

# CHILDREN'S SERVICES

# COVID-19

# CONTEXT

The impact of Covid-19 on children,  
young people and their families, and  
our response to meet their needs

**January 2021**



**BLACKBURN WITH DARWEN**  
CHILDREN'S SERVICES

## FOREWORD

A message from the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education.



**Jayne Ivory**  
Director of Children's Services

*Jayne*

**I am immensely proud of how every team and staff member within Children's Services has adapted practices throughout the pandemic to continue to safeguard and support children, young people and their families.**

The speed with which teams rose to the challenge in March and April to develop innovative Covid-19 secure solutions, and keep adapting practices as regulations change, has been exceptional.

This review sets out how the pandemic has impacted on the lives of children and families in the borough and highlights the particular hurdles we continue to work to overcome, in the face of ever-changing restrictions.

Improving outcomes for children, young people and their families will remain the driving force behind the department's Covid-19 response strategy, strengthened by a talented workforce and strong and effective partnership working.



**Cllr Julie Gunn**  
Executive Member for  
Children, Young People  
and Education

**Maintaining the high standards of safeguarding, wellbeing, education and aspiration that we expect in usual circumstances has been a key priority throughout the last year of living with a global pandemic and all of its ramifications.**

Remaining mindful of the impact on our children and young people, both in the immediate term but also in the long term is the basis of our ambitions to ensure that we protect by working closely with our health colleagues using both quantitative and qualitative data to support decision making and policy direction.

That we raise aspirations by working with our schools and settings to build a robust relationship to withstand the uncertainty that the pandemic has delivered to their education. Safeguarding their emotional health and wellbeing is central to this endeavour and we know this because we listen when they tell us so.

We have maintained participation and have taken opportunities to meet, discuss and face challenge from our Voice groups, Care Leavers Forum and the Youth MPs. There is no doubt at all that the pandemic has the potential to disrupt these and we have made it our priority to minimise the disruption. There is also no doubt that the long term impact is going to be most keenly felt by our children and young people and that is why it is more important than ever to offer them our unreserved corporate family support.

As this document sets out, many of our children and young people face structural barriers that pre-date Covid-19, but the challenges that these present have had unprecedented exposure, and as has become increasingly clear these have been exacerbated by the pandemic. There is an opportunity for the creation of a post-pandemic landscape, informed by this experience, that provides an extension of equality and equity that our young people, who bear the heaviest of burdens, have always deserved.



## COVID-19 CONTEXT

# A review of how we've responded to the pandemic

**B**lackburn with Darwen has faced immense Covid related challenges which have been particularly unique to our area. Factors such as intergenerational living, range of housing stock, multiple community languages and digital literacy and access have all contributed to Blackburn with Darwen presenting with consistently high infection rates and consequently prolonged tougher restrictions. Some of the area's most deprived communities and South Asian neighbourhoods have been affected disproportionately.

The productivity and health gap that exists between the Northern Powerhouse and the rest of England is well documented. The productivity gap stands at £4 per person per hour and average life expectancy is two years lower in the North and the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed this regional context. Unemployment rates, mental and financial wellbeing as well as other economic outcomes have been hardest hit in the Northern Powerhouse. In addition to the impact on adults, pre-pandemic child health in the Northern Powerhouse was poor and this has been exacerbated by adverse trends in poverty, education, employment and mental health.

A strength of Blackburn with Darwen as a local area is strong local partnerships between the local authority, health sector, education network, businesses and the Community, Voluntary and Faith Sector. At the start of the pandemic the Council quickly co-ordinated and mobilised an integrated partnership Outbreak

Management Plan to co-ordinate the borough's Covid response. Partnerships have driven priority themes affecting residents and communities including our response to the vulnerable, maintaining education, food resilience (Nourish Group and Food Alliance), digital (Digital Inclusion Network), employment (Youth Hub, ESOL Hub, Inclusion Employment and Skills group) and cohesion (Our Community, Our Future programme).

