

Circulation	Cllr Rachel Powell Ali Bulman
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Title	Child Protection and COVID-19
Purpose	Synopsis of response from Children's Services to support children at risk of harm during pandemic
Status	Information
Date	4 th April 2020

Purpose

This report has been prepared for Councillor Rachel Powell to provide a synopsis of children identified at risk as well as an overview of support services available during COVID-19 from Powys Children's Services. Communication from the director of social services has clarified which service elements will be business critical and which will be less critical, which has guided our current approach to practice.

During this period, it has been important to identify and plan for the potential increased risk to children and young people. This involves drastically reduced contact with professionals, family members and peers and a change to support networks. Children and families are now spending most of their time indoors together, which may lead to increased pressures on the family unit. These potential risks are compounded by the need to balance the health and wellbeing of children and families by limiting physical contact and adhering to social distancing techniques to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Business continuity planning has been developed to ensure a service can be delivered in the likelihood of a significantly depleted workforce. Whilst this is an unprecedented crisis, daily leadership planning is occurring to mitigate the impact of disrupted services.

Children and families supported through care and support plans

Managing risk

Children's Services engaged in a risk rating exercise in the early stages of business continuity planning. This has ensured that the cases of all children open to Children's Services now have a rating which has provided the service with a clear view of which care and support cases are towards the higher end of the care and support threshold. This includes households where there is domestic abuse, substance misuse and / or a risk of family breakdown. The number of care and support cases which will receive additional monitoring and support is 20.

These children and their families will continue to receive services throughout this period. The care and support plan will be reviewed to reflect the changes to methods of support and any additional risks which could emerge during self-isolation. All professionals working with the child and family will make efforts to maintain relationships through regular telephone contact or video chat calls. Children and families will be able to access a school-based child-care hub and this service offer has been communicated to them.

IDS

Within the Integrated Disability Service (IDS) we are continuing to visit, support and advise families. We have increased the use of direct payments wherever possible. Short breaks are also taking place if there is a risk of family breakdown or in the event of a family needing an urgent break.

Visits

The frequency of visits is identified in the child's plan and will be followed. Children and families are being spoken to about changes to service provision. Decisions to enter the household will be made in partnership with the family and based on an assessment of risk. The health of all family members will be considered, and all staff will use PPE when entering households where there are symptoms. Staff will explore opportunities for direct contact and spending time alone with children in garden spaces or whilst walking in green spaces. Social workers have resources to share with families on activities and online resources they can use as support. Social workers can offer advice on routines and joint activities for families in self isolation.

Children and families supported through care and support protection plans

Child Protection Register

Currently in Powys there are 91 children on the child protection register (CPR). The categories of registration which have the largest number of children are emotional abuse followed by neglect. To ensure our resources are targeted towards the correct families, 9 children have been identified for an earlier review child protection conference. These are children where the social worker will be recommending to conference that the child's name be removed from the CPR.

The Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2019) state that the child whose name is placed on the CPR must be seen by the social worker every 10 working days. This timescale will remain in place during the pandemic, however the methods of contact will need to adapt and there may be circumstances when a social worker is unable to see the child within the family home.

Having direct contact with a child may impact on their health due to the increased risk of infection. In turn, this will compromise the wellbeing of all other household members and increase the strain on family functioning potentially leading to the child being at greater risk. Any visits to households will be considered in this context and justified. If

any household members are in high risk categories, the social worker will speak with their manager and agree / record how to proceed. This discussion will also consider the wishes and feelings of the family. Children and families are increasingly fearful of direct contact with staff in case they become infected with COVID-19.

Social workers are also having contact with family members at the door of their property or in the garden / local green spaces if they are unable to enter. All efforts are being made to speak with the child alone.

Child Protection Conferences

In respect of child protection conferences, Powys has developed and ratified a policy document which clarifies how these will be undertaken. Child protection conferences are now being undertaken virtually. This is being closely monitored and is working well in these early stages. The policy gives clear guidance on how virtual conferences will work and expected practice. Timescales in respect of a case reaching conference and the periods for review will continue to adhere to Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2019). However, the policy pre-empts issues around family participation and quoracy. The safeguarding unit will ensure that children and families are able to participate and will consider a reasonable delay if family members are unwell. However, the conference must be reconvened within a reasonable timescale. The safeguarding unit will assess all cases on their individual merit and may, in specific circumstances engage in a desk-based review and place the child on the CPR if the concern warrants this. A review conference could occur as soon as the family is able to engage.

Engaging families in the child protection process in a meaningful way is key to the success of our work with families. The current circumstances are bringing new challenges and barriers to this important aspect of our work. Many resources for families have ceased or changed the way they work, such as IFST and drug and alcohol support, making it a challenge for families to work on aspects of their plan.

Ultimately, all decision making will continue to be defensible, agreed with a manager and clearly recorded on the child's file and the Children's Services action log if outside of standard procedures.

Core Group Meetings

All core group meetings are being managed virtually, and within timescales. All child protection work, including core groups is multi-agency work and it is a challenge to get core groups fully represented in the current circumstances. This is being raised with partners.

Pre-birth assessments

There are a high number of pre-birth assessments currently underway. The pre-birth risk assessments are being tracked by a principal social worker who has the lead responsibility for ensuring that social workers are working on plans which can include a birth plan, home plan, foster placement plan and/or court plan. Weekly meetings are being held and this work is being overseen by the senior manager, Sharon Powell. There are 22 pre-birth or new born babies currently under review. Court applications have been made where necessary and hospitals are working closely with Children's Services.

Court work

Weekly tracker meetings for all court cases are continuing and are chaired by a senior manager and include our legal advisors. These meetings also consider children subject to the Public Law Outline and cases in care and support which are causing concern. A court specialist is now in place which is a county wide role operating at principal social worker level. This specialist will oversee all court matters and ensure that any actions are undertaken in a timely manner. Any issues arising are immediately raised with the senior manager.

Partnership working

Collaboration with key partners is occurring on both a local, regional and national level. This currently includes:

- Weekly meetings with Powys health, police and education partners. This meeting allows professionals to discuss specific issues and scenarios to enhance local responses and to ensure that partner agencies remain updated on each other's challenges / responses.
- Weekly meetings with regional board partners to discuss practices and to disseminate information between agencies.
- Weekly regional children's safeguarding leads meeting. This group is endeavouring to gain regional agreement on matters such as child protection conferences and section 47 enquiries. This provides a helpful space to ratify practices and processes which are outside of standard practice when necessary.
- Powys Children's Services Leadership Team (CLT) continue to meet daily to assess and respond to the unfolding situation.
- The Head of Children's Services is in close communication with All Wales Heads of Children's Services.
- The Head of Children's Services is a member of Silver Command and attends meetings which are held at least daily.

Issues relating to children where COVID-19 is suspected or confirmed

In addition to the matters addressed above regarding direct work and home visits, potential issues may arise if a child protection medical is required when a child has COVID-19 symptoms. Work is underway regionally and nationally regarding confirmation of process in these circumstances.

Similarly, when the need to place a child with symptoms in foster care arises. We are currently working with our foster carers to identify carers who are able to accept children into placement with COVID-19 symptoms.

Personal Protective Equipment

Guidance has been issued to the workforce in relation to use of PPE. Guidance to colleagues has been updated in light of revised Government guidance (issued 2 April 2020).

Welsh Government is providing PPE for use in these circumstances. There are concerns that there is not a sufficient supply of PPE.