

Agenda Item	11
Report No	HCW/13/21

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Health, Social Care and Wellbeing

Date: 19 May 2021

Report Title: Vulnerable Children and Young People

Report By: Executive Chief Officer – Health and Social Care

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report considers data available in relation to Child Protection, Police Child Concerns and Interagency Referral Discussions. It also considers findings from national reports during the pandemic, and feedback from children, young people and families.
- 1.2 It is important to note that most children and young people are resilient and will recover from the pandemic without the need for significant input or support. The skills they have learned in the past year are invaluable and for many, the opportunity to spend quality time with their families has been of benefit. However, some children, young people and families have struggled with the pandemic emotionally, physically and/or financially. The differences in these experiences is highlighted in the 'Letters from Lockdown' project undertaken by Highland Children and Young People's Forum.
- 1.3 This report aims to highlight some of the vulnerabilities identified and considers the need for prevention and early intervention provision to support families with issues which sit below the child protection threshold.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
 - i. Note the content of the report
 - ii. Consider the further development of family support services
 - iii. Support further consultation with services, communities, children, young people and families to identify gaps and possible solutions in relation to the provision of prevention and early intervention services

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 identified during the current pandemic
- 3.4 Climate Change/Carbon Clever: none
- 3.5 Risk: If services are not flexible and available to meet the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families, risk may increase bringing families into the child protection system or causing undue harm within families
- 3.6 Gaelic: none

4. Police Child Concerns

- 4.1 Police Child Concern forms are submitted to a confidential central mailbox in Highland Council for consideration and forwarding to the relevant Family Team and/or the Named Person as appropriate. Concerns can include incidents the Police have attended involving children directly, where there are known to be children living in a household, or children are known to be associated with the household. Police Child Concerns can include anything from children involved in disputes with other children through to allegations of abuse and neglect. The information contained in this section of the report aims to provide Members with an overview of the types of concerns received from Police Scotland with a particular focus on specific vulnerabilities.
- 4.2 The process for dealing with Police Child Concerns is thorough in ensuring all relevant checks and recordings are made. Checks include whether or not children are open or known to a Family Team. Concerns are also shared with the Named Person for similar checks to occur and to ensure any further discussions with Social Work take place where required. This process ensures a proportionate approach in order that families who need additional support receive it whilst respecting the rights of families to a private family life. Many concerns require no further action and those requiring Social Work input will receive this.
- 4.3 In 2020, the Children's Service Manager (South) collated data from the Police Child Concerns received over a ten-week period to monitor any key trends or issues arising during the pandemic. 1006 concern forms were submitted during this period and the data suggests there was no notable increase in the volume of Police Child Concerns received during this time. However, the pandemic was cited in many of the concerns as causing additional stresses for families, particularly in relation to mental health, alcohol use and issues relating to separated parents/carers.
- 4.4 Parental factors feature significantly in child concerns received including parental drug or alcohol use, and parental mental health issues. Many of the concerns received during this period cited the pandemic as having an impact on levels of drug or alcohol use. Parental mental health has also been affected by the pandemic, with a number of concerns related to self-harm and suicidal ideation. Parental drug and alcohol use and mental health issues often co-exist. It is worth noting that parental drug or alcohol use is often a symptom of other underlying issues within families e.g. poverty, wider financial issues, domestic abuse, childhood trauma. This highlights the need for whole family approaches across children and adult services to ensure that whilst risks to children and young people are managed, the needs of the wider family must be addressed if children are to live healthy and fulfilled lives. This also fits with the ethos of The Promise in terms of intensive family support to help keep children and young people with their families wherever possible.

