

25th April 2022**Agenda Item: 6****REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, COMMISSIONING AND RESOURCES****CONTACT SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT****Purpose of the Report**

1. To provide an update on the Contact Service with regard to the supervision of contact for looked after children.

Information

2. The Local Authority has a statutory duty to provide and promote contact – unless it is not in the best interests of the child.
3. The primary law and key reference documents emphasise the need for the child to be at the centre of planning contact arrangements. The Children Act 1989 and case law (decisions of the higher courts) identifies contact as 'a right of the child' - birth parents, relatives and others do not have a 'right' to contact, although local authorities must provide and promote contact, providing evidence to court if they are planning to change or withdraw contact.
4. The 'Good Practice Guidance Note ADCS/CAFCASS-2013' also emphasises the need for contact to be in the best interests of the child and, in particular, the level of contact must be based upon observation of the contact and the need to adjust the plan if contact is detrimental to the child. This is fundamental to the Contact Service.
5. The Contact Service provides a County-wide service and has been operational since June 2012. In September 2013 a full review of the service was initiated and the service has embedded the revised practice guidance and procedures. The child has remained the focus of all decision making and key processes within the service model.
6. The core offer is:
 - the Contact Service 'core offer' is to 'provide supervised contact to children who are looked after by the Local Authority to inform their permanency plan until this is agreed'. Priority is given to cases within the court arena and where there is a requirement to provide evidence to the proceedings
 - contact is also supervised where there continues to be evidence of 'significant risk' to a child and where no other alternative is appropriate. The Contact Service will also provide

supervised contact for a time limited period to children who may be at risk and report to inform the future plan for the child with regard to contact arrangements.

7. The Contact Service has extended the service and, where possible, has supervised the contacts held in the Looked After Children team, to support the contact arrangements for long term looked after children where risks remain high and there is no suitable alternative.
8. There are Nottinghamshire Looked After Children placed across the UK who may require supervised contact with their families; this is a challenge to support and, depending on the distance involved, an independent agency is commissioned to supervise on the Council's behalf.
9. Service delivery is Monday – Friday, 8.30am – 7pm.
10. Over the previous 10 months the Contact Service has provided between 978 and 1,290 contact sessions per month. This equates to an average of 1,131 sessions each month. The referrals on average relate to 18 new referrals each month. During the Covid 19 pandemic indirect contact by way of audio and video calling and video exchanges has been introduced to ensure that the requested level of contact between children and their families can be maintained. Due to the success of this, virtual contact will remain an option for contact where appropriate, including if there is a delay in the contact service being able to undertake direct contacts, if the child would prefer a mixture of both types of contact and if a contact had to be cancelled due to the child being ill.
11. The contact service is split into three areas: north, central and south districts. North covers Retford, Worksop and Ollerton; central covers Mansfield and Ashfield, and south covers Broxtowe, Rushcliffe, Gedling and Newark.

Venues

12. There are dedicated venues across the County to ensure:
 - children are transported within a reasonable time
 - venues which are fit for purpose with age appropriate accommodation
 - children to access sessions outside of school times without being restricted by external venue opening times which has reduced the time pressures on staff
 - increased safety for Contact Support Workers
 - the ability to control infection and keep rooms clean. This has been paramount during the pandemic.
 - control over booking contact rooms
 - a reduction to changes and cancellations
 - better consistency of worker for the child, which contributes to safeguarding priorities and best outcomes for the child
 - a reduction in Contact Support Worker travel time which leads to increased capacity to supervise more sessions and upload notes in a timely manner
 - a reduction in mileage spend by Contact Support Workers travelling between venues
 - using the Council's own venues has avoided the potential disruption to service as a result of venue closures and limited access restrictions during the pandemic.

North:

Ollerton Contact Centre – based on the Dukeries Academy School site. This venue continues to work well for all ages; there are two large contact rooms, a small team office and a kitchen area. There is no outdoor play space available at this venue.

Worksop – Priory Contact Centre – this is a development of three individual bungalows and has a total of eight contact rooms (only four of these are in use during the pandemic on the advice of health and safety), there are three kitchens attached to larger contact rooms, a team office and a smaller office space. Outdoor play areas are available. The building is appropriate for supporting assessments and can also be used for contact which requires low level supervision, but for which a private space is required. The building is situated in central Worksop and has excellent access to public transport links.

It is proposed that a new purpose-built contact centre will occupy the former Bassetlaw learning centre site and the current bungalows will be demolished with construction on this due to start in late 2022 with completion planned for late 2023. This will be a positive development for the service. The building will be bespoke and more in line with meeting the needs of children who are spending time with their families.

Retford Office at Chancery Lane – we are currently not using the Chancery Lane site but are working with colleagues in Property to secure rooms within the post-16 centre to ensure that the Bassetlaw area is fully covered and this will be completed by spring 2023 at the latest. There is no current impact on the service.

Central:

Sandy Bank – this is considered as the central base of the Contact Service. Team leaders work across their area in the respective venues to ensure management presence and oversight. Sandy Bank has 12 rooms available for contact, there are kitchen facilities and outdoor play areas, and the centre continues to be well used.

South:

Beeston Central – this venue is currently closed for refurbishment. When complete (April 2022) this will be a corporate venue for co-located teams (contact service, business support including social work support officers and the independent chair service. There will be two rooms available for the Contact Service for use as necessary. Beeston will be used as a satellite centre.

Home Brewery Building – this venue is no longer used for supervised contact.

Gedling View

The contact service is now fully established in Gedling View with four contact rooms, kitchen facilities and an outdoor play area. There is also a small meeting room that is bookable externally and a quiet room which can be used for overseen contacts where a supervisor is not needed but can be observed via a two-way mirror.

