



Annual Engagement Meeting

COVID-19 Response

March 2021





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1. Introduction

This document is intended to complement our self-evaluation document, and is a response to the particular questions posed in the Ofsted South East – DCS/RD Annual Engagement Meeting protocol 2020-2021 regarding the challenges and opportunities COVID-19 has brought to our Company and partners in Reading.

There is some overlap with our self-evaluation document, however this document enables us to provide more detail about the impact of, and our response to the pandemic, with a particular focus on our vulnerable learners and young people who are post-16. This second report reflects the challenges that are specific to COVID-19 – some of these are additional challenges and others have extended those that we are already facing in our delivery of children's services.



2. COVID-19

2.1 Impact of COVID-19

From the end of March 2020, our overarching focus has been on safeguarding and supporting schools as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. The safety of children and young people known to us – as well as those who were not – was paramount. The impact of the pandemic on our provision to children and families included:

- The cessation of targeted group work, including parenting programmes, children’s centres and youth groups.
- Needing to provide safe virtual environments for Child Protection Conferences and Child Looked After Reviews.
- Sustaining contact arrangements; supporting families through delayed and virtual Court hearings.
- Reduced community support, respite and short breaks for children with disabilities.
- An increase in parents opting out of school attendance for their children, with concerns about the risk COVID-19 poses to their children, and instead have chosen elective home education.
- There has been a significant impact on our workforce, as although we haven’t had a high number of staff who have tested positive for COVID-19, there has been a palpable sense of weariness across our staff that has required a tight focus on supporting them over this extended time of COVID-19 restrictions.

2.2 Our response to COVID-19

- Timely updates to Standard Operating Procedures providing staff with an effective framework
- Creation of Coronavirus Hub on intranet to support practitioners and share daily guidance/updates
- Increased frequency of virtual visits and re-introduction of direct work when risk assessed as safe.
- Increased use of creative activities/resources to engage and give focus to sessions
- Increased use of doorstep/garden and targeted outdoor group activities when permitted
- Increased contact with Care Leavers as they responded more positively to use of social media
- Regular wellbeing and other support activities for staff, including information and advice, and



workplace assessments and response.

2.3 Key activities and achievements

Governance and partnership

In March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic forced us to change the way we live, and all local area services were required to work differently.

Our senior leadership team were partners in the operational command meetings – both Gold and Silver – with immediate actions to move much of our work online.

We stepped up our web presence, creating sections on mental and physical wellbeing for children and young people and for parents and carers. We put learning and fun activities online, as well as links to the latest government and Public Health England guidance in a ‘one stop’ information point. We had more than 7,000 visitors to that section in one week.

Health services across the system were required to redeploy some staff to front line acute services, which at the beginning of April resulted in a significant change to our vulnerable children and young people’s health offer that was concerning. Maintaining oversight of our vulnerable children, and being able to identify newly vulnerable children, has involved keeping a focus on identifying gaps and impact of changes and using the strong partnership to work collaboratively across our local area. One way we have done this is through our Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership (BWSCP), comprising statutory safeguarding partners and other key health organisation colleagues. We initiated frequent and regular COVID-19 Partnership meetings to consider risk to vulnerable children during the pandemic, and plan against these risks.

In October, staff from across BFFC worked with RBC and local organisations to coordinate a rapid response providing more than 1,250 meals, mostly donated by the University of Reading, made their way to the families who needed it most. Our half-term food project enabled 300 meals/hampers were provided to families, and the Winter Support Grant was used to provide 3,400 Free School Meals vouchers.

In November 2020, a combined ‘Lessons Learned’ from Early Help and Social Care regarding the pandemic was presented to our Quality Assurance and Improvement Committee.

Education

Health professionals across the system have worked with our SEND and mental health teams, which has resulted in the development of a suite of resources to support children, young people and their families during this time. Since April 2020, the resources have been displayed on the SEND Local Offer as well as being available on the BFFC website.

Additional funding was secured to support our Primary Mental Health Team and a range of resources including groups, information and Kooth (counselling on line service) were made available to children and young people. We are offering Get Active packs for children and young people so that they can start some self-help whilst on waiting lists.



