telephone, video-link or other electronic means'.
7. In Southwark we have not reduced the frequency of visits and in most cases contact with the child has been more frequent determined by their needs and a risk assessment, we also decided that a phone call where a child and their surroundings can not be seen is not classified by us as a visit although this would be allowed in the government guidance. The majority of visits to looked after children have been undertaken by video call from the social worker to the young person and their carer. The visits still have tried to include direct work and games and speaking to children on their own. Some really creative ideas emerged such as writing poems and sharing these and also virtual cooking sessions sharing creations. Some visits did happen directly sometimes requiring PPE where there were safeguarding concerns, when children entered care and in situation vital to placement stability. We also had lovely examples such as a social worker who took a birthday cake and gift to a young person leaving at doorstep as his carer could not go out as was socially isolating due to symptoms of Covid-19. As restrictions have lifted we have introduced a new visit category of community visit, which could be taking children out for a game and chat in the park. We are keen to ensure during July all children in care have a face to face visit undertaken.

### **Experiences of looked after children**

8. Through regular video calls social workers were having with children, they had the opportunity to see for themselves some of the brilliant activities children undertook at home during the pandemic.
9. 'S' is a 11-year-old boy, he was keen to share with his social worker a 'Nature Book' he created over the Easter Holidays, *'For the Easter Holiday I have been doing lots of things in the garden and exploring nature. I have also been learning how to use Microsoft Publisher to show what I have been doing'*
10. His social worker stated; *'all children deserve carers who are crazy about them – and they certainly feel this way about 'S'. He still struggles with his emotions at*

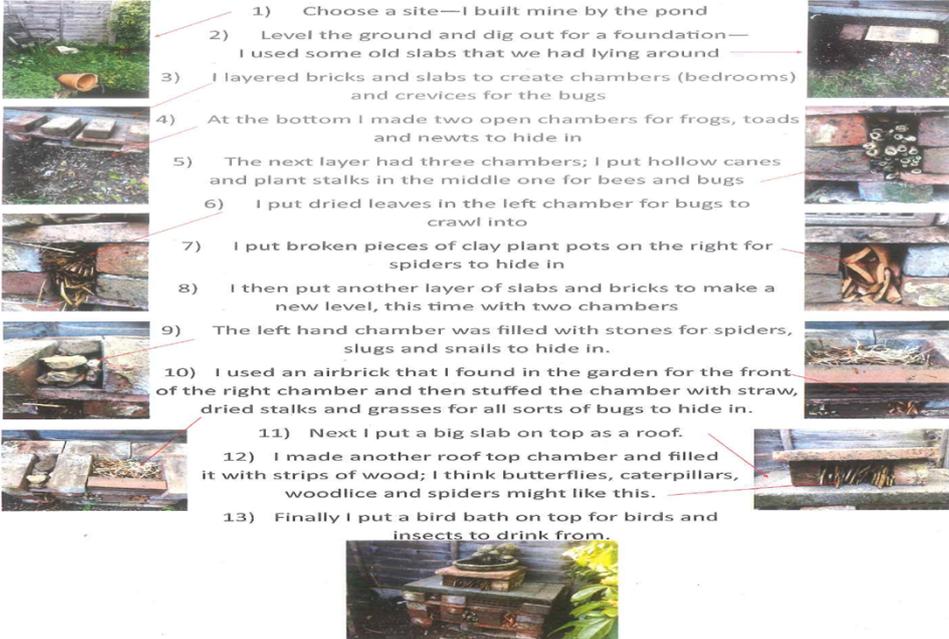
times but with support is doing so well. We are all so proud (and relieved!).

