

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

**On: 9 June 2022**

---

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

---

**Heading: Children's Social Work Covid Recovery Plan**

---

## **1. Summary**

- 1.1 The Covid 19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of most front line Council services. As we enter the latest phase of the pandemic, services should be clear about how the pandemic has impacted on them and prepare a plan to recover and return to pre pandemic standards of practice.
- 1.2 Social Work services in Renfrewshire have operated throughout the pandemic. We have attempted to deliver almost business as usual level of service delivery albeit with some changes to accommodate Government guidance.
- 1.3 In recent months, the social work management team has been assessing the impact the pandemic has had on the delivery of the service and has prepared a Covid recovery plan.
- 1.4 The issues which have impacted most significantly on the service relate to what can best be described as professional isolation due to limited access to office accommodation. Social Work is not a job which should be done without wider connections. We have tried very hard to promote these connections during the pandemic but believe it is best addressed by our teams spending time together face to face in our offices.
- 1.5 Additionally, supporting newer more inexperienced colleagues, inducting new employees, and familiarising them with policies / procedures/ who to connect with has been challenging. We have also experienced staff pressure for the past year with higher vacancies due to turnover and a national shortage of social workers which are unlikely to be resolved in the short to medium term as this situation is replicated across the country.
- 1.6 Our Covid recovery plan focuses on tangible actions which will be undertaken in the short and medium term. The actions will be regularly reviewed and progress against them assessed.

---

## **2. Recommendations**

### **2.1 Elected members are asked to:**

- a) Note the work being undertaken by Children's Services Social Work to recover from the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic.

---

## **3. Background**

- 3.1 Front line services across the Council and in other organisations had to adapt extremely quickly at the beginning of the pandemic in order to be able to continue to deliver critical and key functions like social work and education. Our Children's residential houses and Charleston Square, our independent living accommodation, continued to operate as normal. Our front-line social work teams were operating completely from home in those first weeks of the pandemic but continued to visit children and families throughout the first period of lockdown. Within a month we had opened one of our buildings with staff providing a duty response on a rota basis. The remainder of our main offices in Johnstone, Paisley and Renfrew re-opened on a phased basis from July 2020 but with significantly reduced numbers of staff being able to access this office accommodation.
- 3.2 This meant that most of our staff only had access to an office and in person contact with their colleagues one day a week, with contact with their supervisors being even less than this due to the rota system that was in place. Some employees joined us in the pandemic with their induction being undertaken remotely. Many of these new social workers had a very limited experience in terms of their final social work placement.
- 3.3 Social Work is a challenging profession with complex, relationship based tasks associated with the role. Reflection and critiquing of practice from supervisors and peers is central to effective performance. This is particularly true for newly qualified or inexperienced staff as like many other professional roles the consolidation of your learning is done "on the job" from shadowing more experienced colleagues and being guided by your manager.
- 3.4 Experienced social workers also require to connect with colleagues regarding their practice and to be supported by their team when undertaking complex work which often involves making life changing decisions for children and their families. Furthermore, we should not underestimate the impact on all our staff of having to undertake highly sensitive work from their home rather than an office environment.
- 3.5 Like occupations such as the Police, Nurses and Teachers, the demands of the job for social work staff are often mitigated by close bonds with colleagues / supervisors and the wider service. The absence of this on a day to day basis with the other issues highlighted above has made the job feel quite overwhelming at times for even our most experienced and robust employees.

