

Children's Centres

Lockdown experiences and issues

Summary compiled from meeting on 14.1.22 of managers from the two children's centre lead agencies

(Please note: AfC is Action for Children and MHCT is Murray Hall Community Trust)

Issues	Actions/Outcomes
Early issues	
<p>MHCT –Did not have an extensive IT infrastructure at the outset. Had issues with insufficient IT to enable home working</p> <p>AfC – Back office staff did not have work mobile phones</p>	<p>Bought in additional laptops</p> <p>Bought additional mobile phones to set staff up for home working. All staff set up for home working within 24 hours.</p>
<p>Staff had to learn quickly and adapt!</p> <p>Managers had to manage their own anxieties as well as their team's emotions.</p>	<p>Staff developed skills in using IT; presenting sessions; undertaking role play to illustrate issues.</p> <p>MHCT staff had access to Murray Hall's EHP confidential counselling scheme.</p> <p>Staff completed various on line training courses whilst working from home.</p> <p>AfC built in check in times, access to wellbeing resources and counselling.</p>
<p>Initial concerns from families of Family Support Cases that they would not</p>	<p>Addressed issues within the first 24 hours and maintained support throughout. A combination at different points of process</p>

get the support that they required during lockdown.	including virtual; parks and gardens; doorstep meetings and home visits with full PPE.
Families not being able to access Teams for virtual sessions	Staff gave tutorials on how to use the system so that they were able to access the service.
Families lack of IT	Most families had access to the internet through their smartphones. Staff able to support families to get on platforms and access services.
Home schooling etc	Children's Centre liaised with schools where necessary for families: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About IT issues. • Took school packs to families • Printing off work for families • Teacher on Centre staff provided early years sessions • Reassured parents • Gave out EWB packs for children and parents
Practice issues	
Universal sessions for families undertaken virtually.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had to use booking system for some sessions which normally would have been open access • Staff demonstrating examples of actions/using role play • Staff sending resources out for sessions in advance to families • Use of facebook including closed sessions • Home Learning Packs delivered to all children and families in line with virtual sessions on offer
Access to Welfare Rights advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instigated a robust booking system to ensure welfare rights service was

	<p>still accessible to families via telephone appointments.</p>
<p>When the regulations changed centres were inundated with families wanting to attend.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used the booking system initially which didn't work for most families so capped numbers in sessions instead which was received well by families. • Added additional sessions
<p>Maintaining volunteer staff when sessions had to be cancelled.</p>	<p>Volunteers adapted as well and turned their hands to other tasks. Evidence is that volunteer teams have been maintained through the pandemic.</p> <p>Volunteers benefited from virtual training opportunities to prepare them before returning as well as additional training sessions to improve their chances of employment e.g. customer services etc.</p>
<p>Difficulty in meeting new families eg reduction in numbers attending baby clinics.</p>	<p>Children's centres do not have information about new born children so rely on families attending these sessions operated by Health Visitors.</p> <p>Currently due to the reduction of clinics on offer and the appointment system being introduced we have started to see 6/8 families where as pre COVID numbers were around 20/30 families</p>
<p>Pressures on families</p>	<p>Action for Children were able to access the organisation's emergency funds to help families with issues eg beds, cookers, food, fuel, washing machines</p> <p>Rather than give out food parcels Action for Children set up 'feed well for less' which was an initiative which provided a bespoke food hamper with recipe cards which developed cooking skills; budgeting skills and a family experience. Additional</p>

	<p>support resources were included from partners in Sandwell.</p> <p>Murray Hall made up food hampers and delivered to all families who were open to family support at Christmas 2020 & 2021</p>
<p>MHCT found that parenting programmes did not work virtually. Families would not engage.</p>	<p>AfC found an increase in engagement from parents with issues of anxiety, fathers/significant males, and provided 1:1 catch up virtual sessions to maintain flexibility.</p> <p>Once face to face sessions were more accessible Murray Hall saw a huge influx in requests for support with Behaviour Management so in response developed a 4 week behaviour workshop programme. This helped to manage the number of single agency cases being allocated for 1 to 1 support and increase capacity for other referrals within the team.</p>
<p>Early Help TAF meetings. Undertaking meetings virtually where parents choose that approach has had major advantages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionals able to ‘attend’ from home or workplace – less time consuming in travelling • Families feel less intimidated as they are not in a room with lots of professionals. (Have member of children’s centre staff at family home to offer them support and deal with any IT issues) • Greater attendance of fathers
<p>Greater involvement of fathers</p>	<p>There is evidence during this period that engagement of fathers increased possibly because they were home more but also due to changing attitudes about roles. More fathers engaged with parenting groups; bringing their children to speech and language screening; now attending stay and play type sessions. Seeing that</p>

	<p>children's centres are not just for mums! Fathers accessing virtual sessions on an evening when returning from work. Fathers group being run by volunteers.</p>
<p>Use of community venues/schools for sessions was not permissible.</p>	<p>Good examples of services working together eg in gathering children's wishes and feelings where the task was taken on by schools as children's centre staff could not see the child in school as per usual practice. For older children sessions were arranged at children's centre or library</p>
<p>Concerns about emotional well-being and anxiety</p>	<p>MHCT were able to use the other elements of the organisation's services AfC developed emotional well-being boxes, sensory kits and resources and facilitated access to wellbeing services across the borough. Well-being Hub were a great support and responded to referrals quickly.</p>
<p>Interpreting costs rose</p>	<p>The cost of video interpreting and phone line interpreting is more expensive than face to face costs. AfC negotiated 'bundles' with the company.</p>
<p>Staff shattered after the long period of Covid. Working beyond expectations. Staff very resilient in coping with the constant changes of guidance.</p>	<p>AfC have a robust and easily accessible resource hub with wellbeing tips, wellbeing first aid, mental and physical health support and guidance and resources on stress management. Sitting alongside this is a 24hr counselling service for staff and their family members to access. All staff have access to support from their manager as well as from the organisation as a whole. A team from executive leadership members was created and provides regular Q&A sessions with updates and support.</p>

	<p>Flexibility in patterns of work, regular supervision and wellbeing check-ins continued and will continue throughout.</p> <p>Murray Hall staff supervision continued throughout with an open-door policy from management to offer additional support if and when required. Throughout pandemic always had 50% office working so always had some face to face contact with team colleagues and managers.</p> <p>Management were full-time office based throughout whole pandemic.</p>
<p>Greater working across agencies – avoiding red tape processes</p>	<p>Easier to access mental health advice via phone calls.</p> <p>Membership of wellbeing board and SCVO provided easier access to information from a wide range of organisations across Sandwell and notification of resources and services to utilise for families.</p> <p>Ability to utilise funding to develop initiatives.</p> <p>Regular strategic Early Years meetings to ensure full updates around issues of child care provision and wider impact upon service provision.</p>