

Circulation	Cllr Rachel Powell, Portfolio Member for Young People & Culture Ali Bulman, Corporate Director of Social Services
From	Jan Coles Head of Children's Services
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Purpose	Update from Children's Services during COVID-19 pandemic
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## 1. Workforce

Children's Services Leadership Team are holding a daily workforce sit rep meeting to review staffing capacity to ensure that each team has enough staffing resource to be able to undertake business critical services. Internal redeployment has taken place within Children's Services to ensure that our critical business services continue.

Workforce absences due to COVID-19 have maintained at a manageable level (with redeployment of Children's Services staff) that so far hasn't affected service provision.

As at 20<sup>th</sup> April:

- 21 staff throughout the whole of the service were self-isolating due to being in a shielding or vulnerable group but are working from home undertaking partial duties. Of these 21 members of staff, 11 are in business critical teams and are therefore unable to undertake face to face work including statutory visits.
- 5 staff were off work due to COVID-19 and not able or not well enough to undertake their role from home.

The testing process is set up and Managers are acting quickly to submit a referral when Children's Services staff are absent from work and fit the criteria for testing.

Staff morale is very good and staff across teams are working together to overcome the challenges we face in this difficult time.

Weekly staff wellbeing sessions have been put in place to support staff who are continuing to undertake work that can take its toll on individuals, but who now do not have the support of direct contact with colleagues and the support of their team around them.

During March the service had 4 new staff starters and no leavers. The number of staff leaving has reduced over the last 12 months; this is the first month that there have

been no leavers and is evidence of workforce stability. Alongside this the average days sickness is reported at 1 per FTE for March. This figure has been consistently below 1.5 days since May 2019.

In March there were 3 compliments and 5 complaints received – 2 were resolved and 3 turned aside.

## **2. Review of Business-Critical Services**

Following the invoking of the Children's Services business continuity plan, Children's Services responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic to keep staff safe and redeploy staff into business-critical areas. Offices were closed and staff were provided with everything they needed to be able to work from home to reduce the spread of infection.

As part of the business continuity plan initial action was taken to consider how services could be delivered with a significantly reduced workforce. This led to emergency changes to service provision which reduced early help and preventative support so high-risk cases could be closely monitored and actively 'worked'.

Early re-deployment efforts were required to ensure EDT and our children's residential homes maintained the required support level; redeployment plans were developed. After monitoring this situation for 3 weeks, it has been agreed that as sickness levels amongst the workforce have been stable the business-critical services were reviewed and amended to include:

- Early help
- IFST
- Usual threshold for assessment applied at front door
- Undertaking of all care and wellbeing assessments in line with usual thresholds
- More frequent face to face visits to be reinstated

This is in response to evidence of domestic abuse increases across countries and concerns about a drop in police and CS referrals. This is particularly pertinent as the childcare hubs have not been utilised by many children who are identified as vulnerable.

When the business continuity plan was put in place, there was no access to PPE. There are arrangements now in place for staff to access PPE.

## **3. Early Help, Front Door, Assessment and EDT**

An action from the review of business-critical services was to re-introduce Early Help services for cases of concern – particularly families where domestic abuse is known. This will now involve staff spending time alone with children wherever possible.

We are ensuring that the front door threshold is maintained and all children reaching the eligibility criteria for an assessment of their care and support needs are able to access a service. The Front Door team remains the single point of contact for all enquiries and the team continue to be fully staffed with no reduction in the workforce. They continue to link in closely with the Early Help Team.

Contacts to Children's Services have decreased since the COVID-19 measures were introduced by the Government.

February:	505 contacts received with 54 referred to Assessments
March:	493 contacts received with 44 referred to Assessments
From 1 <sup>st</sup> April – 20 <sup>th</sup> April:	195 contacts received with 16 referred to Assessments
23 <sup>rd</sup> March – 20 <sup>th</sup> April:	336 contacts received with 16 referred to Assessments (since social distancing was introduced)

There is a noticeable reduction in contact rates since 23<sup>rd</sup> March. In this time period a total of 2 referrals have been received from education compared to 13 received in February. Powys children's services have been working with other parts of the Authority to raise awareness of reporting mechanism to the community through newspaper adverts and leaflets for volunteers are being developed. Arrangements are being made for training for council staff and C-SERT volunteers around the identification of child abuse and domestic abuse.

The Assessment Teams are committed to ensuring that wellbeing assessments continue for all children meeting the eligibility criteria. When a referral is received which gives reasonable cause to suspect a child is at risk of significant harm, a strategy discussion / virtual meeting is being undertaken to determine whether s47 enquiries should be initiated and how this should occur in the context of COVID-19. Powys CC has developed a specific policy to support staff in planning for s47 enquiries during COVID-19. This policy has supported efforts to develop a regional policy.

In March the percentage of Section 47 Assessments completed in timescale was recorded at 89% in comparison to 87% in Feb. The total number undertaken in March increased to 46 in comparison to 31 in February and 27 in January.

