

**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 recent Covid pandemic and provides a summary of associated service performance.

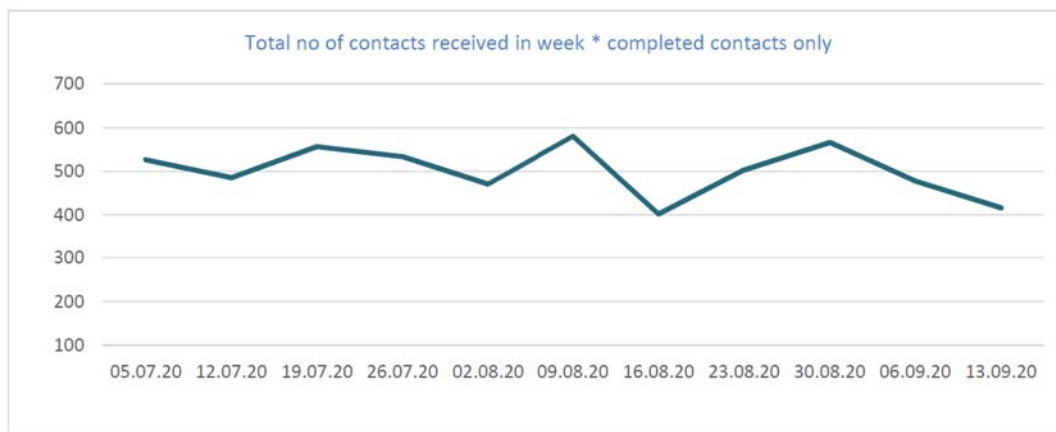
**2. Summary of Current Performance Data**

- 2.2 From the outset of Covid 19, TfC has reported data (Social Care, Education and SEND) to a range of audiences including the Department of Education, Regional and National Association of Directors of Children's Services, the Council, the Improvement Board and the TfC Board.

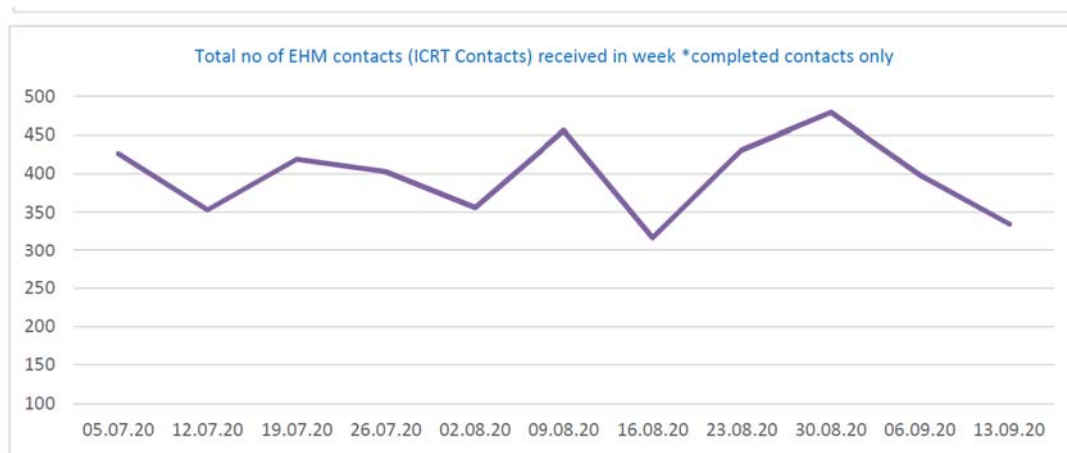
- 2.3 The following information presents a summary of this performance data.

This section summarises in more detail:

