

Agenda Item	8
Report No	HSCW/04/21

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Health, Social Care and Wellbeing

Date: 10 February 2021

Report Title: Vulnerable Children Within the Highlands

Report By: Executive Chief Officer – Health and Social Care

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an understanding of the impact of COVID on vulnerable children and families and the processes we have put in place to keep them safe and protected.
- 1.2 The report outlines the Health and Social Care Service and Education and Learning response to the Scottish Government guidance and expected standards that have guided our practice during this time.
- 1.3 The report proposes that further work is now required to help assess whether there is a need for rapid intervention for those who are presenting with welfare type concerns (as opposed to child or adult protection) as well as more scrutiny and assessment around hidden harm.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
 - i. Note the contents of this report
 - ii. Note the challenges of where we are now, and the proposals for interrogating our data and information. Firstly, to ascertain if an early intervention/prevention team is required or appropriate. Second, to assess whether our systems (across all partners) are robust so that we can identify any hidden harms, and to intervene appropriately.

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource: Further assessment will be carried out within current resources.
- 3.2 Legal: We are required to work within Scottish Government guidelines.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island): The report highlights a number of concerns relating to vulnerabilities and inequalities which have been emphasised during the current pandemic.
- 3.4 Climate Change/Carbon Clever: none.
- 3.5 Risk: There is a suggestion that some vulnerabilities/issues are not being identified. Proposed option is to identify any risk and to implement practice that will address it.
- 3.6 Gaelic: none.

4. Background

- 4.1 Children and families can experience adversity for a number of different reasons. Due to the impact that COVID was having on many within our population, the Scottish Government produced national guidance which determined that children and young people may be vulnerable because of factors relating to their personal development, features of their family life, or because of wider influences that impact on them within their community.
- 4.2 From the above, we have to acknowledge that whilst we might be able to identify vulnerable children and young people within our services, there are a number of children who are not known. We have to be alert to this and act appropriately.

5. Vulnerable Children, Social Work and Education

- 5.1 Most vulnerable children and young people known to children and education services will have a child's plan. This suggests a need for a coordinated approach due to greater vulnerability. This could include a range of children and young people, such as those:
 - at risk of significant harm, with a child protection plan;
 - looked after at home, or away from home;
 - on the edge of care, where families would benefit from additional support; and
 - with additional support needs, where there are one or more factors which require significant or co-ordinated support.

Additional criteria has been added to support the Highland context which includes those:

- affected by disability;
- where they and/or their parents are experiencing poor physical or mental health;
- experiencing adversities including domestic abuse and bereavement; and
- requiring support when they are involved in making transitions at critical stages in their lives.

- 5.2 The Scottish Government made changes to national guidance and restrictions on 4 January 2021, in response to the changing situation with the Coronavirus pandemic. This meant updating the plans for the opening of schools and Early Learning and Childcare settings.
- 5.3 Based on the Scottish Government guidance, and in discussion with NHS Highland colleagues, the Highland Council position statement for providing support to vulnerable and keyworker children is as follows:
 - all schools remain open but only pupils identified as vulnerable (Nursery to S6) by schools and the children of Key Workers (Nursery to S2) will attend school;

- children attending school will be supervised as they access the same remote learning as those children and young people who are not in school;
- only enough staff as are required to allow supervision will be working in school. All other staff will be working from home, in line with the national rules, focusing on delivering remote learning and supporting young people;
- free school meal vouchers continue to be issued to all eligible families, even if children are attending school;
- schools open from 6 January for vulnerable and keyworker children for childcare; and
- remote learning in place for all children and young people from 11 January.

5.4 As of the end of the first week of schools returning in January 2021, 8.65% of children and young people were attending our schools across Highland. Nationally, the figure was 7%.

5.5 One further development between social work and education relates to mental health. The literature on supporting mental health and well-being highlights the importance of adhering to a staged approach. Most individuals are highly resilient and do not require psychological intervention. Support is best received if offered by those who know the children best, that is family members and familiar school staff.

5.6 Building on the above:

- sessions on mental health and wellbeing were provided to all head teachers in November with a detailed information sheet and power-point being provided as reference documents for them to continue to refer to.
- information on staff and pupil health and wellbeing was placed on the wellbeing section of the digital hub
- training and information has been made available on a number of topics relating to building resilience, maintaining positive wellbeing and good mental health, for staff and parents
- A list of people trained to deliver 'Seasons for Growth' has been compiled and updated companion training and refresher courses were delivered last term to better support pupils experiencing loss or bereavement.

6. Further Investigation

6.1 During COVID, child protection registrations increased by 30% before reducing by the same figure. This data requires further interrogation to ensure that we have agreed thresholds across all partner agencies and our practice is appropriate and safe. There is also a suggestion that cases being referred are more complex. Again, this needs to be examined as if this is accurate, we need to identify why issues have not been picked up earlier.

6.2 Whilst the process for supporting vulnerable children within schools is robust, we need to explore those children not attending school. We need to be confident that we are meeting the needs of all vulnerable children.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Health and Social Care

Date: 25 January 2021

Author: Fiona Duncan, Executive Chief Officer – Health and Social Care

Background Papers: