



## **Safeguarding children and young people within the context of Covid-19 response and recovery planning**

### **Report of the People Scrutiny Commission**

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## Executive summary

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The People Scrutiny Working Group, a cross-Party group of elected Members, Chaired by Councillor Claire Hiscott, was convened in July 2020 to focus on what effect Covid-19 has had on safeguarding children and young people in Bristol, what the city-wide response has been, and what learning there is to help inform and build resilience for the ongoing challenges and for risks of future pandemics. In August 2020 evidence was heard from 22 participants and the Working Group also considered 5 further submissions.

The issues, reflections and responses that came out of the evidence sessions can be organised across 6 key areas: (i) Identifying who needed support and assessing risk, (ii) School attendance during lockdown, (iii) Family tensions and stress, (iv) Community support, detached youth work and contextual safeguarding, (v) Children's and young people's mental health, (vi) Back to school; and underpinned by issues of Communication & Messaging, Service Provision & Joint working, and Equality & inclusion.

Significant findings were:

- Members felt it essential, firstly, to commend the exceptional work of all youth and child services practitioners in the Council and across partner organisations during the period of lockdown and after.
- Members heard that misunderstandings about what practitioners from the Council and youth organisations could and couldn't do within lockdown restrictions created some gaps in services, and so agreed there should be clear and standardised guidance that would be easily available for all practitioners and organisations. Members also felt that there should be an increased profile and positive messaging about youth services as a trusted point of contact and engagement for young people and their families, and that the Council ought to further utilise the rich resource and knowledge across the sector for training and sharing good practice, including taking up the direct offer from the Association of Child Protection Professionals of support.
- Although it was found that when lockdown restrictions came into force the Council acted quickly and appropriately, Members heard that it was at times unclear how to access support for those young people who would not have previously considered themselves vulnerable, but who came to be so due to the extra stresses and pressures associated with Covid-19 and lockdown restrictions. Members recognised suitable provision of guidance, including in schools, although found there was a need for clearer messaging and also that child-friendly advice and guidance should be made available.
- Members were told that young people are experiencing what's described as 'Covid anxiety' with increases in mental health issues; and that a renewed focus on mental health and wellbeing has placed it fully within the remit of safeguarding concerns. Members felt that this refocussed approach should be encouraged and developed within the Council, youth organisations and across school settings. Members commended the young people who contributed to Barnardo's report, ['Mental Health and Covid-19: In Our Own Words'](#), and

thought these documented experiences should be referred to, learnt from, and similar projects encouraged and developed.

- School attendance figures were found to be low amongst the eligible cohort during lockdown. Members thought clearer messaging was required as schools reopened, providing reassurance that the option of school attendance was a good one, and ensuring messages from schools and partners were aligned to avoid confusion. Members heard that the Designated Safeguarding Leads Network was well utilised and was a positive and invaluable resource, and so agreed the Network should be supported and be front and centre in ongoing recovery planning.
- Members heard that whilst online service provision and connectivity rose out of necessity due to reduced face to face contact, many families were unable to access the internet. It was noted that most schools knew students who were unable to access digital platforms and worked hard to provide hard copies of resources to them. However, despite distribution of devices with connectivity by the Council and youth organisations, it was recognised that there were still gaps across the city where families were unable to connect virtually. Members thought greater focus should be placed on tackling the 'digital divide', and the Council and all its partners should aim to ensure every household had equitable access to the internet.
- Assumptions and perceptions about young people involved in street conflict, serious violence and/or drug related offending were flagged as potential barriers to support and safeguarding, including societal perceptions of some young Black people as offenders rather than victims of criminal exploitation. Therefore, Members thought that the culturally competent responses within the Council's child-centred services were welcome and should be built upon by way of appropriate training and utilising more local organisations that already had close relationships in Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities to help co-produce services.
- Members heard about the importance and value of detached youth work and a contextual safeguarding approach which would provide for an understanding of extra-familial factors; and felt the Council, whilst being at the forefront of collaborative working arrangements to utilise these methods, should investigate ways to increase the use of detached youth work and a contextual safeguarding approach across the city.
- It was noted that the usual 9-5 office hours could prevent or delay access and support where it was needed, and so Members agreed that the Council should investigate how its service delivery could be more balanced with the work in voluntary and community organisations, including infrastructure outside those usual office hours.
- Members found that the City had strong existing networks and partnerships. However Covid-19 had shown that they need to be built on and arrangements should be put in place enabling them to be utilised even more, which would create firmer resilience for future pandemics.
- It was recognised that Covid-19 shone a light on structural inequalities, including that economically deprived households required extra support including food parcels, which placed children under further stress and risk of harm. Members commended the role of mutual aid groups who had stepped up during the crisis, and Social Prescribing services were highlighted as valuable for supporting and signposting young people and families; and that there should be more investment and development of Social Prescribing in communities.