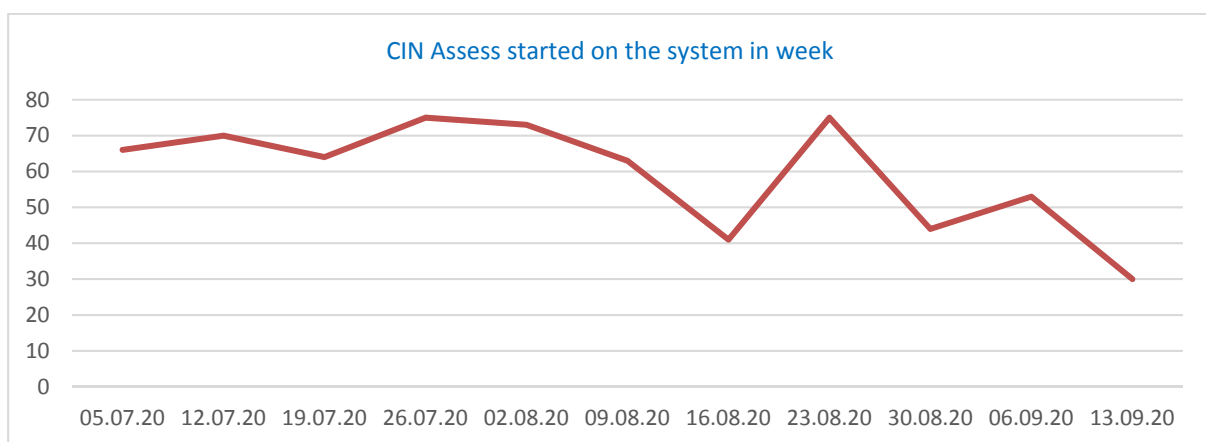
**i) ICRT (Contacts and Referrals)**



Whilst overall the amount of contacts being received by the safeguarding front door are lower than previous from all sources, the service has remained very busy with contacts from the Police which have at times exceeded pre-Covid levels. On average 20% of contacts progress to an Early Help intervention or offer of support as you can see below.

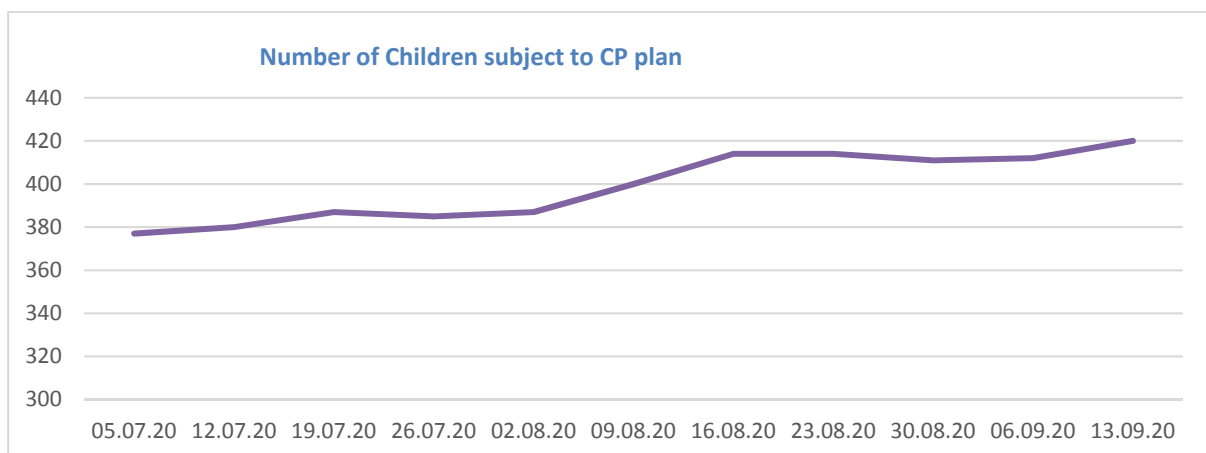


## ii) Child in Need

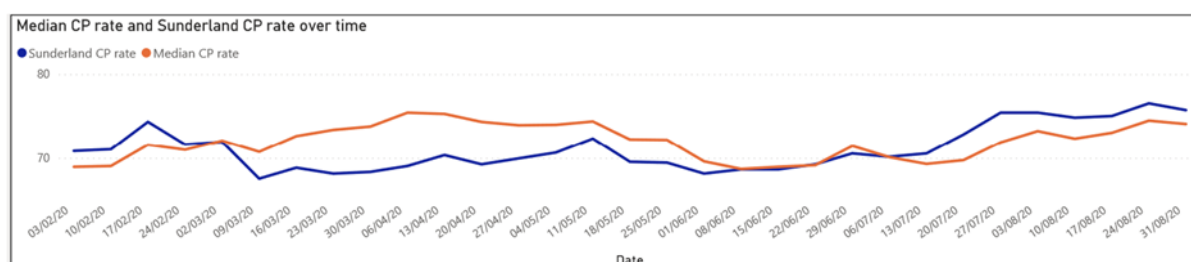


This graph shows the number of CIN assessments commenced, rather than completed. The summer holiday period impacted as it would normally with a lower level of assessments required through the early summer period. Even during when the number of assessments peaked later in August, timeliness remained between 97-100% for achievement of the timescales for completion of assessments.

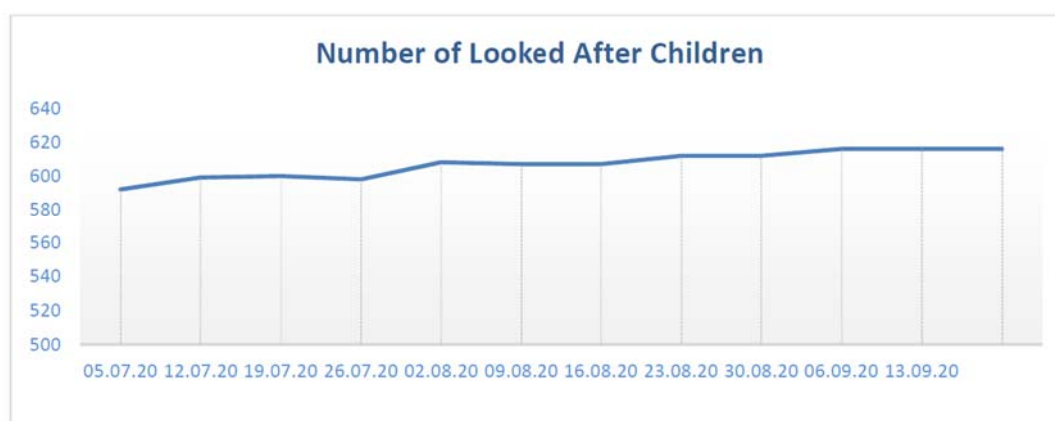
## iii) Child Protection



The number of children subject to a Child Protection plan has been at a lower than regional median level (see graph below) for a considerable period but has started to increase more recently. The total number of children on a plan is 410 which still remains considerably lower than historically experienced.



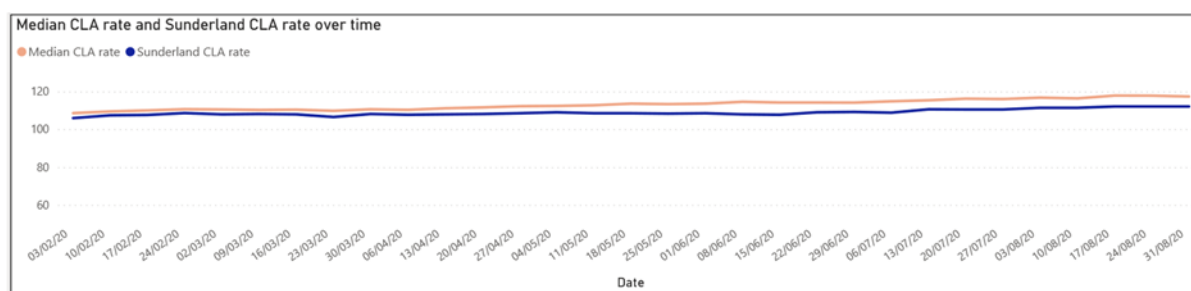
#### iv) Cared for Children ('children looked after')



The graph above shows a slight increase in the overall number of cared for children. The number includes those children whose Court Orders have not been discharged due to the delays in the Family Justice system, approximated to be 11% of all cases nationally. This would include for example, children waiting to be placed with adoptive parents and those children who are safely returning home without intervention.

The graph below shows the regional context with Sunderland represented as the blue line. Since 16 March 2020 the TfC rate of the number of cared for children per 10,000 is 3.9% higher than before 16 March 2020.

That represents the 5<sup>th</sup> lowest change in the region.



#### v) Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Throughout the lockdown period children and young people continued to receive a range of short break services and other support through a range of creative means. They also continued to have access to overnight short breaks from Grace House. As is the case for the majority of other direct service provision, services are now more routinely available directly, subject to clear risk assessment. In terms of Education, Health and Care plan processes, the team continued to undertake new and ongoing assessments. Government did make some temporary legal changes to the statutory timescales for the provision of plans but it made very little material difference to the service who made every effort to operate as normal.

In July 2020 there were 25 new requests for Education, Health and Care needs assessments and 39 final EHC plans issued. No plans in that period had the allowable exceptions applied.

In August 2020 there were 2 new requests for Education, Health and Care needs assessments and 16 issued. Again, there were no plans where the allowable exceptions were applied.

### 3. Temporary legal flexibilities

3.1 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 were implemented from 24 April to 25 September and permitted Local Authorities to deviate from statutory requirements in a number of areas.

3.2 TfC made minimal use of the range of legal flexibilities provided, largely as a result of maintaining service resilience. The five specific flexibilities were used as follows:

- Temporary approval of foster carers and an extension to the length of time that approval lasts (for urgent placements required due to the pressures related to Covid)
- Placement planning timescales extended (to recognise that social workers may have been able to respond as quickly as normal)
- Independent visits to children placed in residential accommodation to be virtual (to reflect the fact that residential providers did not want visits from external agencies)
- Electronic means for the supervision of children's welfare in placement (to replace face to face visits during the height of the lockdown)

3.3 The application of these flexibilities was reported regularly to the Improvement Board and the appropriateness of their use will be tested by Ofsted on their forthcoming Focused Visit. The test at all times will be the degree to which decisions were made in the best interests of the child. The overwhelming majority of the flexibilities lapsed on 25 September and are no longer in place at this time.