11. Below is an extract from his Nature Book, 'Building a bug hotel'

**Building a bug hotel**

I built a bug hotel in my garden; if you want to build your own, here's how I did it

- 1) Choose a site—I built mine by the pond
- 2) Level the ground and dig out for a foundation—I used some old slabs that we had lying around
- 3) I layered bricks and slabs to create chambers (bedrooms) and crevices for the bugs
- 4) At the bottom I made two open chambers for frogs, toads and newts to hide in
- 5) The next layer had three chambers; I put hollow canes and plant stalks in the middle one for bees and bugs
- 6) I put dried leaves in the left chamber for bugs to crawl into
- 7) I put broken pieces of clay plant pots on the right for spiders to hide in
- 8) I then put another layer of slabs and bricks to make a new level, this time with two chambers
- 9) The left hand chamber was filled with stones for spiders, slugs and snails to hide in.
- 10) I used an airbrick that I found in the garden for the front of the right chamber and then stuffed the chamber with straw, dried stalks and grasses for all sorts of bugs to hide in.
- 11) Next I put a big slab on top as a roof.
- 12) I made another roof top chamber and filled it with strips of wood; I think butterflies, caterpillars, woodlice and spiders might like this.
- 13) Finally I put a bird bath on top for birds and insects to drink from.



12. 'T' is a 10-year-old boy, his social worker shared the below photo of his super Lego project, 'T' has been keeping busy creating a lego world and the foster carer has kindly sent me some pictures for his file. This is one with his café, including garden seating, cinema and some of his vehicles'



Looked After Children's Reviews

13. Looked after reviews have continued using video conferencing as scheduled since the Covid-19 restrictions began. The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 amended the requirement for six monthly reviews to 'where reasonably practical thereafter but in Southwark reviews for all children in care have continued to held at the normal frequency.' Written guidance on how looked after reviews would be conducted was distributed to all staff in Children's Services on 19 March 2020. This was signed-off by the Director for Children and Families. The guidance focuses on the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) but is relevant to the other key participants in the looked after review process. IROs have conducted all reviews using virtual platforms during this period. Children sometimes prefer to engage on line, as this is a "natural" environment for young people who have grown-up in a digital world. In some cases, this has led to improved participation. IROs have found that the novelty of communication via video can be engaging for younger children, who enjoy giving a virtual tour of the foster home for example, or playing visual games.
14. IROs are also mindful of confidentiality, as they are required to speak to a child alone, and need to check that there is no-one else in the room but "off camera". IROs gather a lot of information by observing the exchanges between children and their carers, and how the child "presents" in the environment of the foster home, and it is more difficult to assess the nuances in the interactions between people when holding meetings virtually. The quality assurance Service Manager has asked the Children's Rights Officer to work with the Speakerbox Junior group to give us feedback on their experiences of looked after reviews and communication with social workers and other professionals using video conferencing and other virtual methods during Covid-19.

### **Contact with birth family**

15. In line with the government direction of not having face to face contact with individuals outside the home all face to face contact between parent's/family

members and children was suspended on 20 March, we wrote to all parents to inform them of this decision and to assure them that we would support contact virtually. Where necessary we provided foster carers and birth families with smart phones or sim cards to be used so children could maintain contact with family members, the fostering service also provided carers with guidance on using such video conferencing applications safely.

16. The local authority has a duty to promote contact between looked after children and their parents and recognises how important this is. With certain elements of lock down being reduced and the direction by courts for the local authority to restart contact between children and families a working party has reviewed how face to face contact can be carried out in a safe way with the aim to reintroduce face to face contact by the week beginning 6<sup>th</sup> July.

## **Education**

17. Currently 20% of all looked after children are attending one of more days at school this figure is increasing week on week. Whilst all of our looked after children have a social worker and therefore have been able to attend school we worked in partnership with foster carers to reach a decision about whether the child should be attending. For many foster carers they felt that by sending their looked after child to school whilst their own children stayed at home was unfair and wanted to treat them equally by having them remain at home using both school issued learning and online resources to support home schooling. It was agreed that Foster Carers are keyworkers so in circumstances where they have decided for children in their care to go to school they are also able to send their birth children to school.
18. The Virtual School has developed and taken the lead working with the allocated social worker in completing a COVID19 Personal Education Plans (PEP's). This PEP has a specific focus on children in transition years and for young people who were due to take public examinations.
19. The virtual school supplied 50 children with laptops so they could access home schooling in the first few weeks of school's closure and before the government roll out of laptops for vulnerable children to which 103 further laptops have been delivered or in process of being delivered to children with in the Care Service.

## **FOSTER CARERS AND PLACEMENT CAPACITY**

20. We recognised the financial impact that lock down could cause our foster carers. With children at home more and unable to access usual activities outside of the home there would be an increase in demand on grocery and utility bills with children using online applications to carry out school work, keep in contact with friends and general entertainment. Therefore, we provided 7 weeks of extra funding for carers to cover such costs. The Fostering Service also ran online Zumba and Yoga sessions for foster carers to support well being.
21. With the Fostering Service and children's social workers working from home, and not travelling to conduct visits, the level of telephone contact social workers had with carers increased resulting in carers reporting to be feeling more supported as issues and concerns were responded to immediately.

22. For 7 weeks the Clinical Service ran an out of hour's service. This was designed so that in the event of a placement becoming unstable they would work with the Fostering Service out of hours supervising social worker and the Emergency Duty Team to provide direct telephone support to carers to provide advice and guidance in order to support placement stability. The service was not utilised during this period, as above carers reported feeling very supported by supervising social workers.
23. The service has embraced the use of technology in order to maintain core services, for example the Fostering Panel is now meeting virtually, Foster Carers Annual Reviews which is a yearly appraisal of the foster carers development and required to maintain registration as a foster carer have also been undertaken using video conferencing.
24. There was inevitable concern at the start of lockdown regarding placement availability with potential that carers may need to self isolate if they caught or showed symptoms of the virus and impact this would have on the children in there care as well as general availability of placements.
25. The Access to Resources Team (ART) began an out of hours service so that in the event of a placement breakdown or the need to accommodate a child overnight they could undertake a placement search on behalf of the Emergency Duty Team.
26. The Fostering Service considered how they could create capacity within its pool of carers by using variations of foster carer approval however the service has not had to carry out any variations of approval as sufficient capacity was met through current carers and commissioned services. Furthermore, ART worked and attended weekly conference calls with commissioning to understand issues from external providers of fostering and residential care in respect to available placements.
27. Our foster carers and young people have been very creative during lock down. Fostering Fortnight took place between the 11 and 24 May and we celebrated the difference our foster carers make but especially how they supported children during the pandemic, below are some stories from supervising social workers and children's social workers;
28. *'One of our lovely carers has a new child in placement that was getting on really well with the carer's niece. To help the little girls maintain their relationship our carer has been holding daily video calls where the girls undertake a shared activity. One day she encouraged them to make tents out of cardboard and coloured paper, the girls showed each other their creations and as they did do they swapped ideas and suggestions'*
29. *'My carer supports the young person to maintain a good routine by getting him to do a few chores prior to having a shower and starting his online school work. She tries to breakup and add a little versatility to the school work and they will watch some educational programmes on BBC bitesize together, including Shakespeare plays and books such as 'Of Mice and Men'.*
30. *'One of my carers with 2 complex children has ordered a basketball and stand so she and the girls can play every day along with doing some Jo Wicks. This is working really well and she was also pleased to share that one of the little girls is*

*helping her to prepare dinner every day.*

31. *'When the young people go food shopping with the carer, they buy lot of fruit and the young people make a fruit salad. In the evenings they all go for a walk together. It's one young people's birthday this weekend and to celebrate the carer will buy a cake and get a takeaway from their favourite Turkish Restaurant'*
32. *'She has also booked a yoga teacher to come to the house each week and do yoga sessions with them both in the garden, (whilst observing social distancing guidance). The yoga gives the young person the opportunity to focus on his breathing, do some stretching exercises and use some of his gymnastic skills'*

## **CARE LEAVERS**

33. The Leaving Care service is very conscious of the vulnerabilities of care leavers and the additional emotional and practical strain the coronavirus pandemic has placed on them. The service was quick to respond at the start of the lockdown to some fundamental issues around ensuring care leavers had sufficient food, equipment, money and emotional support.