In 2019 BwD had 42,422 children and young people aged 0-19 years, equating to 28.3% of the population. Since the start of the pandemic to 21st Dec 2020, there have been 1,892 positive Covid-19 cases in children and young people aged 0-19 years. 43% of these cases were in teenagers aged 15-19, with a significant rise in cases recorded at the start of the September term.

Local authority teams working in communities have reported that since the start of the pandemic there has been an increase in the number of individuals and families needing support in the borough as a result of growing poverty and isolation. Applications for Universal Credit have risen by 63% and the use of Section 17 funding to support families has also increased in number, partly due to poverty and families needing basics like beds, bedding and food, and partly due to isolation as families may not be able to rely on the extended support of family and friends. The DWP/HMRC March 2020 report on 'Children in low income families: local area statistics 2018/19' highlighted a worsening picture with nearly half of Blackburn's children in child poverty (47.3%), up 24% in 4 years.



# Innovation, resilience and adaptability to meet extraordinary challenges

**T**o support residents, the borough established a Help Hub in March 2020, which has continued throughout the pandemic to coordinate essential supplies and support, including the distribution of food, access to personal and sanitary care, support with utilities and bills, access to healthcare and medication and mental wellbeing support. Staff working within the Help Hub were trained and supported by our Children's Advice and Duty Service to ensure that children and families in acute need or at risk received an appropriate service. Additionally, the borough-wide Blackburn with Darwen Food Alliance continues to work with more than 40 voluntary sector organisations to feed thousands of low income families throughout the pandemic.

To combat holiday hunger for families, the network of children centres delivered food and activities as part of the Department of Education funded 'Get Stuck In' holiday scheme.

Each week the centres prepared and delivered between 2,000 and 2,500 meals to families who were shielding, shared as part of a family support visit, collected by a parent at the end of a learning or SEND activity or collected by a parent who just required a meal. Activity numbers varied between 1200 and

1400 per week as part of family support visits, parenting groups, SEND and home learning activities.

During the first lockdown, four children centre hub buildings remained operational. These four sites provided support as the borough Childcare hubs, working alongside the small number of childminders and seven private nursery settings that remained open. Hubs operated during the school holiday period with staff from across the service taking their usual end of term leave flexibly to support childcare provision at Higher Croft Children Centre nursery which reopened after the Easter period to support increased demand.

Across Children's Services, a process for RAG rated Risk Assessments to manage face to face contacts with the most vulnerable children and young people was quickly mobilised with a consistent process in place across all teams by the end of April, including joint risk assessments with schools and weekly reviews. Adolescents on the whole have engaged very positively with the virtual visits, however it still remains much harder to engage with very young children in this way as non-verbal clues and clear assessment of the home environment is not as evident. Relationship building between the social worker and the child and family has also been more difficult to

achieve compared with pre pandemic, particularly for children and young people new to social care. As a result of these early findings all new assessments to the social care service are RAG rated Red and require face to face visits.

For contacts and referrals through the front door CADS service, there were 18% fewer contacts and 49% fewer referrals during April and May, which quickly resumed to expected levels due to effective publicity on how to report safeguarding concerns.

Staff have responded extremely positively to the flexibility that our new ways of working and working from home has presented. With less time travelling and waiting in court, compliance with timeliness of assessments has increased from 61% pre pandemic to 89%.

Achieving Permanence for children and young people has been adversely affected with the average time for care proceedings increasing from 32 weeks to 62 weeks for our five most longstanding sets of care proceedings.

As well as children remaining in placements for longer and permanence delayed, the availability of placements across the system has reduced with a greater demand across the borough and externally.

## THE IMPACT

**“The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in communities that are the most deprived.”**

The challenge of recruiting more foster carers continues as the planned programme of recruitment has been restricted to virtual marketing. Gaps particularly remain for carers with the skills and desire to care for adolescents, children with additional health needs and for large sibling groups.