## Introduction

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As in every workplace and household, the Council saw big changes as a result of lockdown in March 2020, including how day to day work was carried out, how partnerships across the city were maintained (and in most cases developed), and how elected Councillors (also known as Members) carried out their duties. Rules were amended to enable 'virtual council meetings' with public participation; and processes, plans and priorities were refocused to ensure safety and that support was available where it was needed.

Finally, relevant questions and discussions were had to enable learning so as to build confidence and resilience for the future. This included ensuring that, in line with the [Centre for Public Scrutiny guidance](#)<sup>1</sup>, the Council's scrutiny function was maintained and utilised to act as a [critical friend](#) to the administration in terms of supporting the Covid-19 response and recovery planning. With that in mind, the Chairs of the Council's scrutiny commissions convened Working Groups, overseen by the Overview & Scrutiny Management Board, with the remit to focus on the effect of Covid-19 on Council services, communities and individuals across Bristol.

Safeguarding children within the context of Covid-19 response and recovery planning was prioritised by the People Scrutiny Commission. This focus was based on Scrutiny Members' views that, at this time of crisis, Bristol's children and young people's safety and wellbeing are of top concern and so the scrutiny function was best placed to help reflect and learn from the response, and inform recovery planning and future policy with regard to keeping children and young people safe.

## The purpose of the Working Group

### *Reflection and Learning*

The Working Group would like these findings and recommendations to support the Council and city partners reflect and learn from the experience of lockdown so as to:

1. Build resilience should Covid-19 remain for the foreseeable future or increase again, and also for the risk of future pandemics and other city emergencies;
2. Inform ongoing recovery planning to support the protection of vulnerable children as we experience the rolling back of some lockdown restrictions;
3. Inform ongoing policy development across the city, gaining improvements for:
  - identification of risk and vulnerable children and families;
  - support and preventative measures available for vulnerable children and families;
  - equitable access to prevention and support services for all vulnerable children and families from different backgrounds, with all protected characteristics, and for those with economic disadvantages.

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<sup>1</sup> The name has now changed to [Centre for Governance and Scrutiny](#)

## How the Working Group investigated and collected evidence for this report

The 3 aims above were framed around the following key questions which were referred to when collecting and reviewing evidence;

1. What were the most successful methods, and what has been found to be unsuccessful, in identifying risk and safeguarding vulnerable children during lockdown?
2. What are the lessons learnt and what new methods can be implemented to identify, support and protect vulnerable children, young people and families coming out of lockdown period?

*“The questions you ask will probably be an exam question for public servants in years to come”*

Jacqui Jenson, Executive Director, People, Bristol City Council

## Participants and submissions

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Members of the People Scrutiny Working Group heard from 22 participants in person, and received a further 5 written submissions;

### Session 1: Council & City Partners

**Jacqui Jenson** Executive Director, People, Bristol City Council

**Alison Hurley** Director, Education and Skills, Bristol City Council

**Ann James** Director, Children, Families and Safer Communities, Bristol City Council

**Ivan Powell** Independent Chair, Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership

**Jim Bowyer** Head, Bristol Hospital Education Services

**Henry Chan** Safeguarding in Education Team Manager; Chair, Education Reference Group

**Victoria Caple**, Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit Partnership Manager, Avon & Somerset Police

**Gerry Bates** Head of Children's Services, Sirona Care & Health

**Cllr Asher Craig** Deputy Mayor, Communities, Equalities & Public Health

### Session 2: National picture

**Dr. Carlene Firmin** Social Researcher, University of Bedfordshire

**Wendy Thorogood** Chair, Association of Child Protection Professionals

**Fiona Carnie**, Educationalist

### Evidence not in person

DCI Larisa Hunt Operation Topaz, Avon & Somerset Police

Androulla Nicolaou Prevention Officer and Coordinator, Topaz, Avon and Somerset Police

Empire Fighting Chance

Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Office of the Children's Commissioner

