

BELFAST CITY COUNCIL - RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PLAN

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Department of Health has led on the development of a Covid-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan, which has been produced on a cross-departmental basis with DfC, DE, DOJ and DfE.
- 1.2 The plan has been developed in response to the challenges and risks facing children, young people and their families due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is intended to reflect a series of activities that will be, or have been, undertaken across the Executive to meet the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families during this time and in the recovery period after.
- 1.3 The Executive agreed to the publication of the Covid-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's plan on 6 August 2020, subject to a targeted consultation to ensure the Plan:
- reflects the activities that are being undertaken to support children and vulnerable families during Covid-19;
 - reflects how services have adapted and enhanced provision to continue to support children and families during Covid-19; and
 - Includes new actions, which have been undertaken specifically to address some of lockdown's risks and challenges.
- 1.4 The Plan will help support the next steps in rebuilding services to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people.
- 1.5 Belfast City Council (BCC) welcomes the core principle of the document. We find however that the document will benefit from additional detail.
- 1.6 Alignment with current policies and frameworks (Eg. Outcomes groups) need to be detailed. Correspondence between established indicators aimed at measuring the improvement of children and young people and the newly proposed actions needs to be explored to assess the real impact of the proposed interventions.
- 1.7 In order to prevent the reactive nature and volatility of some interventions due to current unprecedented circumstances and the constant changes in the limitations for service delivery, a more thorough plan is needed. The plan would benefit from an assessment of which intervention can be delivered according to the different levels of restrictions in place. This will ensure that different interventions are in pace to mitigate the named risks regardless of the different levels/tiers of restrictions.
- 1.8 The response outlined below follows the structure set out in the consultation paper. We have provided answers where BCC has a stated position and where it is considered appropriate for us to respond.

2. Definition of Vulnerable children and young people.

- 2.1 We welcome the definition of children and young people used in the consultation document. We welcome in particular the specific acknowledgment to “invisible” children, that is, those not known to services and invisible to local authorities. The number of these children have increased dramatically as a consequence to COVID pandemic encountering a wide range of difficulties from physical health , mental illness to going hungry or cold; at the verge of getting homeless or out of school; being at risk of neglect or living with parents with health problems.
- 2.2 BCC welcomes the aims of the plan.
- 2.3 Monitoring, reporting and engagement need to take a holistic approach. We found it challenging to discern between actions already in place, and plans of actions which will take place in the future. Clear and simple reporting mechanisms need to be put in place as a matter of urgency in order to respond efficiently to the needs of children and young people.

3. Promoting safety and wellbeing in the home environment

- 3.1 We welcome the actions proposed. BCC welcomes in particular the recognition of the relevance of the usage of outdoor spaces. In addition to the opening of parks and other outdoor facilities, BCC is working on a programme of interventions aimed at encouraging service users, including children and young people, to exercise and use outdoor spaces. BCC recognises the impact that the usage of outdoor spaces has on mental health and wellbeing.
- 3.2 A clear reporting mechanism for the learning from the different COVID emergency support lines needs to be put in place to make best use of the learning incurred during the lifetime of the service. This mechanism should be informed by already agreed indicators. (Outcomes for children and young people).
- 3.3 There are a number of initiatives across the region that, while not targeting children and young people directly, have proven to be a huge influencing factor in improving quality of life across the region during the pandemic. An example of this is the Belfast Community Response Hub.
- 3.4 The Belfast Community Response Hub was established within **9 days** (distribution hub, customer helpline and remote contact centre). This provided an opportunity to support vulnerable families and children. Some of our outputs are:
- **9,770** calls handled by the Contact Centre
 - **6,908** enquiries were in relation to food parcels
 - **5,115** calls handled by local community run helplines
 - **930** welfare referrals were managed by the Area Teams N/S/E/W (this included providing advice and signposting for prescription pick up, emotional support and emergency food). The majority of referrals were for charity or community support (43%), non-emergency support (20%), collection of prescriptions (11%) and emergency service support (10%).
 - **30** staff provided with ‘Big Word’ training to improve communication with people who didn’t have English as their first language

- **107,407** food parcels and hot food delivered over **16** weeks - **50,533** food parcels from Community Response Hub and **56,874** food parcels and hot food from Community Organisations
- **9,320** deliveries or prescription pick-ups were made on behalf of residents
- **Over £1.6 million in grants** allocated to **134** Community Groups to fund their support of the project.
- **4,577** calls were made by the Contact Centre to residents to prepare them for the closure of the scheme and to signpost them on to community support where needed

3.5 With an increase of usage of internet by children and young people, there is a bigger potential for online harm to take place. Specific guidance on how to deliver online services safely for professionals would be welcome.

3.6 Multiagency support is key. Fluid communications between the different organisations involved needs to be formally established particularly in the co-design of activities.

3.7 While there are several interventions that would address the majority of children in a vulnerable position, there are a number of key issues that might need further consideration such as the lack of wrap around support mechanisms for families, isolation and specific issues such as poverty, food poverty and fuel poverty.

3.8 The consultation asked if we are aware of any other effective interventions to support the improvement of mental health in children and young people: we would recommend the attached 'Universal approaches to improving children and young people's mental health and wellbeing: Short descriptions of interventions identified from the synthesis of systematic reviews' by Public Health England (2019)

3.9 A simple reporting mechanism needs to be put in place from the beginning of the intervention to assess progress and needed corrections. An accountability mechanism with specific outcomes and targets is required by each one of the partners.

4. Promoting safety and wellbeing in the wider community

4.1 Overall, we agree that the right actions have been put in place. There is no clarification as to which of these are currently being delivered and which ones are being planned, making it difficult to assess the demand and need for these services.

5. Strengthen system capacity to respond to current risks

5.1 In addition to the availability of adequate information in a timely manner to inform decision making, there are a series of services such as parent and toddler groups, activity based children groups, afterschool's and play groups that prove to be invaluable in promoting the health and wellbeing of children and young people. Timely advice, guidance and planning of these activities will provide an additional resource during this time. Up to date advice and coordination between different partners to agree minimum standards for the delivery of services are paramount.

6. Rebuild Services

6.1 In addition to the executive recovery plan, Council is in the process of finalising its own recovery plan that will guide us in how we move Belfast forward towards COVID recovery and beyond.

The framework covers both economic and community recovery, the latter in the broadest sense – families, local businesses, and community sector – all those stakeholders that are connected to a local place.

6.2 In BCC we will approach recovery collectively and in an integrated way that is very much in the spirit of the principles agreed by chief officers and elected members. These are:

- Support local area problem solving
- Create opportunities for new ways of working
- Support cultural change in support of area working
- Create synergies to pool the great knowledge and experience that you all have
- Align to the vision of community provision