The Emergency Duty team is trialling a new way of working from today which involves merging with the Assessment Teams to ensure there is always cover for the EDT out of hours rota. Assessment Team staff will now work their usual hours on a day or evening shift during which they will also be part of EDT. This will not only benefit the previously stretched EDT service rota but also will mean that assessment visits to families can take place in the evenings which may be more suitable for some families.

## **2. Care and Support, including Integrated Disability, Services**

Children's Services Business Critical Services review identified the following actions which are being implemented:

- Daily visits for cases identified as concerning – regardless of the CP registration status
- Altering the way in which children who are eligible for free school meals are accessing food vouchers if they do not attend the hubs. We are currently investigating whether Children's Services can deliver vouchers instead to encourage and enable direct contact with children and family members.
- Increased encouragement for children of open cases to attend childcare hubs through writing to all families to inform them of the benefits of attending and support they will receive to attend. Social workers will contact all families by telephone and/or visits to ensure there are no barriers to registering or attending.
- Additional ideas are being progressed to work with community organisations such as outward-bound centres to support staff spending time with children outside of the family home.

Only 2 'vulnerable' children accessed the 13 childcare hubs across Powys initially. Over the last 3 weeks we have identified 11 children who are either registered or attended the hubs at some point during this period. This is a positive increase, but we continue to work at increasing the attendance at hubs of vulnerable children.

During March our performance data for statutory child protection visits undertaken in timescale remained consistent at 90%, this figure included 3 frontline teams that achieved 100% in timescale during this exceptionally challenging month.

In March there were 33 strategy meetings held which is an increase from 22 in Feb and the highest number since September. This is further evidence that the multi-agency working arrangements continue to work well.

## **3 Corporate Parenting**

The Through Care Teams and Fostering teams continue to be fully operational. March saw a small increase in the number of children becoming looked after, from 238 in February to 244 in March. The number of children becoming looked after in this month was 8 and the number of children ceasing to be looked after was 2. However in a year on year comparison, the number of children becoming looked after in the financial year 2019/20 was 57, the number in 2018/19 was 82.

Children's Services recognise that there will always be children who need to come into care and we are continuing the work in planning to bring children back home safely, during this time.

An analysis of all our Children Looked After data is currently being undertaken so that we can recognise any trends and fully understand the demographics to ensure we provide the best possible service to Powys children.

The percentage of Children Looked After statutory visits undertaken in timescale was reported in March as 86%, this is a slight decrease in performance from 93% in February. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the challenges of travelling to undertake statutory visits to our Children Looked After who are placed out of County and out of Wales and this is reflected in performance data. In addition to face to face visits by the allocated social worker, Children's Services are in regular contact with children who are looked after including via telephone, text and video chat. We are continuing to look at alternative solutions to this challenge and all others that we face directly as an impact of Covid-19. Only a face to face visit by a qualified, registered social worker, which meets a specific criteria can be logged as a statutory visit.

Placement stability continues to be a priority for the service and is even more important for children's wellbeing during the current uncertainty and stressful time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The percentage of children looked after who have had three or more placements during the year was recorded in March as 4%. This is the lowest for the last 12 months and this performance indicator is now consistently well below the national average in Wales.

Our Closer to Home project work is also continuing as a priority and there were 2 placement step downs in March – a foster care placement to 'When I'm Ready' and a residential placement to foster care.

We recognise that with schools closed there are additional pressures on some of our Foster Carers. In partnership with our colleagues in Schools Services a package of support is being developed for our Powys Foster Carers. The details are being finalised; plans are to include advice and support from teaching professionals over skype/teams/telephone around home schooling, positive behaviour and ALN support from the Educational Psychology teams. Our Fostering Teams are in regular contact with carers and we welcome the opportunity to work in partnership to be able to provide further support to our fostering families who provide excellent care to our children.

Golwy y Bannau and Golwg y Gamlas, our children's residential homes, continue to offer full time care to young people with complex and enduring needs. This area of the service, in terms of staffing, has continued to be challenging and has the highest rate of staff self-isolating and presenting with COVID-19 symptoms.

#### **4. Intervention and Prevention, including Youth Justice, Services**

The review of our business-critical services has included the re-introduction of prevention services for children at risk of harm, in particular families where domestic abuse is known.

The IFST staff who were previously re-deployed to other areas of the service have been reinstated and are providing intensive support to our families. Placement support is also continuing through the Edge of Care service.

#### **5. Safeguarding and Quality Assurance**

Safeguarding work continues as business as usual. Weekly local meetings are taking place with Children's Services, police, health and education to attempt to identify cases of concern or general issues relating to service delivery and to promote partnership working.

Similarly weekly regional meetings with multi agency partners continue.

The Regional Safeguarding Board will meet later this month as will the Local Operating Group. Urgent matters relating to the COVID-19 response will be discussed.