### **Contact with Care Leavers**

34. One of the first actions taken, when the governmental restrictions meant workers were unable to meet with young people face to face as a matter of course, was to increase the regularity of contact with care leavers virtually by video call, phone, email and text. This was welcomed by most young people, who were pleased to have additional support in place. Some young people had existing support such as foster carers or key workers in their accommodation, and did not need as much support and the approach was adapted for them. Staff received important feedback about the immediate needs of young people, which led to some practical interventions, set out below

### **Practical Support**

35. In practical terms, the service recognised the critical importance of care leavers remaining close to their social networks to sustain their mental health, and that some young people suffered from digital poverty, meaning they were unable to interact with friends, family and professionals effectively. Consequently, the service provided mobile phones, laptops, iPads, PlayStations and games consoles for all 16-18 year olds in semi-independent accommodation and for others. The intention here was to encourage children and young people to remain at home and practice social isolation. In addition, the service has benefited from the Department of Education issuing laptops for care leavers, and these have also been distributed.
36. Financially, the service has supported care leavers by increasing the personal allowance for 16-18 year olds by £10 per week, for those who are unaccompanied minors or with no recourse to public funds by £23.15 per week, and for those who are 18-21 by £23.15 per week. Care leavers who are in custody are receiving £10 per week. This enables the care leavers to purchase data, food, supplies for young children and other necessities.

## **Emotional Support**

37. Regarding emotional support, this is a significant issue for many of the care leavers and additional resource has been put in place. The in-house Clinical Service has set up a dedicated hotline by phone for care leavers to access additional mental health support, and the participation worker has been checking in with some specific care leavers who were identified by their personal advisor as needing extra support.
38. Speaker Box have increased their sessions to weekly virtual sessions, and these have been well attended and forged closer bonds between young people and staff. The group work experienced practitioner has been running a weekly timetable including Zumba, cooking, gym sessions and is planning to set up a young dad's group. The participation team has been sending out weekly newsletters to care leavers, informing them about upcoming participation sessions and current information about coronavirus, and including written pieces from care leavers.
39. A newly qualified social worker has offered to take forward specific work with care leavers at university, exploring how to better support them. For example, helping them to move during this time, and checking in with them more regularly if they are living alone in halls at this time.

## **Placements**

40. The Leaving Care Service has been trying to prevent the number of placement moves for care leavers, in order to provide some stability for them during this time period. For example, young people who were due to move on from their foster care placements when turning age 18 have remained in their placement.

## **Support from the Community**

41. The Community Social Capital Manager and Social Capital Experienced Practitioner within the Leaving Care Service have been researching and sharing details of numerous COVID-19 focused interventions that are running for young people during this period, ranging from employment opportunities, to financial support from British Gas Trust to reduce bills, to a direct hotline and online chat evening and weekend facility for care leavers from Family Action. These are shared via the newsletter, WhatsApp, via social workers and personal advisors to young people.

## **Group Work**

42. Group sessions have ran virtually since 25 March 2020 using various platforms such as House Party, What's App and Zoom. The first House Party group session took place on the 25 March 2020. 4 young people took part. Following discussion with the group, they wanted more information regarding the virus, and expressed what support/activities they would like as we being to work more virtually.
43. Since 6 April there have been a total of 8 unique sessions, this includes wellbeing check-ins, 2 home workout sessions, Zumba classes, Eid celebration,

Black Lives Matter discussions and Speaker Box meetings and discussion group.

44. 35 young people have engaged in a group activity, many have been to several activities and these have become an important source of support for them. 54 young people also received cards to celebrate Eid.
45. **Weekly check-ins** – initially these sessions were highly effective as young people reported that they felt trapped, confused and isolated due to the Covid-19. These sessions enabled young people to share their feelings offer peer to peer support and share ideas of how to keep busy and active. As lockdown began to ease this was an opportunity to prepare young people that were anxious about leaving their homes, to return to work and building confidence in going to the shops.
46. Workout **session and Zumba** – feedback from young person regarding online sessions - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTFr-d1Klcw>
47. Feedback from member of staff, *“my young people benefited from physical activity as their mental health began to deteriorate due to lockdown, these sessions gave them structure and a purpose to remain active, we were able to discuss their mental health and build a healthy working relationship”*.
48. **EID** – We held an EID Celebration with 4 different languages in the Zoom house, that being English, Amharic, Kurdish Sorani and Pashtu and we all came together as one community to mark Ramadan and Eid, We did this with the help of 3 interpreters. There were check ins, a fun quiz with prizes and discussions of what Ramadan has been like during Covid 19, safe ways of breaking a fast, including encouragement to stay at home and social distance, as opposed to normal, massive gatherings. The young people thoroughly enjoyed it. And some of those on the zoom call had actually received their card, and were so grateful they said it was very nice to receive something in the post. The zoom call actually made their day and helped to establish a sense of community.
49. During **the next few months** there are additional activities and support groups being made available, including:
  - Young fathers support group
  - Parenting support group
  - Pride celebration
  - BLM forum
  - Cooking sessions.
50. These activities will be conducted online and have the potential to continue face to face once safe to do so.

### **Experiences of and feedback from Care Leavers**

51. One of our social workers who leads on work with unaccompanied minors writes.....*“We had a young person referred to us on the first day of the lock down by the police. I remember going to meet him at Sumner House and his clothing was all dusty and his lips were so dry and chapped, he just looked*

*exhausted. The only question he asked me that first day was 'is there somewhere I can wash, I have been in these clothes for many weeks'. It's been two months since he arrived. He is like a different young person. He is now attending school and going to college in September to continue to learn English. At his first review he told his independent reviewing officer (IRO) that he never expected the kindness, respect and good treatment he has received since he came to us and he could not have asked for more".*

52. One young woman wrote to managers in the service about the difference her Personal Advisor and the Experienced Practitioner who leads group work is making to her; *"my Personal Advisor and she has been helping me to get my new temporary placement and has just been so supportive to me when im having a stressful day/week! I don't think I could of got through lockdown without her being at the end of the phone and if she hasn't heard from me then she always calls me to check up on me! She is awesome! Thank you for everything ! I simply couldn't do it without you and your support. The group work Experienced Practitioner has been like an extra personal advisor to me and is always helping me when he can! I've been so lucky!! Before lockdown we were doing different team sessions which were so fun and helped me to get out! Then we got put on lockdown so during the lockdown he's got me motivated by doing weekly workouts over zoom and by having our Zumba class on a Friday afternoon! He's always at the end of the phone when I can't get hold of my PA!"*
53. One young person who is studying currently aiming to eventually become a paramedic wrote in to compliment his Personal Advisor he wrote: *"I still have the urge to run every minute of every day, but one thing I've learnt is to run I need to walk and my Personal Advisor taught me this. To be honest I wouldn't have been able to get to where I am in this last year if it wasn't for my Personal Advisor. He's taught me to be open and trust and I believe he is truly amazing at his job and will help Southwark social services to get it's young people where they need to be".*

### **Community impact statement**

54. The work outlined sets out the council approach to how we supported looked after children, care leavers and foster carers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is critical for our roles and responsibilities as Corporate Parents for these children and young people during a very challenging time.

### **Financial implications**

55. Some the measures outlined in this report to provide the support required for children, care leavers and foster carers have had additional financial cost and careful records are being kept to understand the additional costs incurred due to the pandemic.

## BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
None		

## APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

## AUDIT TRAIL

<b>Lead Officer</b>	Alasdair Smith, Director, Children & Families,	
<b>Report Author</b>	Kelly Henry, Head of Service Permanence, Andrew Fowler, Head of Service Care Leavers, Helen Woolgar, Assistant Director Safeguarding	
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