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**To: Education and Children's Services Policy Board**

**On: 28 October 2021**

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**Report by: Director of Children's Services**

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**Heading: Children's Social Work – COVID-19 Recovery Status Report**

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## **1. Summary**

- 1.1 This report provides elected members with information on the current delivery of children's social work services as we implement a plan to continue the recovery from the impact of COVID-19 and continue to deliver social work services as we go forward. The report highlights how services adapted to ensure delivery over the past 19 months.
- 12 Throughout the current pandemic, the majority of children's social work services continued to operate within the restrictions put in place by the Scottish Government in terms of physical distancing and working from home. The children's houses and the supported accommodation for throughcare continued to provide safe care for the children and young people who live in them. Social workers operated from home for a period, however, undertook visits to the children and families who were identified as most in need of support. Staff used a range of tools to remain in contact with children and families including the use of video calls, telephone calls and in-person contact.
- 13 The locality teams were able to resume access to offices in July 2020 and have continued to operate a model where staff worked from home but have increased access to social work offices. Since July 2020, the locality services were able to adapt from online meetings to hybrid meetings where families could attend in person and be supported by their social worker. Other professionals attended these meetings on a virtual basis.
- 14 As staff were able to access office accommodation, it was possible to increase the number and range of supervised family contact time. This activity is now back at pre-pandemic levels and no concerns are being reported.
- 15 Other community-based services were also required to operate from home throughout the pandemic. Like the locality teams these services used the same range of tools utilised by the locality teams to remain in contact with those who required support. There continue to be challenges in accessing the full range of

office accommodation for some services and the service continues to mitigate risk in these areas.

- 1.6 As other areas of the community remove the restrictions put in place during the pandemic, children's social work services are adapting to meet the demands and needs of children and families. The areas where external activity has increased and is returning to pre-pandemic levels are in relation to children's hearings and referrals to social work from schools and health services.
  - 1.7 Overall, during the past 19 months social work has continued to deliver the statutory service. The service will continue to prioritise the support to those most in need as it continues to manage the response to the pandemic. A focus will be on increasing the Whole Systems Team, the alcohol and drug support team and the Women and Children First Service to increase their access to buildings.
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## **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 The Education and Children's Services Policy Board is asked to note:
    - [a] the work undertaken by children's social work throughout the past 19 months and the current state of operations;
    - [b] that social work activities in children's services operated for most of the past 19 months with minimal disruption; and
    - [c] that the priority as recovery continues is to support additional capacity in buildings for the Whole Systems Team, the alcohol and drugs support team and Women and Children First Service.
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## **3. Background**

- 3.1 Renfrewshire Council operates a locality-based model for mainstream Children & Families Social Work, with four teams based across the three largest towns in the area. Specialist teams provide focused support in the areas of Fostering and Adoption, Kinship Care, Residential Services, Pre and Post Birth Team Throughcare, Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, Children with Disabilities, and the Whole Systems Team who support children and young people involved in the justice system.
- 3.2 There was a fear that the pandemic and the consequent restrictions would impact significantly on social work services through a reduction in children being referred (because they were no longer visible to universal services); an increase in domestic violence and greater risk because women were less able to leave an abusive household; and the longer-term impacts of prolonged stress arising from lockdowns, job losses and ill health.
- 3.3 As a frontline protective service, Social Work staff continued to operate throughout the national lockdowns and the different phases of restrictions. Whilst offices were initially closed, staff moved quickly to reopen an office as a base to support the work of the service. During times when public health advice was constantly changing, staff continually adapted their approach to ensure that children and young people remained safe and supported.

- 34 Teams quickly found creative solutions to the challenges of carrying out statutory duties in a world of restrictions. Families were supported to contribute to meetings virtually and where they did not have the technology to allow this, social work staff would go to their homes and provide the technology so that their voice could be heard in relation to decisions about their children. Other staff met with children and young people outdoors to minimise the risk of infection whilst still ensuring that the child or young person had the opportunity to speak with their worker alone. Our Women and Children First service, which works with women and children experiencing gender-based violence, ensured that service users had their own mobile phones and arranged meetings away from the family home.
- 35 Family contact visits did stop for several months during the first national lockdown and this had a considerable impact on children, young people and their families. Our foster carers helped fill that gap, arranging video calls and text messages between children and families in order to maintain that connection whilst face to face meetings were not allowed. Showing their usual high levels of care and compassion, foster carers ensured that children could see their birth families when restrictions allowed. When contact was able to restart, staff organised outdoor activities so that families could safely meet wherever possible.
- 36 Our staff remained a constant in the lives of children and young people who needed support and protection during times when many other services had to withdraw either because of national policy, a need to redirect staff to other services or concerns over the risk to staff during some phases of the pandemic. Social work staff continued to make home visits to ensure those most in need of supports and services were safe.
- 37 The dedication and commitment of residential staff during the pandemic cannot be overstated. Staff rearranged working patterns in order to maintain a loving and safe home for the young people in our children's houses. Social distancing concerns became less important than providing a hug for someone who needed that extra bit of care. The ethos of the service has been summed up by a senior manager thus: "The world changed outside but not inside for our young people." Children's houses in Renfrewshire remained a family home for our young people.
- 38 Our Throughcare Team supporting young people at Charleston Square and in our satellite flats changed how they engaged with young people to reflect the additional isolation and vulnerability that lockdown brought. Individual and small group support moved outdoors and provided an opportunity for new skills to be developed, including learning to cook on the barbecue, working in the garden, exercise classes and drumming workshops. One of the cooks from our residential team provided home cooked food as well as teaching sessions, recipe cards and ingredients so that our young people had access to fresh food and were able to further develop their skills.
- 39 One of the challenges during the period, and one that remains to some extent, was the closure of other services, particularly the courts and Children's Hearings. These closures had a knock-on effect across Children & Families. The timescales for Children's Hearings doubled, which impacted on decision-making and on the implementation of Child's Plans. The closure of courts created delays in adoption processes. Perpetrators of gender-based violence were no longer remanded in custody, creating an additional risk for women and children who had survived that violence.

- 3.10 Staff have demonstrated incredible resilience over the last nineteen months by continuing to carry out statutory duties throughout the period of the pandemic. Home visiting continued throughout the period covered by this report. Social work teams organised supermarket vouchers, deliveries of nappies and baby milk at times of empty supermarket shelves, provided tablets and dongles to families to keep them connected.
- 3.11 Training had to move online and though the training team provided excellent online resources, there are areas of work where in-person training will always be preferable. The implementation of a new case management system had a significant impact on the amount of time staff had to dedicate to training as well as to familiarising themselves with new processes once the system was implemented.
- 3.12 A primary concern during lockdown was whether child protection referrals would fall due to children not attending school or health appointments. Schools within Renfrewshire remained in regular contact with children via technology during the initial lockdown before schools reopened. In Renfrewshire, there was a slight drop in referrals in the first few weeks of lockdown but numbers have returned to previous levels. Information on referrals, investigations, child sexual exploitation, case conferences and registrations continued to be monitored by the Child Protection Committee.
- 3.13 During 2020/21, there were 125 new registrations and 142 deregistrations, and there were 71 children on the register as of 31 March 2021. The biggest areas of concern remain domestic violence, parental mental health problems, and parental drug misuse. There were 15 Child Protection Orders granted during the year, slightly lower than figures in the previous two years. Renfrewshire Child Protection Committee and its subgroups continue to meet virtually and a new business plan (delayed to allow staff to focus on the Covid response) will be completed shortly.
- 3.14 The RADAR service supports children and young people aged 12-21 whose alcohol and/or drug use is impacting on their wellbeing, and had 57 service users at the end of March 2021, of whom 30 were 16 or under. The service has a holistic approach and works flexibly and intensively with young people to address the causes as well as the impact of substance use.
- 3.15 The Whole Systems team works with young people either involved with the justice system or at risk of becoming involved. Where a person aged under 21 is made subject to a community sentence or is released from custody on licence, the Whole Systems Team undertakes supervision, rather than Justice Social Work. This allows for a continuity of support from Children's Services, who will work closely with justice colleagues as well as with the RADAR service and the Throughcare Team, with whom they are co-located.
- 3.16 High levels of alcohol and drug use within the local population continues to pose a major risk for children and young people in Renfrewshire and drives much of the social work activity. Renfrewshire's Alcohol and Drug Commission has made a number of recommendations to help address this issue and social work will play a significant part in progressing this work, which has a strong recovery focus.
- 3.17 Emotional and mental wellbeing had already been identified as a risk factor for children and young people prior to the pandemic, and there is evidence to suggest this has been exacerbated. Work is already well progressed within

Renfrewshire to establish a new service which can offer holistic and family-based mental health support.

- 3.18 Since the last lockdown was eased, there have been more demands on children's social work. The service has continued to work flexibly to deliver supports to children and families and to respond to the increased demands. The locality teams continue to utilise office accommodation to deliver their duty service and to facilitate family contact time. Child protection case conferences continue to be provided on a hybrid model with the parents, social worker and operations manager in the office whilst other staff join via video calls. There are an increasing number of children's hearings now taking place on a face to face basis. If the current restrictions for physical distancing are revised and the distances reduced the locality teams will increase the number of staff able to access office accommodation on a more regular basis and increase the attendance in person of other professionals at case conferences.
- 3.19 The children's houses continue to operate to meet the needs of the young people who live there. The children's houses have maintained a high quality support for young people throughout the pandemic.
- 3.20 The areas of service which are experiencing most disruption are the Whole Systems Team, RADAR and the Women and Children's First Service. Ensuring these services are able to increase access to accommodation to meet the service demands is identified as a priority for the next stage of reopening.

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## Implications of this report

### 1. Financial

The service incurred some additional costs due to the response to COVID-19. There were additional costs within residential services due to some staff shielding and other requiring to self-isolate and staff being required to ensure adequate staffing on each shift.

### 2. HR and Organisational Development

Staff were impacted by COVID-19 however overall the service managed the demands over the period of responding to the pandemic.

### 3. Community/Council Planning

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| Our Renfrewshire is thriving                    | - Ensuring the best start in life for children and young people.                              |
| Our Renfrewshire is well                        | - Early intervention will lead to healthier outcomes for children and young people.           |
| Our Renfrewshire is safe                        | - Local services will benefit children, young people and members of the community.            |
| Building strong, safe and resilient communities | - The quality of community life is enhanced by supporting parents, children and young people. |

Tackling inequality, ensuring opportunities for all

- Effective governance arrangements ensure that the organisations receiving funding comply with legislative requirements.

**4. Legal**

The Council continued to operate and discharge the statutory functions throughout the pandemic.

**5. Property/Assets**

None.

**6. Information Technology**

None.

**7. Equality and Human Rights**

The recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations.

**8. Health and Safety**

Throughout the period of the pandemic the service has worked with colleagues from Health and Safety to ensure that the premises being utilised were compliant with protecting staff and users of services from the virus.

**9. Procurement**

None.

**10. Risk**

None

**11. Privacy Impact**

Personal information will only be held as required to deliver the service. This will be done in accordance with data protection legislation.

**12. COSLA Policy Position**

None.

**13. Climate Risk**

None

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**List of Background Papers**

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JT/LG 24/09/2021

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