- 4.5 The Medics Against Violence Pathfinder project aims to engage with adults who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs or are experiencing mental health issues at the point of crisis. Taking referrals from local police, Pathfinders will work with people who accept support to address their underlying complex social issues and connect them with local services. It is crucial as this project develops, the links across Children's Services are made to ensure support is available across the family.
- 4.6 During the pandemic, there has been an increased focus nationally on domestic abuse to ensure child protection issues are identified and responded to at the earliest possible opportunity. Whilst domestic abuse did feature in a number of Child Concerns received, the detail in these concerns included a wide range of domestic incidents:
- Violence – male on female/female on male/male on male
 - Verbal disagreements
 - Family disputes within households related to excessive alcohol consumption
 - Coercive control
- 4.7 From the Concerns received, it is noted that there has been an increase in the number of concerns raised in relation to separated parents and couples. In particular, issues arising in relation to contact with children and young people, violence and aggression from ex-partners and the use of the pandemic to exhibit controlling behaviour.
- 4.8 Highland Council are currently in the process of submitting a bid to the Equally Safe fund to bring the Safe and Together Model to Highland. This model supports practitioners in addressing domestic abuse by putting strategies in place to support children and adult victims whilst working with perpetrators to reduce risk and harm.
- 4.9 The increase in concerns in relation to online abuse has been noted throughout the pandemic in Highland and nationally by the NSPCC. Police Concern forms received during this period included a number of online issues - the sharing of images, inappropriate communication, and inappropriate content being viewed. The increased time spent online during the pandemic coupled with social isolation are thought to have contributed to this rise in concerns. Highland Child Protection Committee are working with Education colleagues to ensure consistent messaging and support for children, young people and families is available in relation to this issue. The Highland Underage Sex Protocol has also been updated to include online situations.
- 4.10 During the monitoring period a number of child concern forms related to children who had gone missing from their parental home, residential home and/or foster care placement. This figure includes children and young people who have been reported missing in line with Highland Council procedures for children who are looked after and accommodated. These children are normally located within 24 hours and a Return interview is conducted by Police Scotland to follow up any concerns. However, there are concerns that young people who go missing may be at increased risk of exploitation and this is currently being addressed through the Child Protection Committee.
- 4.11 Other concerns included allegations of assault, self-harm, youth offending, drug and alcohol use by young people, COVID breaches, children left at home alone, and a breakdown in family relationships.

5. Interagency Referral Discussions (IRD)

- 5.1 Interagency Referral Discussions (IRDs) are initiated when a professional has sufficient concerns that these discussions need to be held to consider the safety and wellbeing of the child or young person.
- 5.2 An IRD is the joint decision-making process which allows information to be gathered and shared to inform decision making as to whether a child is in need of protection. This happens when a notification of concern is raised with one of the key agencies. This may include a new concern on an existing case, a new referral or a cumulation of concerns.
- 5.3 The IRD occurs between key services where it has been suspected that a child or young person has suffered, is suffering or may be at risk of significant harm or abuse. It is the first stage in the process of joint child protection assessment following a notification of concern and involves Social Work, Health and Police alongside Education where appropriate.
- 5.4 The Lead Nurse (Child Protection) has been collating data in relation to IRDs to assess any patterns and trends arising during the pandemic. Between April 1st 2020 and March 31st 2021 there were 526 IRDs involving Police, Social Work and Health. Please note, each IRD may relate to more than one child. This figure is on a par with data collated pre-lockdown. Following an initial dip in requests for IRDs at the beginning of the pandemic, figures returned to normal levels from April 2020.
- 5.5 The main reasons for IRDs during this period include concerns, allegations or disclosures of physical injury and child sexual abuse. As outlined within the Police Concerns, indecent communications have featured significantly during the pandemic resulting in 113 IRDs during 2020/21. Child Sexual Exploitation, Neglect, Youth Offending, Drug and Alcohol use also feature in IRDs. Other reasons included parental factors such as domestic abuse, offending behaviour, supply of drugs and acrimonious separations between parents/carers impacting on children.
- 5.6 IRDs may progress to further assessment or investigation by Social Work, Police or jointly between Social Work and Police. A Child Protection Medical Examination may also be requested as part of this process.
- 5.7 When comparing the type of concerns submitted by Police Scotland and reasons for IRDs, there are a number of similarities but also significant differences in the issues identified. This is partly due to the processes involved and levels of risk identified, but it also highlights vulnerabilities which do not reach the child protection threshold but may require early intervention to prevent risk escalating.