We revisited the terms of reference of our SEND strategy board to ensure appropriate engagement with our key partners. We continue to assess the impact of lockdown on children and young people and families with SEND. Both the SEND Service and Short Breaks are operating differently following lockdown and these changes are regularly reviewed. We continue to use risk assessments to inform our approach to supporting children, be they in school, at home, or elsewhere.

A risk assessment process has also been developed for children with EHCPs and other children considered to be vulnerable (including all Reading CLA).

We have provided schools with a template risk assessment (RA) looking at the holistic needs of the child or young person which looked at the following areas: (i) family need, (ii) education needs, (iii) mental health needs to be completed with parents/ carers, CYPDT, virtual school for children looked after, health and social workers as appropriate.

We have working protocols in place to share RA with short breaks. We are using the RA to help identify what is being provided in order that we can give parents confirmation and keep a formal record.

We are encouraging schools to continue to maintain phone contact with families and keep RAs updated as circumstances change; some children's needs may only be able to be met at home for a finite time. Children who were flagged as amber or red for emotional wellbeing or mental health needs were followed up on their return to school.

We continued to deliver our amended free Education Welfare offer to all schools, reaching 485 children and young people in the Autumn Term. Fuller details are provided in the next section.

COVID-19 has disrupted the delivery of careers guidance to support post-16 progression planned by schools and between schools and colleges. This will impact disproportionately on young people who remained undecided about their future pathway at the end of March or who are holding unrealistic study offers. We know youth employment and the prospects for new school leavers seeking employment are adversely affected by the pandemic.

Our post -16 service, Elevate, provides regular information on the situation for young people at risk of NEET and we have recently secured additional funding from DWP to work with our 19-25 cohort to secure appropriate support and provision. Our September guarantee shows 94% of 16-year olds have a destination for their post-16 provision. For young people with SEND, this provision is predominantly the local FE provider, Reading College. We adjusted our ways of working with this group during lockdown, providing online and web-based support including a virtual chatline for young people in August concerned about their futures.

Key achievements include:

- We strengthened our partnerships with schools, multi-academy trusts and the independent sector. Each state funded school has an allocated 'go to' person to deal with any queries and ensure schools were receiving the support they needed. This was (and has continued to be) combined with a weekly dial up meeting for all headteachers and the headteachers' briefings, where key messages have been shared and success celebrated.
- We worked with schools to ensure children not in attendance were supported and the risk to them understood.



- We produced a COVID-19 self-evaluation framework in our Education service, which was updated in early January 2021. This identifies our approach to support children and young people with SEND throughout the pandemic.
- We sent daily briefings to employees and also to headteachers as we stepped in to support them with school closures, with interpretation of ever-changing guidelines and with some difficult and distressing messaging to staff, parents and pupils when two (separate) staff members sadly died.
- We refreshed the terms of reference for our Schools Joint Forum, where we work alongside our trade union colleagues.

Early Help

The March lockdown also had an immediate impact on our Early Help offer. As noted above, some activity, including parenting and other targeted group support was halted, But our teams quickly adapted to new virtual ways of working with direct work being quickly reintroduced, with a focus on new families or those experiencing crisis. The Early Years team mobilised support, ensuring funding was released and provision was open for vulnerable and key worker children. Our own nurseries were among the first to re-open.

Our staff maintained their engagement with some of our most vulnerable young people with 40% of contacts face-to-face. Creative responses included a tallest sunflower competition and completing a fantastic mural.

The Early Help team also maintained cover in police stations and covered additional ‘appropriate adult’ work in evenings and weekends. Support was deployed for young people and their families impacted by significant delays in Court hearings.

We were able to sustain timely Early Help Assessments with an average completion time between April – December of 92%, and delivered a blend of 9,661 virtual and 4,165 direct visits

Key achievements include:

- The needs of all children under five were reviewed and we maintained close liaison with health partners to monitor the safety of this age group.
- Our children’s centres staff successfully used Facebook Live to reach out to parents. And, when the warmer weather arrived, we introduced ‘buggy walks’ helping new parents get out and about, meet other parents and get support from health colleagues who joined the sessions.
- Staff delivered additional educational welfare support for those children who fell outside the DfE definition of vulnerable, where non-attendance and lack of professional contact was cause for concern. 252 visits, primarily virtual, but including doorstep checks were delivered including 73 for children not previously known to the service.
- In April, the One Reading Children and Young People’s Partnership Board expressed concern about the impact on school transition. The ‘Moving on Moving Up’ Year 6 Transitions project, led by Cranbury College, was developed to provide bespoke therapeutic support to facilitate a successful transition to secondary school. Of the 29 children supported by EWOs, 70%



achieved 90% attendance in the Autumn Term.

- Our youth/detached workers collaborated with Reading Play to provide targeted activities throughout the summer holiday. Of 53 referrals, 47 young people attended over 20 sessions and received 640 hours' worth of provision.
- Alongside the activity programme, our youth/detached workers went onto the streets of Reading. They covered 240 kms, amassing 900 contacts with young people, 300 of which were regular contacts.
- In August 2020, Early Help held four thematic discussions to explore how practitioners made contacts meaningful in the context of virtual working. Thematic discussions focussed on: 0-5s, 5-10s, young people, and parenting.

Children's Social Care

As elsewhere in the country, we have seen an increase in complexity and risk for the children, young people and their families. The impact of the first lockdown in relation to children being 'hidden' and therefore later notifications of their difficulties being brought to our attention was predicted and was apparent once schools returned in September 2020.

We created a new standard operating procedure for visits, meetings and ways of working. In May 2020, Children Social Care provided a Practice Guide for Video Call/Contact and Virtual/Online Home Visits, supporting practitioners to creatively undertake virtual visits.

All children and young people were triaged and the risk COVID-19 posed to them was rated red, amber or green. Children and young people whose risks rated red (higher risk) continued to have face to face visits throughout the pandemic. children and young people rated amber and green were visited virtually, then in person once the first lockdown was lifted.

We created a duty social work visiting team to cover social workers who were shielding or extremely vulnerable and they worked across teams; we issued frontline workers with PPE equipment.

The increase in risk for children, exacerbated by the absence of interventions, led to an increase in court proceedings with our social workers having to attend remote hearings and giving evidence virtually.

Child protection conferences and Children Looked After (CLA) reviews still took place and none of the relaxations set out in the government guidance were utilised, apart from visiting children virtually, and only then when their risk was low.

In October 2020 Children Social Care undertook a thematic audit to ascertain parents and children's experience of service delivery during COVID-19. This, together with feedback from staff, provided a helpful understanding of the learning and key themes.

2.4 What has worked well and what have been the main challenges?

It has been a disruptive and challenging year and evaluating the effectiveness of schools'



performance will be almost impossible this year. Cancelled exams, schools closing, opening and closing again will mean we will have little viable school performance data to evidence how well, or not, children and young people have been able to learn. We are concerned about the impact on our children's academic, physical, social and emotional progress.

Within our Early Help service, practitioners initially were more challenged with moving beyond 'welfare checks' to creative and meaningful engagement. Some children, young people and families responded well to virtual working, sharing more in calls than they would in a home visit. Other families were more reluctant to take part in virtual working. There were particular challenges for virtual working with young people with learning difficulties and non-verbal children requiring creative ways to observe and engage with them in a meaningful way.

Despite the challenges, we have made some notable achievements, including:

- Overcoming Digital Poverty: identifying and supporting families to have access to laptops, smartphones and broadband, especially when not meeting DfE definition of vulnerable. We were allocated 656 laptops and tablets by the DfE for distribution to the children of Reading to assist in their online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these devices have been either gifted to our schools for them to distribute or to the social workers to give to directly to children.
- We have improved multi agency attendance at Team Around the Child (TAC) and statutory review meetings, and increased engagement of parents of older young people.
- Our Finance team set up an Allpay scheme as an alternative to cash vouchers for care leavers without bank accounts so they continue to receive their allowances. They have processed more faster payments to support carers and families in need and have been monitoring COVID-19-related additional expenditure.
- The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has forced us to think quickly and do things differently. We are grateful for the resilience and adaptability of our staff who have shown outstanding commitment over the past 12 months. Our staff are our most valuable resource and we are committed to the development of a stable, motivated and agile workforce.



3. Educational outcomes for our children and young people

Reading has a mixed economy of types of schools - Academies and free schools, community and voluntary aided schools, selective and non-selective, infant, junior, primary and secondary schools. In the secondary sector all of our schools except one (Blessed Hugh Faringdon) are academies. In the primary sector, most of our schools remain maintained (out of 49, 13 are academies or free schools).

3.1 Supporting vulnerable learners across all settings during the pandemic

Throughout the restrictions in place as a result of the pandemic, we have continued to support our vulnerable learners:

- Special Schools remained open, and a number of schools continued to provide for all learners.
- Annual reviews for children with EHC Plans continued.
- Our weekly EHC Panel continued with a particular focus on risk assessments.
- We continued to support schools in a more flexible responsive way such as virtual meetings, conference calling.
- Provision of transport, tuition and provision for pupils with EHC Plans continued and we worked closely with our Alternative providers to ensure that children still had support over the summer break due to their vulnerabilities.
- We re-procured all home to school transport, putting in place a robust procurement framework with a new regime of risk assessment.

Early Years Team

Our Early Help team have continued to deliver continuous professional development opportunities. Since April 2020, these included eight courses focussing on Speech, Language and Communication including: 'Closing the gap in Early Years language development', I-CAN Communicate, Superscribers, Storytellers & 'EAL in Early Years'. Over 200 professionals across the sector have attended. The team have booked Dr Julian Grenier, author of Development Matters, for whole sector training in February 2021. This will focus on supporting practitioners to identify & support children not making expected progress.

SEND Local Offer – COVID-19

The Family Information Service continues to support children, young people and their families throughout the pandemic, the demand for the service has increased. During the second quarter of 2020/21, our phone line support service calls doubled (511 calls were taken). We modified and updated the Local Offer, added more tools and filters to help parent carers access high quality information on services that were still available to support families on line, created advice and guidance pages (based on feedback from parent carers) to support them with further



information on trend topics.

Mon-Fri, 9am – 5pm, brokerage service provided to the most vulnerable families, needing additional support to access a service, this could be anything from childcare to mental health support services.

Feedback on the Reading SEND Local Offer can be found on the following page - <https://servicesguide.reading.gov.uk/kb5/reading/directory/advice.page?id=pTV5YggMfbQ>

Key achievements during this time include:

- Family Information Service/SEND Local Offer (Data April 2020 – October 2020)
- Mailout to parent carers – 100 mailouts sent to parent carers between April – October 2020
- New service records created – 118 between April – October 2020
- In-depth information, advice and guidance (including brokerage) provide to 916 contacts
- On average we have had between 45,000 and 55,000 hits on the Reading Services Guide, where the SEND Local Offer can be accessed
- Children and Young Peoples Disability Register – we have 537 children and young people registered on the voluntary register.

Information Advice and Support for SEND (IASS)

In terms of our core work, we have supported service users with a total of 305 new cases and enquiries 01/09/2019-31/08/2020 as against 296 for the same period in the last academic year. This is quite surprising given that schools were closed for most children during the main lockdown period in March to June and this impacted on the number of new cases in that period. What it does reflect is that we were exceptionally busy from the start of the academic year, up to lockdown and we were also very busy in July.

Most of our cases have involved one or more of the following: serious breakdown in communication with education provider, safeguarding/child protection issues, families with complex difficulties, repeated exclusion from school, part-time timetables or students proving hard to place in an appropriate setting.

Our website remains a valuable resource and an important way for us to demonstrate that we are an arm's length service. In February 2020 our new refreshed website launched, and it has received a lot of positive feedback. It is helpful for us to be able to direct service users to our resources page which provides them with basic information about SEN Support, EHCPs etc. We have added information for young offenders, advice on choosing a school and a glossary of terms. We are continuing to improve our website by considering feedback received and we have added a page for children and young people who are looked after.

In February 2020, we also launched our Reading IASS Facebook page. This has steadily



increased likes and follows and is a useful way to spread the word about our service offer and share information relevant to the SEND community.

Mental Health

Mental health of vulnerable children and children with an EHCP has been an integral part of risk assessments. During the pandemic, the Primary Mental Health Team (PMHT) did not cancel any appointments, and offered virtual sessions during lockdown; many of these have continued at the child or young person's choice rather than returning to face to face appointments. Face to face appointments are increasing now although the waitlist remains large. Triage of waitlists is done one a weekly basis.

Additionally:

- Educational Psychologists and PMHT and MHST have continued with mental health surgeries during lockdown and since. Educational Psychologists and PMHT have arranged 'Reflective Spaces' supervision for Head Teachers to help them voice and process the containment, and an additional six virtual training sessions were run.
- SENCO network meetings continued virtually.
- Weekly cross Berkshire West multiagency meetings with all mental health leaders across including CCG, BFFC, CAMHS, AnDY Clinic, No 5 to ensure joined up work to support children and young people with mental health needs.
- Regular meetings with Reading Families Forum were held on mental health needs of children.
- Additional helplines and support were put in place (Kooth). The Berkshire West Kooth report shows a 100% satisfaction rate during August. 70% of interactions took place outside working hours and 95 users of the service. The majority of users (58%) were in the 14-16 age group.

Education Welfare Service

Our EWS amended their offer so that schools can continue to speak to Education Welfare Officers (EWO) free of charge to discuss any vulnerable children who they are concerned about who are not attending provision or engaging in virtual learning or where there is concern relating to lack of communication from home. There may be children who are not regularly engaging with virtual learning. Whilst the legislation is suspended, the EWS cannot enforce school attendance or online learning, but we work with schools and parents to support and encourage positive engagement wherever possible.

For our children already open to the EWO team, the team will:

- Complete cross referencing to ensure families are not being contacted by more than one professional.
- For children not already known to BFFC, the team will liaise with the school to determine current levels of concern.



- Where concerns remain, EWO staff will contact families to complete a welfare check and assess any risk.
- Provide an update to schools regarding the outcome of these checks.

Children Missing Education

COVID-19 has contributed greatly to the increase in children missing education (CME) cases in the year on year comparison. From the anecdotal data and reasons given from settings in regard to their CME cases, the prolonged absences from school, coupled with parental and child anxiety relating to falling ill with the virus has caused the children and young people of Reading to struggle with a successful reintegration into full-time education on the occasions where the schools have reopened. We expect this to continue to rise, given the current third ongoing lockdown we are currently experiencing.

Table 1: Children Missing Education 2020/21 overview

Category	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21
Unplaced	34	34	37	41	43
On roll - low attendance	155	155	159	189	187
Reduced timetable	123	136	160	162	165
Electively home educated	3	3	2	4	4
PEX - Unplaced after 6th day	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	315	328	358	396	399
Currently investigating	0	1	5	7	7

COVID-19 has contributed to the difficulty in reducing CME cases through the considered interventions of key workers and professionals, due to the impact on the schools spending time open and partially closed. For example:

- Managed moves for some children that have been put in place to support a fresh start in a different setting have been postponed either once or numerous times
- Some children that we were making good progress at reintegrating back into school following a period of low attendance have been forced to not attend school
- Interventions and strategies used by schools and agencies to help children reintegrate back into school following a period of low attendance have been paused whilst schools are not open to those pupils
- Some alternative provision organised for children to re-engage them in education has been postponed

We are of the opinion, that especially with CME cases, the longer a child spends out of a school setting, the harder it is to support them back into school. To support our CME, BfFC hold termly CME meetings to review all cases that have been CME for 6 months or more, plus any other child or young person the network would like to raise as a high need case. This is a multi-agency panel including; SEND, CME, Virtual School, YOS, EWS, CSC.



The Pupil and School Service work in conjunction with one another (as well as with other agencies) to support the identification of those whom are CME or on a reduced timetable. For example:

- School transport liaise with the CME Officer if they are providing transport to any child on a reduced timetable so that this can be checked against current data
- School admissions regularly liaise with the CME Officer and Service Manager on any cases where children are not admitted into school places within the allocated time frame, to support the placing of children
- There is an escalation policy for cases that go outside of the 20 days processing allocated timeframe
- There is a joint process with SEND and the Pupil and School Service where children can be supported after being identified when SEN is looking to contribute to a delay in placing a child in a school setting
- School Admissions have continued to process in-year admissions through the current partial school closure

The CME Officer is part of many panels and meetings to ensure sharing of educational data, including the CME status of vulnerable children and young people, including:

- Missing Children Meeting
- Child Exploitation and Missing Operational Group
- Youth Diversion Hub

Since the end of 2020, we have started and are still in the process of trialling fortnightly CME sub-groups for the most vulnerable children, and those most concentrated within the current CME cohort, namely CLA, SEND, Cranbury College Pupils, Hamilton School Pupils. This is to:

- minimise drift on the cases by setting actions more regularly and review them more regularly
- ensure we have current and relevant updates on record
- enable more targeted and thorough conversations with the relevant partners to support them in minimising the length of time the children and young people spend as CME

Reduced timetables data has now been added to the education database, so that any partner within BfC that has access can see this data which was previously only held by the CME Officer. The CME Officer is in the process of widening the CME tracking that is collated monthly, to include more at-risk groups including; children open to YOS or graded on BfC's Exploitation Panels. The CME Officer is currently part of projects within BfC to reduce children missing education including Exclusions Project in conjunction with VRU, and the Reduced Timetables task and finish group.