Short breaks at the SEEDS have been affected with reduced occupancy and therefore availability, to comply with restrictions. Children on the edge of care have been prioritised for overnight stays, however support is offered to all young people and their families open to Adolescent Services through increased outreach work, both virtual and face to face. In Blackburn with Darwen we have seen an increase in the number of teenage girls admitted to hospital for assessment due to a significant dip in their mental health, with referrals to CAMHS up by 60%. Across the Borough waiting times for specialised domestic abuse support have increased by up to 6 months, and to address this social work teams have become more involved in delivering sessions with families themselves.

Compliance with Covid-19 restrictions from adolescents was very high during the first lockdown but as restrictions have been extended, it has been more of a challenge for young people not to see friends socially and on some occasions anti-socially.

A multi-agency team has been established to support street level detached youth work to promote safety messages, disperse young people congregating and provide additional support. It has been

difficult to signpost young people to youth clubs and projects due to limited provision available with lockdown rules constantly affecting local delivery.

Young people within the criminal justice system are receiving a delayed and untimely response to their crime. Crown Court cases have been adjourned since April, and for one case it has taken until November to resolve, with another case only commencing trial in January. The remand status of these cases and deferred hearings has culminated in significant costs incurred by the local authority of £73k and has prevented the full use of a remand foster carer due to placement matching issues.

The Engage service has managed an increase in Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) referrals since the start of the pandemic and a noticeable reduction in Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) referrals over the same period. The delivery of additional CCE training on modern day slavery, trafficking and contextual safeguarding plus joint working with partners including the Police, education and the voluntary sector has supported the rise in CCE referrals.

Blackburn with Darwen schools are safe places to be with strong and robust infection prevention & control measures in place. Where schools have experienced high infection rates, the local authority



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**“The Education Response team has managed over 1,400 confirmed cases in schools and settings resulting in over 13,000 children being sent home to isolate and over 1000 staff”**

is satisfied that schools are following the guidance, with 98% of cases due to community transmission which is impacting on pupil and staff attendance. There is continuous pressure on school leaders to maintain face to face teaching, exacerbated by staff absence due to the need for self-isolation.

The vast majority of children in BwD are in school, with the overall BwD pupil attendance rate at 85.3% on the 17th of December compared to 84% for Lancashire and West Yorkshire and the national rate of 76.7%. Attendance has only recently overtaken the national average despite the generally much higher than average rates of Covid 19 locally. Schools reported a total of 389,740 lost days of education since the start of the academic year. This equates to an average of nearly 15 days per pupil. The rate for pupils with a social worker was 74.2% on the 17th of December. This is now in line with the national rate, having been well below the national average for most of November.

Attendance of pupils with an EHCP was nearly 10% above the national average on the 17th following extensive work with schools to ensure that the most vulnerable pupils are attending school wherever possible.

There were 1,661 pupils absent for Covid related reasons on the 17th of Dec, down from a high of 3,529 in mid-November. This is primarily due to pupils having to isolate following contact with positive cases. Teachers and support staff have also been affected, with 8% absent on the 17th of December. This has also fallen since mid-November, when up

to 13% of all staff were unable to attend school, having an impact on the ability to deliver lessons in some settings. In December over 90% of schools reported that they have remote learning in place and over half are delivering more than 4 hours of content every day, and three quarter delivering at least three hours every day.

To support our schools and settings following the full reopening of schools at the beginning of September, a multidisciplinary Education Response Team was established comprising of colleagues from Public Health, Health and Safety, Human Resources, Education, Education Risk and Business Support.

Schools have received measured, sensible and professional support to be able to help manage their complex and challenging scenarios. The team has managed over 1,400 confirmed cases in schools and settings resulting in over 13,000 children being sent home to isolate and over 1000 staff.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in communities that are the most deprived as a Nation, in our region and in our Borough. This challenging context has been responded to positively as a Local Authority and as a partnership.

A focus on children’s outcomes has been central to every action we have taken and innovation in our practice as well as an increasingly resilient workforce have enabled us to maintain business as usual in these most extraordinary of times.