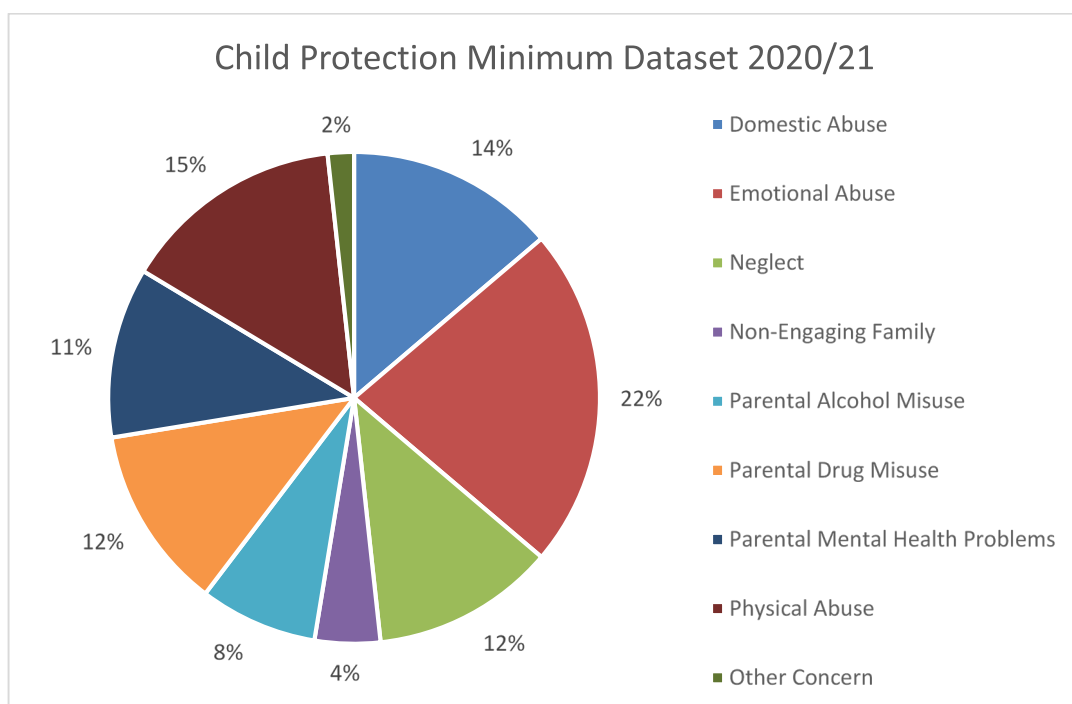
6. Child Protection Registrations

- 6.1 Previous Committee Reports have highlighted the increased number of children and young people being placed on the child protection register during the pandemic, peaking at 131 during August 2020. Further scrutiny of this data has shown large family groups placed on the register together contributed to this increase. However, registrations did indeed increase during the pandemic, and this is in line with other figures reported across Scotland during the same period. It is thought that the anxiety of professionals to keep children safe during the pandemic contributed to a reluctance

to deregister children too early and err on the side of caution in terms of registration where risk was deemed to be a significant factor. Figures have since returned to previous levels at around 100 children on the register at any one time. An audit of child protection cases will take place later this year.

6.2 Throughout the pandemic, Social Work have maintained contact with all children on the child protection register, with 98% being seen at least every two weeks period face-to-face. This is monitored through the Family Teams and where children are not able to be seen, legitimate reasons are provided.

