

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN

UPDATE FROM TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN – COVID 19

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This update provides a summary of current issues and actions during the Covid pandemic and enforced restrictions. It also provides a summary of our performance through the associated period of time.

2. Summary of Current Performance Data

- 2.1 From the outset of COVID19, TfC has reported demand data to a range of audiences (and in addition to the ordinary reporting that takes place routinely) including the Department of Education (fortnightly), regional and national Association of Directors of Children's Services (weekly), the Council (weekly) and the TfC Board (monthly). This has provided clear oversight to all relevant stakeholders of the level of service provided, and the overall demand for children's services.
- 2.2 The following information presents overall demand and TfC performance in meeting need since the month before the lockdown which demonstrates that the service has maintained strong stability.

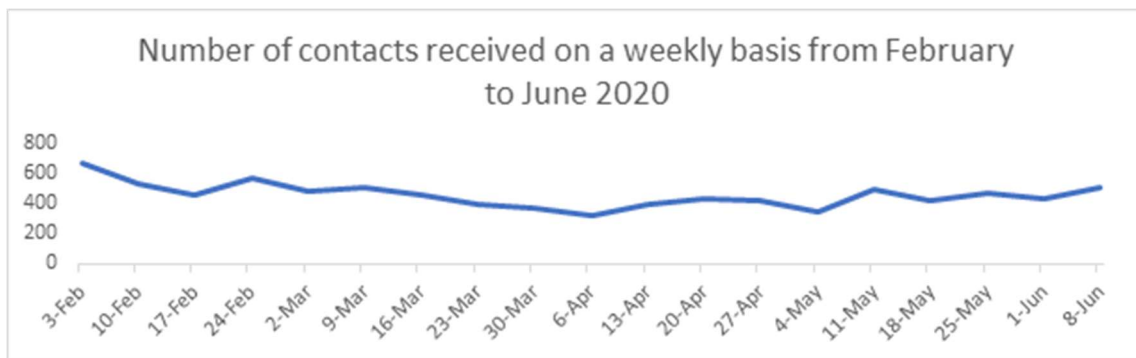
This section summarises in more detail:

Early Help



- This indicates 100 fewer cases now, compared to the start of lockdown.
- Case numbers remained stable in April (between 489-490 cases). They have started to rise slowly since then, and there were 521 on 22-June.

ICRT (Contacts and Referrals)

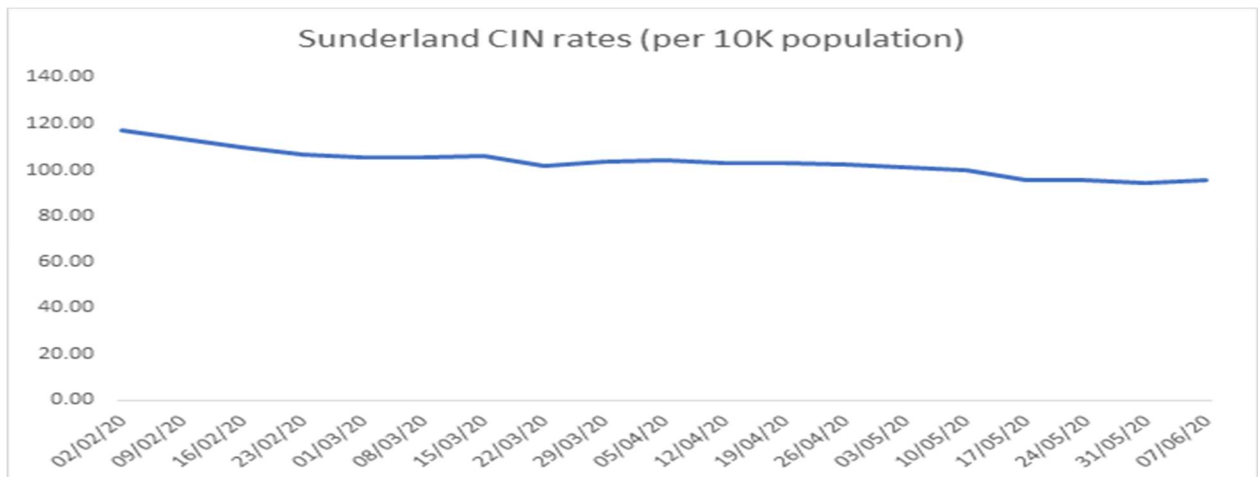


- From February there has been an average of 460 contacts per week, this is a reduction from our usual levels.
- Total contacts from 3-Feb: 8,732
- Using data from September 2019-February 2020, there was an average of 506 contacts per week
- During Feb-June 2020: 53% of contacts came from police, 13% from health and 11% from other legal agency
 - Police and health are in broadly similar proportions to those from Sep19-Feb 2020: police 58% and health 14% of totals
 - Schools are usually in the top 3 of contact sources, but during this time were 2nd lowest source of contacts- accounting for 1% of the total over this period
 - In Sept 19 to Feb 2020 schools accounted for 6% of all contacts



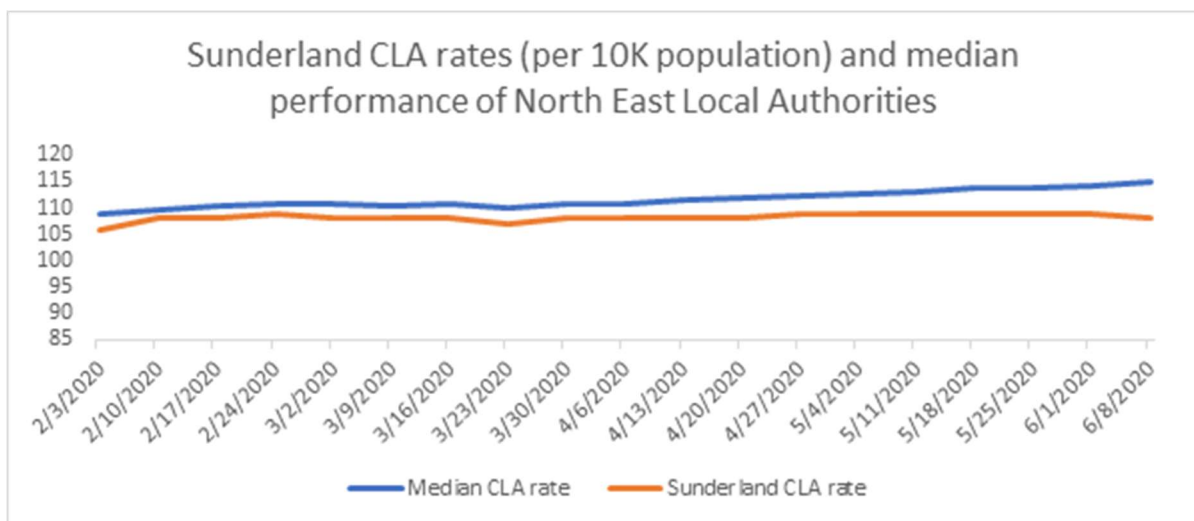
- Referrals remained broadly similar to previous months, with an average of 61 referrals per week since February 2020.

Child in Need



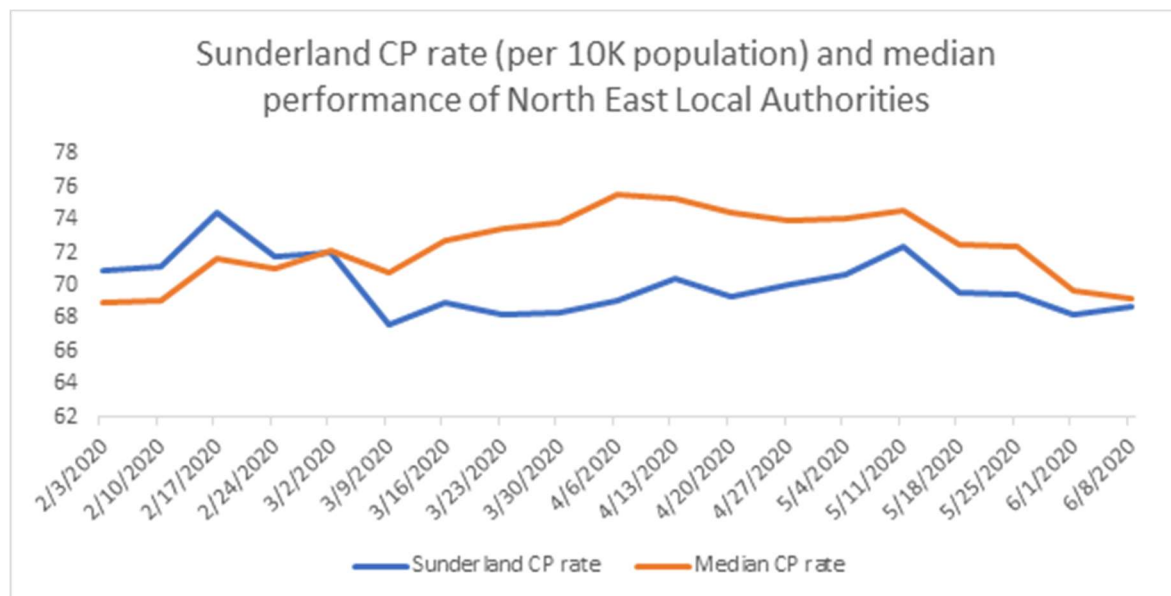
- 82 fewer children are on a CIN plan since the last monitoring visit, a reduction of 13%. There is no regional data on this measure on a weekly basis so comparison to regional neighbours is only possible on a quarterly basis.

Cared for Children ('children looked after')



- Regionally LA's have been benchmarking CLA data from 3-Feb on a weekly basis
- The chart below shows Sunderland's CLA rates are consistently below the median level for the region
- For the last week of this data (8-June) there are the same number of CLA as 16-March (the week of lockdown)

Child Protection



- CP rates have been below the median position for the region since early March
- There was one less child subject to CP on 8-June compared to the week before lockdown
 - Sunderland CP rate is generally lower than the median position of the region
 - Latest week (8-June) shows that Sunderland had 1 fewer CP cases compared to 16-March

3. Actions taken to safeguard children during the Covid pandemic – by service area

3.1 ICRT & EDT

In the week prior to the lockdown operational staff were provided with agile technology so that they could work from home effectively. This included the ICRT (Front door) staff and Assessment Team. The teams have worked off site in the main, with the safeguarding front door operating in a virtual environment. Urgent child protections discussions have taken place as usual virtually and all processes have operated as normal. As the data above shows however, the volume of work reduced significantly over the first 2 weeks of lockdown (as it did nationally) and then gradually increased from that point on.

Monthly MASH audits are undertaken of selected contacts within an operational group (held fortnightly) to ensure that appropriate investigation and outcomes are being achieved and identify learning for partner agencies. Processes and procedures have been updated and are readily available for staff to access in the HUB and there are much clearer processes developed in respect of Early Permanence, Pre-birth, Police Powers of Protection and Homeless for 16/17 year olds.

A re-referral process has been developed which includes the introduction of 'Amber Meetings' to ensure a multi-agency approach. Whilst the number of re-referrals remains an area of focus for TfC, the process allows greater analysis and better understanding around the areas requiring support, resulting in the development of more robust step down and closure procedures. It is hoped that with a continued consistent approach embedded this will in turn reduce re-referral rates across the service. **The percentage of referrals that are re-referrals within 12 months was 22.1% at the end of 2019-20. This is an improvement on the year end position in 18-19 (when it was 24.6%).**

In October 2019, the process changed in respect of the management of CIN cases, as assessment teams now hold short term CIN cases following the completion of assessment. **This process has reduced the number of CIN cases held within TfC significantly with 119 fewer children on an open CIN plan compared to February 2020.** This means families have consistency of the allocated social worker and single intervention pathways. There is a full cohort of permanent staff across ICRT and the assessment teams which has enabled this approach. CIN cases are reviewed within fortnightly CIN clinics which include Early Help input ensuring less drift and delay and more robust step-down procedures.

Sitting within the assessment teams is a domestic abuse team consisting of three Child and Family Workers who are supervised by an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA). This team has been further developed to provide an immediate response to domestic abuse concerns. The process includes joint initial visits with social workers to develop safety plans and develop DASH/RIC assessments and identify further targeted work to be undertaken with the children and parents. Families have welcomed this and the approach has ensured proportionate intervention within the assessment stage, often preventing concerns escalating to ICPC. The role of the IDVA has supported the information sharing and training around domestic abuse across the service.

Performance data demonstrates that despite Covid19, ICRT & Assessment have remained relatively busy. Teams were sent to work from home the week before the lockdown (to reduce the risk of infection) and teams have operated virtually. Joint working was agreed with service leads from partner agencies. A joint risk assessment tool was developed for school aged children to consider how their attendance could be promoted to provide stability and safety and consider what monitoring measures would be in place to enable regular communication with families. Joint working with housing services has been undertaken to ensure that victims of domestic abuse have been provided with alternative housing where appropriate and there has been short-term provisions created to place greater focus on alternative accommodation for perpetrators of abuse. This has strengthened safety planning and achieved better outcomes for children.

Visits to children and families continued in line with government guidance and assessments and multi-agency meetings progressed as usual but mainly virtually. Joint work has been undertaken with Schools Improvement Officers to increase parent's awareness of key issues such as increased risk of online radicalisation and an increase in the sharing of sexual imagery. As restrictions ease more physical meetings will be resumed gradually but in the main staff remain home based.

3.2 Neighbourhood Teams

Immediately prior to COVID19 restrictions being introduced a risk assessment was developed and completed on every case, with a RAG rating determined. This was kept under review by Team Managers, so the most concerning cases were easily identified. The assessment was further developed to look at the most appropriate way to work with each individual family based on the risks related to COVID19 and the family situation. This was completed on every case and regularly reviewed as circumstances changed. Virtual visiting was introduced for families where this was needed. A virtual visit option was created in Liquid Logic so that non-physical visits could be tracked and reported twice weekly to the SLT and DCS. As the transition out of lockdown continues face to face visits have resumed except where a family are symptomatic or self-isolating.

A revised audit tool was quickly devised to respond to the changes in social work practice. The COVID audits focus on ensuring the monitoring of the needs of the children and how well this has been balanced against restrictions and safety concerns in light of COVID. The COVID audits consider, for example, if visits are virtual or face to face, how family time is managed, how children's voices are captured, safety planning in light of COVID (include use of PPE) and any relevant risk assessments completed to understand the impact for the child. 60% of the audits were graded as good or outstanding.

Supervision, team meetings and group supervision had all been conducted virtually but are gradually resuming face to face as teams return to the office base on a rotational basis.

3.3 Early Help

All Early Help services, including the YOS and all Targeted Youth Services, have continued to support children and families from the outset of restrictions. Cases were RAG rated for risk and direct work continued with those at greatest risk of escalation into statutory services. Children and families whose plans were RAG rated green (lowest risk) were supported via video or telephone contact. The Service picked up the ongoing support for all families whose Early Help Plan had previously been co-ordinated by a school, health visitor or other universal service provider. These families were appreciative of the service and welcomed the contact:

"TfC have been brilliant and very helpful. Phone calls have been really helpful. A very good service." (Mum, May 2020)

'TfC have been doing really well as a service. Phone calls have definitely been helpful and knowing where to go for help'. (Mum, June 2020)

Staff who had a reduced workload during lockdown, such as Attendance Officers, were redeployed into the Council's Community Hub Teams and provided telephone contact and a door-knocking services for vulnerable residents. This community support was also very much appreciated.

"It's wonderful to talk through my worries with someone instead of pacing the house getting more and more anxious" (Resident 18.06.20) during a welfare call

Under normal circumstances over 65% of cases opened by the Early Help Service step down to Level 2 from CIN plans, CIN assessments and from contacts into ICRT. This slowed considerably during the pandemic, principally due to the much-reduced number of contacts from schools over this period. We anticipate a increase in contacts from September, or from the point at which schools resume business as usual.

The Youth Offending Service and Targeted Youth Services (ASB support, drug and alcohol support, restorative justice) also continued to support young people as appropriate on a case by case basis. Activity remained stable until the end of June when there was a noticeable rise in reported alcohol-related youth anti-social behaviour. This is likely to have been related to the easing of restrictions, a certain amount of lockdown 'cabin fever' and family tension, and the seasonal increase associated with the end of the school year (despite schools being closed for the most part).

From 1 July 2020 all parts of the Early Help Services ceased to RAG rated cases and direct work with children and families resumed as required for each Plan on a case-by-case basis.

Community work, such as Children's Centre activities, will re-start in September. A virtual offer has been available via social media during lockdown and will be over the Summer. Engagement has been good:

'Miller is really enjoying the videos we watch them everyday we're so thankful that you're all working hard to put the videos together xx' (15th May 17:36pm from Miller's mum via Facebook)

Young people's participation groups (Young People's Council, Change Council, Rainbow Spektrum) also continued virtually via a range of social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom and Teams. The Young Parents' Project (B2b) supported its service users remotely and with home visits and the Girls' groups set up to support and mentor vulnerable young women continued

virtually. Overall, feedback from families has been exceptionally positive during these constrained times:

“Thank you for your help anyway, no ones (sic) ever been as helpful as you with Ben and I really appreciate it 😊” (Ben’s Mum, via WhatsApp, following support to find him a school place in June 2020)

3.4 Children with Disabilities

During Covid all cases in review have been offered a higher level of support. Physical and virtual visits increased to fortnightly and regular telephone contact has been maintained. As restrictions are reducing, the timescales for visits are being reviewed with families and are being tailored to meet individual needs. The teams have responded to different types of need; support staff have offered to collect shopping, for example, for those families shielding due to a child’s complex health needs.

There has been significant collaborative working with partners in SEND particularly around children and young people with EHCP’s returning to education. Early agreement was reached with the respite provider (adult services) to continue to provide overnight respite on a risk assessed basis, and families have continued to access it. As restrictions reduce more children and young people are resuming their care packages of overnight respite, where it is safe to do so.

3.5 Cared for Children & Protection

Direct Family Time (contact as was) ceased at the point of lockdown as per the government guidance. Plans were progressed quickly so that virtual/indirect family time was quickly put into place for all cases to ensure that children did still maintain a level of family time; including for newborns. The service ensured all carers and parents had access to some form of virtual communication method, or this was facilitated by staff. As lockdown restrictions have reduced Family Time will be delivered directly subject to each risk assessment.

Staff have continued to undertake direct work with children through a range of means and an increased number of children have registered with Mind of My Own. An urgent safeguarding alert system was set up with Mind of my Own so that any concerns raised by children would go directly to ICRT for immediate action. Staff have seen children in school if they have been attending making sure social distancing rules have been followed.

There have been examples of exceptional practice by Social Workers taking significant personal risk during Covid, for example removing children in high risk circumstances, acting as temporary connected carers (in line with the agreed temporary flexibilities), visiting infants admitted to hospitals and even delivering breast milk from a separated Mother to her baby (twice a day, every day).

Support has continued to be offered to victims, perpetrators and children who are experiencing or have experienced domestic abuse. Due to COVID19 restrictions there has been changes to how external services have been delivered and this has had an obvious impact on work being completed however, service have offered support virtually where possible. The DCS has chaired weekly partnership meetings with housing, the Police etc. to ensure oversight of demand. The Sunderland area for Northumbria Police has shown consistently higher rates of adult notifications for reported domestic abuse with some very high risk cases presenting to ICRT. Incidents spiked further the week of 22nd June with a 30% increase in reported cases across the Force area.

3.6 Legal Service

The difficulties of conducting hearings remotely has had an impact on the timeliness of care proceedings, specifically contested hearings, Initial Review Hearings and Final Hearings. Hearing outcomes reviewed from 23rd March to 1st June 2020 identify that 16 of 112 hearings held were impacted upon due to Covid19 which will necessarily lead to a delay in concluding these cases. However, whilst the court initially identified at the start of Covid19 that non-urgent case listings would not be made (i.e. discharges, revocations) the court are now accepting such applications, so there is minimal impact on this area of work. Despite the difficulties the legal team have maintained their performance against the issuing of cases. TfC are providing relevant information relating to delayed cases so that the issues can be reported regionally and nationally.

3.7 Children Looked After, Fostering & Residential, Adoption & Leaving Care

Children's homes have maintained 'good' or 'outstanding' Ofsted judgements this year.

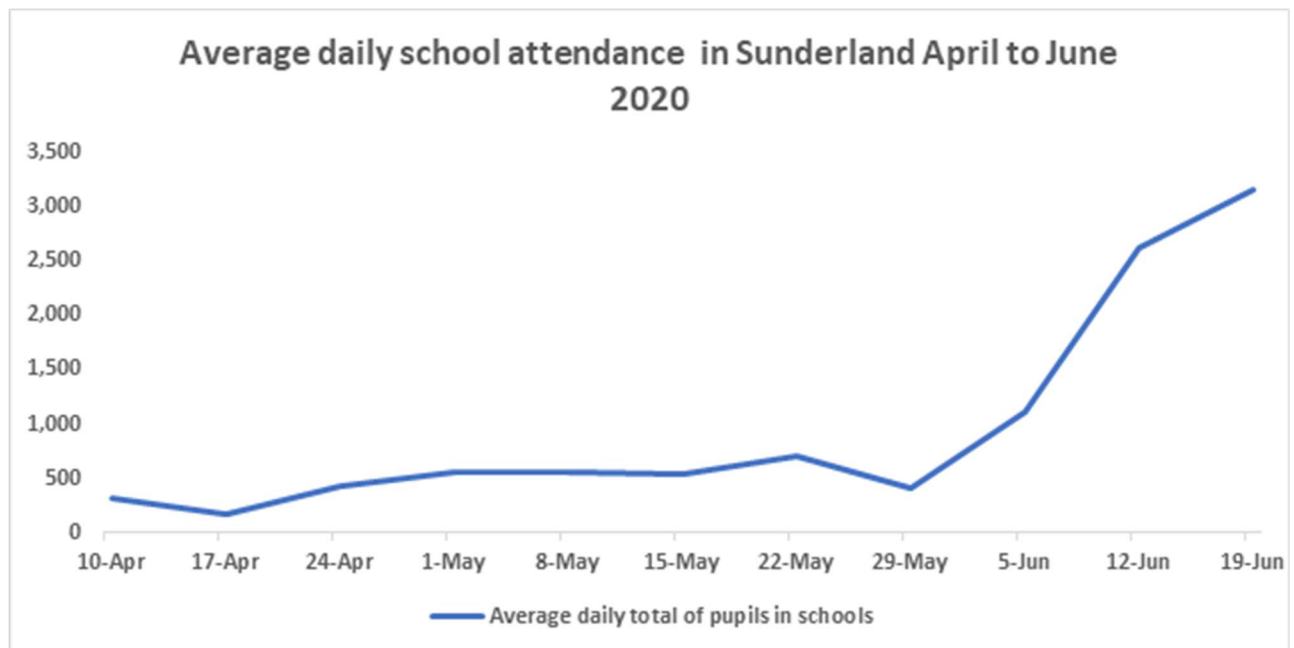
During the pandemic the residential units have had some very challenging circumstances to manage. Whilst overall staffing capacity has been sufficient, the shielding advice did impact on staff capacity. Additionally, the initial delays in accessing PPE, PPE guidance and testing, created fragility across the workforce. Staff from within TfC were re-deployed (albeit in small number) to support the rota's and greater stability was secured once PPE and systematic testing were in place.

Care leavers have received additional support, whether living in supported accommodation or fully independent. Most young people agreed quickly to be moved onto payment cards for their allowances and have also been provided with food parcels, emotional well-being packs and continued direct support.

There has been no young people who have experienced drift or delay in their plans to progress to supported accommodation as a result of Covid19. Transitions have been managed safely and in the best interests of young people.

3.8 Education

A very significant issue presented by Covid was the loss of universal school attendance. Sunderland schools remained open to key worker and vulnerable children from the outset (special schools presented with some particular difficulties early on which were quickly resolved) and of school attendance prior to early June, 25% of children attending were vulnerable and 75% keyworker children.



- The period covers the Easter hols and the May half term, and some weeks where the DfE had not released the information (the DfE collect the data directly from schools)
- The dip on data point for 29-May is an example of this: the DfE had an issue which meant that schools could not provide the data to DfE
- Figures from 5-June incorporate the numbers of pupils attending based on the priority year groups who started to return from early June
- Between 96-100% of Sunderland schools are open or offering places via hub arrangements which appears to be the highest for the region

A full range of support has been offered to all schools, who have had access to TfC and Council services throughout the pandemic. The Outbreak Control Plan which is now in place to manage ongoing management of the virus, has a clear focus on supporting schools with infection control and outbreak management.

3.9 Virtual School

Since Covid19 lockdown The Virtual School staff have all worked remotely. Together with social care and schools the service identified, using RAG methodology, which children needed to be prioritised. All children out of area

and in residential children's homes were identified as top priority as were several children who had complex needs. The role of the Virtual School was to maintain twice weekly safe and well calls, to offer support with education alongside the home school's input, speaking with both carer and child. All cared for children received at least one call from the Virtual School a week. This was in addition to calls from schools and Social Worker. Some carers were overwhelmed (positively) by the response from all professionals and it has been stated that:

"I'd rather have 5 calls a week than feel isolated and unsupported"

The service has maintained contact with schools to confirm which children were attending throughout this period and this was maintained during the return to school for Reception, Year 1 and 6.

Working with Welfare Call the EPEP format was adapted to ensure it reflected the remote and online teaching that schools and children were involved with. EPEPs have been maintained at 94% during this period. The Virtual School team have maintained links with Social Workers and school Designated Teachers throughout this period and have attended virtual LAC reviews and Strategy meetings accordingly. The service also maintained contact with schools to advocate for children's attendance if it was appropriate to do so.

TfC purchased laptops for all children in children's homes and worked with schools on the use of Pupil Premium to buy laptops where this was necessary.

Prior to Covid the newly created NEET coordinator for cared for children and SEND young people role, had evidenced early impact on outcomes for that cohort of young people. The programme has developed a partnership approach to supporting the targeted groups and in the first year helped to start the development of a new post 16 pathway, improved mentoring opportunities and created a range of specific training opportunities for young people at risk of becoming NEET. It is clear that Covid has impacted on current apprenticeships, and given that the impact on future apprenticeships is not yet understood, the skills and employment agenda will need to remain a top priority for the city.

3.10 Children's Independent Reviewing Service

During lockdown, all services delivered by Children's Independent Reviewing Team (CIRT) (including Regulation 44 Visits, Foster Carer Reviews & Designated Officer) have been held via the use of conference calls, video calls, or a series of phone calls with children, families and professionals fully engaging. This change in practice has worked well with strong performance maintained. For example, Initial Child Protection Conference timeliness for April was 92% and 100% in May. Review Child Protection Conference timeliness for

April was 100% and 98% for May. 99% of cared for children reviews were completed in timescale for both April and May. Over 75% of children participated in their reviews in April and May. 100% of Designated Officer referrals, foster carer reviews and Regulation 44 Visits were completed in timescale in April and May.

CIRT is now adopting a hybrid approach to offer choice to families whilst at the same time adhering to government guidance. Families will be offered the opportunity to attend conferences in person with the Conference Chair whilst professionals attend via a conference call or video call to minimise risk. The use of Microsoft Teams is allowing the sharing of documents in meetings which is particularly helpful.

In November 2019, CIRT arranged an external Peer Review to complement internal quality assurance work. In response to the findings, the service identified three key areas of focus; consistency of recording, ensuring the child's voice is fully captured in all case recordings and refreshing the challenge process. This improvement work has continued during COVID19 and from the work undertaken so far, the service has already seen positive outcomes such as the child's voice being more dominant in case notes for mid-way reviews.

4. Recommendations

- 4.1 The Scrutiny Committee is requested to consider and comment on the report.