Supporting vulnerable learners: Areas for improvement

- During the pandemic it was not possible for Under 5 or Over 5 autism assessment services



to offer a direct assessment of the child/young person (clinical consensus is that it is not possible to conduct a valid autism assessment face to face while the clinician is wearing PPE). This means a large number of assessments have been started but not concluded. Services have now begun to introduce new and modified direct assessments for children/young people with the aim of concluding the assessments in progress.

Supporting vulnerable learners: Planned improvement and development work

- We are aware that we do not currently have sufficient choice of alternative provision for some of our most vulnerable children. We have put in place a review of alternative provision led by our excellent alternative provider Cranbury College – part of the Maiden Erlegh Trust.
- We are developing a YOS prevention pilot to reduce the risk of young people becoming involved in the youth justice system. This project seeks to reduce exclusion through early intervention in partnership with one of our schools funded by YOS for 18 months. The aim is to provide a swift response when a child or young person is at risk of exclusion and provide intensive support for two to three days in school instead of being on a fixed term exclusion as well as offering the school training and strategies for managing behaviour (and Educational Psychologist when capacity has improved).
- The Short Breaks offer is an area that requires intense development to ensure BfC meets its statutory obligations and requirements as set out in the SEND reforms. We are confident with the support of Reading Families Forum (RFF) and multi-agency colleagues through Strand 5 of the SEND Strategy this is achievable. COVID-19 has significantly impacted Short Breaks in Reading as it has nationally, however it has also provided opportunities for reflection and recommissioning to ensure as we redevelop the offer it becomes what is required by our families to achieve the desired outcomes.
- The Short Breaks statement will require review and will be co-produced again with RFF in 2021.
- A new service provider, Autism Berkshire, has been commissioned by the CCG to work across Berkshire to deliver a range of services to support children and young people with autism. This service will be involved in the development of advisory and information videos for parents in early 2021 and will be involved in developing the strategic support for the new ASC/SEMH school for Reading and Wokingham pupils which will open from September 2022.

Supporting vulnerable learners: Example Project

Pilot Project with Prospect School – reducing school exclusions and first-time entrants to the youth criminal justice system – is an example of a new project designed to support our vulnerable learners. The aim of the joint project, which is funded to March 2022, is to have a sustained impact on reducing school exclusions through:

- Brighter Futures for Children, Prospect School and Cranbury College working together to develop strategies to prevent exclusions;
- providing some enhanced resource to have an immediate impact in preventing individual pupils from being excluded; and



- sharing learning and success with other schools.

The scope of the project will include:

- Alignment with other partnership delivery within the school to ensure a co-ordinated, cohesive response including MHST and VCS work.
- Development of a swift response project for an identified cohort e.g. year group(s) when pupils within the cohort are on the brink of fixed term or permanent exclusion.
- Skills-based individual and/or group work to enable young people referred to the swift response project to develop problem-solving, self-regulation and modulation skills in line with evidenced based practice.
- Offer of family/ parenting support for parent/s for individuals identified.
- The project will include bespoke restorative responses for young people identified.

A Youth Worker has been recruited and started in early Jan. The Family Worker recruitment is underway and we hope to have someone in post by end March/April 2021. Following the successful Trauma Informed Conference, The One Reading Children and Young People's Partnership have proposed a place-based demonstration project to deliver and evaluate the benefits of all services taking a trauma informed approach in a specified locality. This project will develop the existing activity with prospect School.

3.2 Promoting the school/early years attendance of vulnerable children

As COVID-19 restrictions took effect, we contacted all settings and maintained schools to understand our cohort of vulnerable children (defined as those with child protection plans (88 children), identified as a Child in Need (109 children), supported by Early Help (85 children) or whose needs were currently being assessed by children's services (50 children)). Currently, we have 332 children classed as vulnerable, which includes all 0-5s. In relation to children aged 2-4 years, we have 156 vulnerable children, and of this cohort, 95 vulnerable children are attending settings, evidence that we are promoting the attendance of children to early years settings.

Table 2: Summary of vulnerable children and Early Years provision

Total vulnerable children	332	
Total with an EY provider listed	95	28.6%
Of the 95 children with a provider listed, total NOT attending*	38	40%
Of the 95 children with a provider listed, total NOT regularly attending	3	3.1%

**8 of these children have either moved to a different provider to the one listed on their Mosaic record (and in some cases the child is actually attending the 'new' provider, for example: one child has The Lodge listed as their Provider but the child is actually attending Coley Lodge), or, the School/Setting listed has no record of this child.*

The general theme for children not attending is COVID-19 related i.e. parental choice/concerns and we understand that nearly all providers are keeping in contact with families and providing



resources for children to access (though not all children are accessing them). All named workers for these children are routinely emailed with the children's updates. It is also recognised that many early years settings are providing virtual lessons and material to support children not currently attending sessions, which further assists their learning in the event that they cannot or choose not to attend in person.

The EWO team have renewed their focussed on vulnerable children in January. Reports from Mosaic identified 433 children in Child Protection/Child in Need. All schools have been contacted to identify which children were attending or engaging on online learning.

Table 3: Educational status of vulnerable children

Children attending school	??
Children not attending	161
Children accessing online learning with good engagement	95
Children partially accessing online learning	23
Children not accessing online learning	36
Children moved out of area	2
Children moved to Reading College	2
Unknown	3

Extra COVID-19 pages have been added to the BfC website providing parents and carers with a wealth of links and suggestions for home learning and activities for children in lockdown, as well as advice and updates on services.

3.3 Supporting children who do not reach the expected goals at each key stage or reach positive onward destinations

Portage

Reading's portage service, which provides home teaching programmes for pre-school children with additional needs, is continuing to support around 50 families by providing ideas and activities for parents to carry out.

A holistic developmental assessment is completed by a Portage Home Visitor, and a child's development will be reviewed and assessed on a termly basis and subsequent reports will be written for parents documenting the progress made. A home-based educational programme is carried out in conjunction with parents, parents are supported to carry out educational activities with their child as guided by their Portage Home Visitor. Portage Home Visitors liaise with Early Years settings to provide support and advice for children who are receiving portage support at



home.

The portage team is now preparing for some of our children who will be transitioning into school in September, linking in with the school SENCO and any other professionals that are involved to ensure a smooth and positive transition in to school takes place.

SEND

To support children and young people to bridge the gap to their expected goals, we have provided information from the Education Endowment Foundation and other sources about the use of catch up premium and curriculum design to schools and these remain key agenda items for discussion and training between Heads, Governing bodies and the standards team.

All local schools can access training on all elements of curriculum design and classroom pedagogy via the School Standards team, and several projects have been in place to support schools over the last three years. These include:

- Reading and writing (KS1 +2), based on Ofsted research and national leads such as Teresa Cremin who worked with all our primary schools in 2019 /20
- Curriculum design (all phases), based on Ofsted research and using the work of national leads like Tom Sherrigton and Mary Myatt (both providing training for all maintained schools)
- Oracy (all phases) Project is about increasing both vocabulary and communication skills through structured talk, delivered in collaboration with Voice21 national Oracy leaders
- Therapeutic thinking schools (behaviour and relationships management), building a trauma informed response to behaviour and exclusion, based on Norfolk steps following excellent outcomes in Hertfordshire, Essex, Cambridge and Norfolk in reducing pupil exclusions
- Mental Health Support in schools - wide range of support from educational psychologists and primary mental health and wellbeing team as part of the trail blazer projects and based on the work of the Anna Freud centre among others
- Regular SENCO network meetings
- National Association for Special Educational Needs training on audits for SEN Support
- Close working between schools and educational psychologists including the use of assessments, training and interventions including Therapeutic Story Writing, Precision Teaching, use of teaching assistants, and group support.

All projects have included specific support and advice around COVID-19, with a specific focus on vulnerable children and those who have gaps in their subject schema.

3.4 Our focus on post-16 services, including during the pandemic

Since September 2020, we have received 50 referrals into the service from schools, colleges, colleagues and partners requesting support for NEET young people and those at risk of becoming NEET. Highlights with regard to our NEET service delivery and how we are tackling the



rising NEET numbers in Reading include:

- Securing a town centre hub for young people 16-24 years to access frontline holistic support. Working in partnership with the DWP and the Curious Lounge we have secured a town centre location to provide a 'one-stop' careers, employment and skills HUB for young people and local partners and employers. The hub went live on 18th January 2021. It will start off as a virtual hub, with the aim to move to a front facing service at the Curious Lounge from Feb/ March 2021.
- Starting Point will be delivering an Aspire Mentoring Programme aimed at young people 16-24 years, with a focus on supporting young people from vulnerable/disadvantaged groups. Programme. Starting point matches young people who are not in education, employment or training to reliable mentors who act as positive role models, supporting their mentee on their journey into attaining, sustaining and thriving within a job, college course or apprenticeship.
- New Directions College will be delivering four Vocational Pathways to Employment Accredited Programmes aimed at young people 16-24 years, with a focus on supporting young people from vulnerable/disadvantaged groups. These pathways will offer young people the opportunities to work towards gaining accredited qualifications, including Maths, English and Digital Skills alongside a range of vocational/job specific training and development.
- The Provider network has been re-established with our first meeting taking place in January. This network brings together a wide range of partners to work together to support NEET young people in Reading. Each provider brings something unique to the network, this enables us to build a strong offer of alternative provision and support for young people. Currently in the network are Elevate, Starting Point, Ways into Work, Toolshed and Mapis Academy, and it is envisaged that this network will grow as we start to work with the DWP in the Reading hub. The aim of the network is to have a pan Reading approach to reduce our NEET numbers, prevent young people early on from falling into NEET, and to promote alternative and vocational pathways to employment or training.
- We delivered our first NEET networking event working with local providers at the start of September. 40 NEET young people were invited, 22 young people attended met with a wide range of providers and walked away signed up to start a course.

Apprenticeships

In November 2020, the Post 16 Team manager conducted research into the availability of apprenticeships in Reading, as the impact of COVID-19 was being felt. This research found:

- There were 23 Level 2 apprenticeships, comprising 65% in childcare, 9% each in hairdressing and customer service, 4% each in catering, sales, greenkeeping and care sectors. Some of our key sector gaps, largely attributed to the impact of the pandemic, are in construction, ICT, digital skills, motor vehicle, engineering, hospitality, retail, leisure, travel and tourism, and health care sectors.
- There were more Level 3 or higher-level apprenticeships, 40 available in Reading. Level 3 apprenticeships available by sectors were engineering, motor vehicle, specialist office/



business admin, dental nursing, ICT/digital production, and finance.

A challenge is that many of the young people Elevate support are not ready to step into Level 3 apprenticeships when they first come to the service. There is also a lack of pre-apprenticeship programmes available to young people. In response to this Elevate is working with New Directions to develop a programme to build a young person's readiness to undertake an apprenticeship, with the expectation that this will help more young people take up the available apprenticeships.

Youth Offending Service

The Youth Offending Service works with young people who have offended or are at risk of offending. The majority of the young people we work with have had difficulties in their education history and a significant proportion are not engaged in full time education.

Engagement in Education Training and Employment is a key factor for reducing the risk of offending. The YOS have an Elevate worker who assist with young people to gain opportunities after Year 11. We also employ a communicate worker who offers support to young people on the caseload to develop basic skills around literacy numeracy and communication. We also have the health input of a Speech and Language worker who can work with young people with identified issues.

The YOS are involved in regular partnership meetings around Children Missing education, exploitation concerns and missing from home. The Youth Diversion Hub has been embedded over the year and will consider cases of young people experiencing exclusions for other support. Wider Mentoring services are more established in the local area and can take relevant referrals.

Commissioned services

Elevate commissioned Ways into Work to deliver a Supported Employment Programme to Reading – this is specifically focused on young people with SEND who are defined as not in education, employment or training. Although the programme has been impacted by COVID-19 with less employers being able to offer employment opportunities, Ways into Work have increased their virtual offer to our young people.