6.3 The diagram below looks at risk factors in child protection registrations for the 2020/21 reporting period and is taken from the National minimum dataset for Child Protection Committees (Highland data). In terms of risk factors, parental factors are identified in 31% of all registrations. Emotional Abuse is identified as a risk factor in 22% of registrations, Physical Abuse 15%, Domestic Abuse 14% and Neglect 12%.



6.4 As the number of child protection registrations in Highland is relatively low, risk factors change frequently during each reporting period. The data tells us that all types of risk occur in Highland as they do elsewhere across Scotland. Therefore, focussing on responding to one particular risk factor is unlikely to result in significant changes for children, young people and families. Child Protection is often complex, and families may be experiencing a range of difficulties at any one time. Contributing factors such as poverty, employment, family dynamics and historical trauma impact on parenting capacity and this is considered in addressing risk and need.

6.5 Children and young people on the child protection register receive significant support from targeted and universal services. In all child protection cases, Social Work are the Lead Professional and will ensure support is provided, the child’s plan is in place, is being delivered, reviewed and updated regularly. That has continued throughout the pandemic.

7. Addressing the Needs of Children, Young People and Families Post Pandemic

- 7.1 Whilst the impact of the pandemic on pre-school children is still not fully known, anecdotal evidence has suggested the lack of social interaction opportunities and early support provision for parents and carers may impact on the health and wellbeing of vulnerable children. The weekly vulnerable children reporting provides feedback from Health Visitors and Community Early Years Practitioners to help build an understanding of the impact of the pandemic on families. They have found family engagement challenging, particularly where issues with technology has impacted on remote contacts. Health Visitors report that consistent assessment of families and their circumstances has been challenging and securing access to services to meet the needs of families has proved difficult at times. As a result, there have been occasions where Health Visitors have been expected to pick up some activities from agencies and other services not able to operate during the pandemic. This raises family expectations that cannot necessarily be met by the Health Visiting service but indicates a need for ongoing support where child protection measures are not required.
- 7.2 Finances continue to be a challenge for many families and the impact of redundancies and furlough continue to add to stresses for them. Both Health Visitors and Community Early Years Practitioners are reporting an increasing number of families whose mental health has been impacted during this period. The Community Early Years Practitioners have recently undertaken training to be walk leaders to enable them to lead outdoor activity with the hope of supporting parental mental health and having a positive impact on parent/child interactions.
- 7.3 Families have reported a positive impact of children being back in nursery, and with the easing of pandemic restrictions this should help families reconnect with others. Once the baby and toddler groups restart this should help even more.
- 7.4 The return of children and young people to face-to-face Education is welcomed as it provides an opportunity for staff to pick up any indicators of risk and need daily. During the pandemic 99% of children and young people with Level 3 and 4 plans in place were contacted weekly. However, without face-to-face contact there has been limited opportunity for teaching staff to have discussions about health and wellbeing compared to when physically seeing children and young people. The availability of additional school places for vulnerable children in the second lockdown ensured children could be seen face-to-face and supported where required.
- 7.5 National research into the impact of the pandemic on school age children suggests variable experiences. For those children in Primary School, they have been worried about the effects of the virus and not seeing friends and family. Children in secondary school were more concerned about the impact of the pandemic on friends and family members, employment and finances. Whilst some children and young people appear mainly unaffected by the pandemic, others experienced loneliness, anxiety and risk as outlined in the Police Concerns section. It will be some time before the true impact of the pandemic on school age children will be known and will vary between children. The increase in child concerns predicted following the first lockdown did not materialise and data will be scrutinised over the coming months to assess any fluctuation in figures following the full return to school in April 2020.
- 7.6 The Safeguarding Lead for Education is focussing on updating procedures for school staff and ensuring access to information about child protection and safeguarding issues

is available to all. Further work with Head Teachers, Depute Heads, Guidance Staff and Designated Child Protection Leads in schools is ongoing to ensure all school staff are confident and competent in recognising and responding to concerns about children at the earliest possible opportunity. With the separation of the Care and Learning Service, it is crucial to ensure partnership links remain strong to enable regular communication about risk and need to take place, and support put in place where need is identified.

- 7.7 There are specific issues for consideration in relation to older young people which include risk of sexual and criminal exploitation, drug and alcohol use, self-harm, suicidal ideation and wider mental health issues. Whilst the numbers of these young people remain relatively low, there is concern that risk to this group is considerably high. They often struggle to find the support they need and have reported a reluctance to engage with existing services. The Child Protection Committee is currently working to identify gaps in provision for young people and possible options to provide access to intensive support, crisis intervention and therapeutic services.
- 7.8 Support for young people entitled to an aftercare service continues to be made available through Barnardos, Who Cares Scotland and the wider CHAMPS team. Whilst there are currently 245 young people entitled to this service, only around 92 are engaged with Barnardos Through and Aftercare Service, with an average of 72 young people in contact with the service on a weekly basis. An average of 22 young people per week are also engaged with CHAMPS on a weekly basis, receiving support and advice, opportunities for social interaction and practical assistance.
- 7.9 Feedback from care experienced young people, Barnardos and CHAMPS has highlighted a lack of structure and routine, drug and alcohol issues, housing issues, risk of exploitation and mental health issues exacerbated by isolation during lockdown periods. The pandemic has had an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many and it is crucial that ongoing support for care experienced young people is made available, promoted and developed in line with the needs they have identified. The Corporate Parenting Board is currently focussing on the three main issues highlighted by young people – mental health and wellbeing, bereavement and early death. The Improvement Plan is being developed further to include housing, training and employment, education and youth justice. The Plan also takes account of The Promise and the Care Leavers Covenant to ensure the needs of care experienced young people across Highland are met.
- 7.10 Feedback from Social Work teams, Health and Education colleagues suggests that families have found the second lockdown significantly harder to cope with compared to the first lockdown period in 2020. The lack of face-to-face contact with partner agencies, particularly third sector providers, has meant that families have not had the usual opportunities for interaction with support services. Whilst many services have found ways to deliver services remotely, this does not necessarily replace the benefits of face-to-face support and opportunities for social interaction. However, it is also recognised that the availability for online support has increased provision of services available to some families.
- 7.11 Families with children who have additional support needs have found the pandemic particularly challenging with limited access to formal and informal support, opportunities for respite and lack of structure and routine. This is also reflected in the Police Child Concern forms where a number of concerns were submitted in relation to children with additional support needs in relation to online risk and breakdowns in family relationships.

7.12 Whilst there are many services providing high quality support for children, young people and families, this is not always available across Highland or at times when they are needed. For some families, this may be rapid intervention in a crisis whereas others may require intensive support over a much longer period of time. Family support is a key part of The Promise in supporting families to stay together wherever possible. This support should be available at the point of need and for however long is needed. In order to fully support families, there may be a benefit to further thinking about the way services are designed and delivered. This includes the availability of services at the point of crisis including evenings and weekends. The pandemic has also highlighted the value of community resources which may contribute to the delivery of support services for families.

8. Conclusion

8.1 The data included in this report reflects activity in three areas - Police Child Concerns, Interagency Referral Discussions and Child Protection registrations. It provides a brief overview of the variety of concerns which are reported across Highland.

8.2 The vast majority of vulnerable children and families will sit below the thresholds for child protection which rightly remains a priority for services. However, the availability of preventative and early intervention resources to provide intensive support and rapid intervention at the point of need may prevent the need for child protection measures in the future. This is a priority area for the service, and we are actively looking at how we can develop and build an early intervention and prevention strategy and support network across all services. Working with our partners will be key.

8.3 The pandemic has demonstrated innovative and creative ways of working across Highland and this should not be lost in helping communities recover. Strengths-based approaches can support families discover and implement solutions for themselves. With the pandemic and The Promise, there comes a real opportunity for radical thinking about the way services are designed and delivered to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Health and Social Care

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Background Papers: