


SHORT REPORT	
Subject Matter	Children's Services
Lead Director	Lesley Hagger, Executive Director of Children's Services
Date	22 April 2020



1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 A range of guidance has been provided by the Department for Education (DfE) over the past few weeks and the links are included at the end of this document. Guidance for schools has addressed school opening, free school meals, safeguarding responsibilities, exams and qualifications and school funding. The social care and vulnerable children guidance recognises that local authorities will not be able to meet all their statutory duties and recognises that risk-assessed decision-making and good documentation is vital, but there are no changes to the statutory requirements. All guidance and its implications have been annotated for the Cabinet Lead Member so that there is assurance in place. The Lead Member also receives regular briefings.
- 1.2 Regular meetings take place with DfE officials. The council has been able to raise issues that have informed decision-making by government. The DfE meetings have helped us to assess our local planning and responses against regional and national activities and feedback from the DfE has been that Sandwell has generally been "ahead of the game".
- 1.3 The Sandwell Children's Safeguarding Partnership has created a joint Business Continuity approach and meets weekly so that all partner agencies can provide updates, assess the impact of change across the whole system, and find solutions if there are any challenges or urgent issues to be addressed. The DfE, Home Office and Department for Health and Social Care, and the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel have relaxed some timescales on reporting but have kept in place the need to inform the national Panel about serious incidents. Partners

have created a joint list that identifies all vulnerable children and ensures that there are systems in place to check that they are safe and well, and to respond to issues.

- 1.4 Schools, and the regular functioning of many other agencies that support children, young people and their families, are a major protective factor for children and young people. Whilst schools have remained open for the children of key workers and vulnerable children, and some other systems have been put in place to ensure that children are safe and well, there is clearly an increased safeguarding risk at the moment; the immediate impact of Covid-19 is being managed, but there will undoubtedly be longer term implications for children's services as safeguarding issues that are currently not in our sight emerge, along with disclosures from children, and others, at a later stage. Whilst domestic abuse referrals have increased nationally, at the time of writing, that is not the case in Sandwell.
- 1.5 The Director of Children's Services is in discussion with the Chief Executive of Sandwell Children's Trust several times daily. The Trust has a robust Business Continuity Plan in place for managing the current challenges and, at the time of writing, is ensuring that capacity is in place to carry out statutory requirements, prioritise the most vulnerable children, and meet the obligations of the Contract with the Council. New IT equipment has been purchased that enables social workers to work remotely, maintaining contact with children and families through 'virtual' arrangements, and a team of peripatetic social workers has been created to provide cover for staff who are self-isolating or ill. The Trust Board continues to meet, and all contractual performance monitoring meetings are continuing as scheduled. Risks are escalated to the Council and incorporated into its Resilience Plan.
- 1.6 The Director of Education has sent a daily communication Bulletin to all schools in Sandwell and this has been well received and appreciated. Schools have been able to seek advice and clarification about national and local matters, and liaison with the Council has ensured that the education community has been able to operate as a whole-system. Educational resources have been made available to support parents in home-schooling and play resources and activities have also been provided. Most of Sandwell's schools have remained open and about 1% of the pupil population has attended, mainly in the primary sector. Approximately 25% of early learning and childcare providers have remained open. The Council is re-directing families to care where needed.

1.7 A central system is in place to identify Care Leavers and vulnerable families that need food and supplies. Individuals are contacted by children's services staff and their needs are met through the Council's central food and supplies system.

2. KEY ISSUES

2.1 The lack of availability of PPE for children's social workers has been an issue, although limited supplies are now starting to be made available. The lack of availability of PPE will impact the ability for social workers to visit children at their homes, and this is exacerbated where children live in cramped conditions and social distancing cannot be relied upon when carrying out a home visit. Some foster carers have ended their current placement arrangements, and this has increased the pressure on the availability of placements for children and associated budget pressures. Some national providers have increased their charges.

2.2 If staffing in children's social care becomes critical, and in the most challenging of situations, it may be necessary to agree local arrangements that will not meet statutory requirements or guidance but will ensure that those children most at risk are protected. These arrangements will be agreed between the Trust and the Council, in consultation with the DfE and Ofsted.

2.3 As NHS staff, and potentially the police, are pulled into acute services or increased enforcement activities, children's safeguarding arrangements may not be their priority and this will potentially increase risk in the current system.

2.4 Primary National Offer Day will go ahead on 16th April, usually followed by the Appeals process. The government has announced that it is not considered sensible that admissions appeals should go ahead at present and is working urgently on emergency regulations and guidance to establish alternative arrangements.

2.5 There will inevitably be a longer-term impact on children's education and this is a matter that will need to be addressed through recovery planning, including transition arrangements for all age groups. The Council is already in discussion with schools to plan children's return to school, and it is unlikely that this will be before September.

2.6 As financial pressures increase on families due to loss of employment or through furloughing, levels of poverty across Sandwell are increasing. As a consequence, the Council has seen a steep rise in the number of children who are eligible for free school meals.

2.7 There continue to be groups of people that are congregating in some parts of the Borough; generally, males in their early 20s. Our detached youth work teams

continue to patrol these areas, in partnership with police, to encourage dispersal and to better understand the need for social distancing. It may be necessary to move towards enforcement if groups continue to ignore advice.

3. NEXT STEPS

- 3.1 The safety and welfare of children will continue to be a priority for Council services, and the Council officers will work with partners to ensure that children and young people are safeguarded. However, the Council may need to make decisions that mean it can no longer meet all statutory requirements for children’s services. These decisions will be risk-assessed, and properly documented, and reported through appropriate governance forums. The Cabinet Lead Member will continue to be regularly informed about all matters concerning children and young people.
- 3.3 The Education Benefits team is supporting families to access their free school meal entitlements quickly either through the school’s catering supplier or through the national voucher system. The Council will also continue to provide food and supplies to care leavers and vulnerable families that are in self-isolation or are ill and have no other means of help.
- 3.4 The Council’s officers will continue to liaise with regional and national partners to ensure that the Council is learning from practice elsewhere and sharing its own experiences and activities.
- 3.5 The Council’s officers will continue to read all new government guidance and ensure that the Council’s systems respond accordingly. The list of current guidance, to 8th April is below.

08/04/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): initial teacher training (ITT)
08/04/2020	Coronavirus (COVID 19): online education resources
08/04/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): financial support for schools
08/04/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for educational settings
04/04/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for children's social care services
04/04/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): attendance recording for educational settings
03/04/2020	Closure of educational settings: information for parents and carers
02/04/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): induction for newly qualified teachers
30/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): safeguarding in schools, colleges and other providers
24/03/2020	Collection: Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for schools and other educational settings
25/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on vulnerable children and young people
22/03/2020	COVID-19: school closures
19/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): travel advice for educational settings
24/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): implementing social distancing in education and childcare settings

24/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): early years and childcare closures
24/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): apprenticeship programme response
24/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): maintaining further education provision
24/03/2020	Universities told not to alter applicants' offers
22/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for schools and other educational settings
22/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on isolation for residential educational settings
19/03/2020	COVID-19: free school meals guidance for schools
22/03/2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): cancellation of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020
20/03/2020	Closure of educational settings: information for parents and carers
20/03/2020	Guidance for schools, childcare providers, colleges and local authorities in England on maintaining educational provision