The centre is on a bus route from Nottingham with the bus stop at the end of the drive. Gedling View is a corporate building.

Hawtonville Children's Centre – Newark – there are four rooms available of varying sizes. There is an outdoor area and kitchen. There is a Service Level Agreement in place for the use of this area of the Children's Centre.

13. It is usual practice for the foster carer to transport children to and from contact. In exceptional circumstances the Contact Service workers will transport children. As numbers of contact sessions have increased the availability of workers to transport has decreased.
14. Where foster carers or contact workers are unable to support with transport this remains a challenge. There has been an increase demand for transport via taxi to be provided with obvious impact on budgets.

Staffing

15. The establishment is 3 fte Team Leaders. There is currently a pilot model for 1 fte Deputy Team Leader. This position is currently under review and a business case has been presented for this to become permanent.
16. Benefits of this role:
 - management of long term Looked After cases
 - assisting and ensuring that all long term Looked After cases have identified Contact Support Workers
 - improvement in communication between the contact service, Looked After Children team and parents and carers.
 - ensuring consistency of worker in all cases and enabling children to build relationships with the Contact Support Worker
 - regular case discussions are held between Deputy Team Leader and Contact Support Workers. This has enabled team leaders to focus on case discussion with staff for cases that have weekly supervised contacts ensuring consistency and quality of service
 - regular case reviews taking place to identify clear and more beneficial plans for the children and supports more effective throughput and use of resources
 - in September 2021 a pilot project was set up to have a small number of existing Contact Support Workers from each area to focus on children with full care orders. This project is lead and coordinated by the Deputy Team Leader in consultation with Team Leaders and to date has received positive feedback from the Looked After Children team, children and parents and has reduced the usage of Relief workers and being more cost effective.
17. The Deputy Team Leader role also has responsibility for the weekly scheduling of contact; prior to the role, this was undertaken by team leaders focusing on the areas they managed. This was not always effective or efficient. The Deputy Team Leader will look at all areas across the County two weeks in advance to ensure all supervised contacts are covered and that staff are used efficiently. This has not only saved time but has had a positive cost implication, as the Deputy Team Leader has been able to identify the most effective use of human resources i.e. reducing travel cost etc.

18. The Deputy Team Leader supervises, offers guidance and supports relief workers at a frequency of 4-12 weekly dependent on frequency of use. This has supported the team leaders in reducing the amount of staff they are supervising. The Deputy Team Leader has been able to deputise in the absence of a team leader, dealing with and managing any day-to-day staffing and coordination for that area. This has enabled the remaining team leaders to focus on their area and service development. There have been occasions when a team leader has been on long term sick leave and the Deputy Team Leader would act up into the role reducing the need for an interim replacement therefore reducing cost.
19. The impact of not having this role is:
- the time and capacity on team leaders including less time to develop staff and the service
 - impact on the coordination and planning for long term looked after children including consistency of workers and communication with the Looked After Children team
 - risk of time delays in teams allocating incoming requests as most of the time would be spent on the day-to-day scheduling. This would have an impact on social work teams as social workers would have to supervise contacts until the arrangements were in place
 - reduction in the service cost effectiveness
 - loss of consistency and cohesiveness across the County as it has at present.
20. The service has 23.5 fte Contact Support Workers. There is currently a pool of 3 Relief Contact Support Workers to support with the flow of work and to cover any emergencies. The workers are assigned to a particular area, although as a countywide service there are times when flexibility is required to cover contacts.
21. In addition to the above the Contact Service is currently being supported by five additional workers from residential services, four of these hold a full-time position and one is part time.
22. There has been an increase of looked after children which therefore increases the requirements for supervised contact sessions. By having the additional workers it has been possible to meet the demand on a consistent basis and minimise requests to case holding qualified social workers to undertake contacts.

Training

23. It is a specification of the job description that contact support workers hold a Level 3 City and Guilds Diploma or equivalent in Children and Young People's Workforce. All workers are suitably qualified. All Contact Support Workers and Team Leaders have completed the Grow Wise programme and this is offered to new employees as part of their induction. An ongoing training programme is available to all workers and is reviewed as part of the Employee Development & Performance Review process.

Systems

24. The service is currently working with a project manager for environment and resources to develop scheduling software through TotalMobile. There has been a delay to this project due to uncertainty of continued licencing for TotalMobile, however a solution to this is being sought. This is as a result of the SharePoint system not being adequate to meet the needs of the service. In the interim period a customised version of SharePoint developed specifically for the service is being used. This was originally designed to last 6-12 months

but has been in place over three years. The current system as described is now showing signs of significant deterioration and is no longer fit for purpose.

25. Mosaic supports the current referral process and ongoing recording and information sharing. It is anticipated that the new TotalMobile system will work seamlessly alongside Mosaic, reducing time strains on workers and team leaders.

Other Options Considered

26. No other options have been considered.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

27. The report provides an opportunity for the Committee to consider any further actions arising from the information contained within the report.

Statutory and Policy Implications

28. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

29. From April 2022 the posts highlighted in **paragraph 21** will create a challenge for the service during 2022/23 as there is no longer any funding available for them. The service will need to seek a permanent financial solution to this if they are also seeking to make the Deputy Team Leader post permanent.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the Committee considers whether there are any actions it requires in relation to the information contained in the report.

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Constitutional Comments (KK 23/03/22)

30. The proposal in this report is within the remit of the Children and Young People's Committee.

Financial Comments (LCD 24/03/22)

31. From April 2022 the posts highlighted in **paragraph 21** will create a challenge for the service during 2022/23 as there is no longer any funding available for them. The service will need to seek a permanent financial solution to this if they are also seeking to make the Deputy Team Leader post permanent. The current Contact staffing budget is £898,109.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

None.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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