- 3.6 We are also experiencing staff shortages at the highest level in the past decade. This position is not unique to Renfrewshire and is in fact replicated across Scotland and indeed the United Kingdom. The pandemic has made many people consider their future career path with the consequence being that the sector is under extreme pressure and is struggling even to fill gaps with agency social workers. Vacancy levels are being closely monitored and appropriate action taken when necessary to mitigate associated risks.
- 3.7 In addition to a number of vacancies, increasingly we have a workforce which is relatively inexperienced as candidates applying for posts have only recently left university. New qualified and inexperienced staff require a higher level of support and cannot be allocated the same complexity of work that a more experienced social worker can hold.
- 3.8 Our Covid recovery plan focuses on the following:
- Return to office accommodation.
  - Launch a revised Social Work Policy and Procedure Manual followed by programme of learning events.
  - 'Reconnecting with practice' training and development programme.
  - Identify and mitigate service pressure points to increase capacity for service recovery.
  - Pilot an 'Early Help' approach to divert families from SW referral.
  - Improve recruitment process.
- 3.9 We have implemented a return to our offices over the course of the past few months as we believe that the return to the office for most of our staff is essential to the service's recovery from Covid. Staff need to re-connect with their teams and take advantage of the professional development opportunities best provided in a face-to-face setting. We have been working towards this since the beginning of March whilst remaining fully compliant with Government guidance. Employees will continue to be able to work from home, but this will be by arrangement instead of the situation as it has been that coming into the office was by arrangement. Our staff are fully on board with this and as restrictions ease, we will aim to have at least 80% of the workforce office based on any given day.
- 3.10 We have revised our Social Work Policies and Procedures. The new manual encompasses all core social work tasks within a child's journey through care services. The manual is necessary to ensure practice expectations are clear and accessible to staff, and it forms the basis of all our quality improvement activity. These will be launched formally in the coming weeks and linked closely to the training and development programme.
- 3.11 The long period of home-based working and reliance on virtual training methods has undermined our capacity to support ongoing professional development. Our Newly Qualified Social Workers and staff who are new to Renfrewshire have not had the opportunity to be fully inducted, and they have had limited opportunities to learn from their peers. This programme of training

/ development opportunities will ensure that staff are equipped to undertake their core responsibilities going forward.

- 3.12 There are currently significant demands on social work teams. The challenges related to staffing shortages and newly qualified workers are being monitored closely to minimise impact across the system. Work is underway to understand if there is scope to use our resources differently to relieve pressures and highlight options for better use of resources in the medium term.
- 3.13 An example of this is a pilot we are currently developing in partnership with Barnardos. This will be a pilot in the Paisley South Social Work Locality team which will look to support families on the edge of Social Work involvement in the hope that this reduces the need for them to be allocated a social worker. This community-based model of time-limited assessment and intervention works well in other areas to reduce Social Work referrals, most notably in Dundee City.
- 3.14 We have a high number of Social Work vacancies and there is a national shortage of applicants for Social Work posts. Work is being undertaken in partnership with colleagues in HR to ensure that critical front-line posts are filled as quickly as possible. A new process has been agreed on a trial basis with a named officer to support each SW recruitment. Weekly progress reports on recruitment are being provided to the relevant senior manager responsible for the recruitment.
- 3.15 The actions outlined above will be progressed and regularly reviewed. We will continue to assess if our recovery plan is addressing the impact the Covid 19 pandemic has had on Children's Social Work in Renfrewshire.

## **Implications of this report**

- 1. Financial**  
None.
- 2. HR and Organisational Development**  
None.
- 3. Community/Council Planning**  
None
- 4. Legal**  
None.
- 5. Property/Assets**  
None.
- 6. Information Technology**  
None.
- 7. Equality and Human Rights**

- (a) 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 contained in the report because for example it is for noting only. If required following implementation, the actual impact of the recommendations and the mitigating actions will be reviewed and monitored, and the results of the assessment will be published on the Council's website. (Report author to arrange this).

**8. Health and Safety**

None.

**9. Procurement**

None.

**10. Risk**

None.

**11. Privacy Impact**

None.

**12. Cosla Policy Position**

None.

**13. Climate Risk**

None.

---

## List of Background Papers

---

**Children's Services**  
MMcC/JT/KO 23/05/22

**Author:** Michelle McCargo Children's Services Manager [michelle.mccargo@renfrewshire.gov.uk](mailto:michelle.mccargo@renfrewshire.gov.uk)