#### 4. Direct service provision update:

- i) Staff continued to undertake direct work with children and families during the lockdown on a RAG rating basis. All open cases were risk assessed by the Social Care and Early Help teams and the most at risk cases continued to receive direct visits. The timeliness of child protection and cared for children statutory visits was reported on a fortnightly basis and was consistently at 98%. Welfare and safety assessments were agreed with schools and domestic abuse referrals through Operation Encompass continued to be received.
- ii) As lockdown measures eased direct face to face work with all children and families was resumed, with appropriate risk assessments in place around Covid risks. For example, Family time, Family Group Conferencing, and parenting interventions have resumed and some children's centre activities where social distancing is feasible. Face to face child protection conferences have resumed with Independent Reviewing Officers providing both virtual and face to face meeting options, as an example of the creative ways in which services are operating.
- iii) An increased number of children have registered with Mind of My Own and further work is underway to train more staff to use it. 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.
- iv) Young people's participation groups had resumed their to face to face meetings where appropriate, using social distancing and other measures. The status of these types of sessions will be reviewed in light of the new restrictions in place across the region.

#### 5. Future Ofsted activity

- 5.1 The Ofsted ILACS framework for the inspection of Children's Services has been in place since 2017 and has governed all inspections of Local Authority Children's Services, and Trusts (which is how TfC is described for the purposes of the framework) since that date.
- 5.2 TfC was subject to a full ILACS inspection in 2018 and as a result of the graded judgement of Inadequate a regime of Monitoring Visits (MV) commenced in 2019. To date three MV have been conducted with the last one in February 2020. A fourth MV was due in May 2020 but cancelled due to the Covid pandemic. The ILACS framework requires a minimum of four MV to be conducted before a full reinspection is undertaken.
- 5.3 Shortly after the full national lockdown was announced, Government requested Ofsted to suspend all inspection activity (of social care, providers, schools etc.) and that was then formalised in temporary amendments to the primary legislation and that remains in place. On 17 August 2020 Ofsted announced its plans to recommence activity in advance of full inspections recommencing

(January 2021 at the earliest). This short note describes the implications for TfC and partners.

- 5.4 Ofsted have indicated that from September onwards they will undertake focused visits to Local Authorities to look at the experiences of children and how Local Authorities and providers have made the best possible decisions for children in the context of the pandemic. This includes how they have joined up schools and social care services while schools were closed, to stop vulnerable pupils from 'slipping through the net'.
- 5.5 The focus will be on the quality and impact of decisions made for children and the scope crosses help and protection, children in care and care leavers, and aspects of the impact of leaders on practice.

Inspectors will evaluate:

- the effectiveness of the front door, with specific reference to any rise in and response to referrals, Section 47 enquiries and strategy discussions
- the progress of children subject to child protection and child in need plans (those who have experienced abuse, neglect or exploitation)
- the progress of those recently stepped up or stepped down to early help and the exercise of thresholds.

In the children in care and care leavers area, inspectors will evaluate:

- edge of care/pre-proceedings, particularly those subject to a letter before proceedings
- the focus on physical and mental health of children in care and care leavers, including how the Local Authority has maintained contact with children and young people and how they have facilitated contact with families
- placement decisions, including the quality of matching, particularly when sufficiency is a challenge.

In the impact of leaders area, inspectors will evaluate:

- the quality assurance of practice and 'line of sight' to the quality and impact of practice with children and families
- management and workforce capacity, including responses to staff well-being
- the effectiveness of leaders in leading and contributing to multi-agency working that leads to effective social work practice.

The visit results in a short letter setting out strengths, what needs to improve and, where necessary, areas for priority action. There will be no graded judgement in the letter.

The focused visit varies from the MV in the following ways:

- 10 days' notice is provided before Inspectors conduct field work although for those 10 days Inspectors will conduct interviews, analysis and develop their key lines of enquiry before they interview Social Workers about their case work
  - There will be four social care HMI and one schools HMI undertaking the focused visit, unlike the usual two social care HMIs for a MV
  - Where necessary the visit will be delivered remotely using MS Teams and Skype
6. TfC expects to be prioritised for a focused visit given the length of time that has elapsed since the last MV. Preparations are underway for the visit in the usual fashion, and partners have been appropriately briefed.
- 6.1 Ofsted will be aware that Sunderland is now subject to enhanced local Covid restrictions but there has been no indication that would prevent a focused visit from going ahead and it would not be the view of the service that a deferral should be requested. There is a strong desire to proceed with a visit to provide assurance to the public regarding the continued improvements and to continue to receive feedback on the service. The context within which services are operating is very important however and it would be essential for Ofsted to consider the impact of Covid on all aspects of practice.
7. Recommendations
- 7.1 The Scrutiny Committee is requested to consider and comment on the report.