### Session 3: Children & young people

**Rob Farrow**, Head of Service (Young People) Learning Partnership West

**Kate Gough**, Head of Bristol Youth Services, Creative Youth Network

**Jack Beech** Chief Operating Officer, Creative Youth Network

**Anthony Hill** Service Manager, Helping Young People Engage (HYPE), Barnardo's

**Ella Remes** Service Manager, Barnardo's Against Sexual Exploitation (BASE), Barnardo's

**Maya Mate-Kole** Golden Key/ The Call In; Commissioner, Commission on Race Equality

**Tom Owen** Chief Executive Officer, The Green House

**Molly Flitcroft** Member of UK Youth Parliament; Bristol Youth Council

**Cllr Helen Godwin** Cabinet Member, Women, Families and Homes (Lead Member for Children's Services)

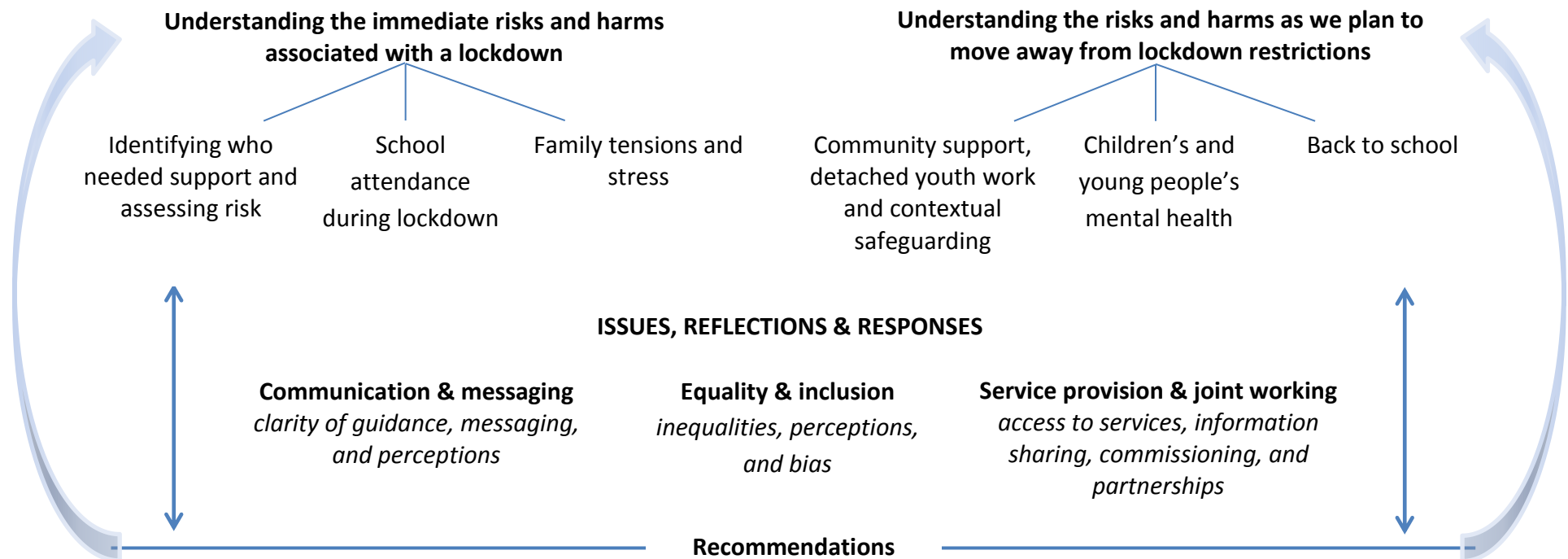
**Cllr Helen Holland** Cabinet Member, Adult Social Care; and Co-Chair of the Health & Wellbeing Board

## Findings

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The diagram below is a visual representation of the Working Group’s findings. Members organised the issues, reflections and responses that arose from the evidence sessions into 6 key areas: (i) Identifying who needed support and assessing risk; (ii) School attendance during lockdown; (iii) Family tensions and stress; (iv) Community support, detached youth work and contextual safeguarding; (v) Children’s and young people’s mental health; (vi) Back to school. The first 3 areas were with regard to ‘*Understanding the immediate risks and harms associated with a lockdown*’ and the second group of 3 areas were informed by ‘*Understanding the risks and harms as we plan to move away from lockdown restrictions*’ (with the understanding guidance and rules may change quickly).

Members appreciated the relationships and interconnectivity between them all, demanding a holistic approach to analysis. Recommendations are framed and informed by 3 overarching themes: (i) Communication & messaging; (ii) Service provision & joint working; (iii) Equality & inclusion.



Understanding the immediate risks and harms associated with the lockdown period

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ISSUES	REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES
<p><b>Identifying who needed support and assessing risk</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risks of intra-familial harm exacerbated by lockdown.</li> <li>• Some children and young people affected may not have been known to social services.</li> <li>• Less availability of safe spaces led to difficulties in contacting young people.</li> <li>• Groups of children and young people disproportionately affected by lockdown, including low income and Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic communities.</li> <li>• Risks of transmission of Covid-19 to unwell and vulnerable children.</li> <li>• Lack of digital access for some children and young people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk assessments were undertaken and plans put in place for every vulnerable child known to the Council at the earliest stage.</li> <li>• Participants raised concerns in relation to `hidden harm`; as children and young people were not able to disclose to trusted professionals, there were less opportunities to safeguard and reduce risk.</li> <li>• The Council pointed to good data analytics with the ability to identify risks of harm so as to reach out to families. There is ongoing developmental work with government.</li> <li>• Face to face contacts were prioritised by the Council based on a risk analysis of families and Council workforce.</li> <li>• There was a focus on harm in the home - outside spaces may have been perceived as less problematic, and so it is unclear how much was missed in extra-familial contexts.</li> <li>• The Council had a focus on providing cultural competent services, and the positive connections with community organisations could be built upon in future coproduction opportunities.</li> <li>• System-wide response was required with the purpose to keep the most unwell and vulnerable children out of hospital - the <a href="#">Lifetime team</a> moved to 7 days a week.</li> <li>• Laptops with connectivity have been distributed by the Council, <a href="#">Hope Virtual School</a> and youth network groups to families without online access; although there are still gaps across the city where families are unable to connect virtually.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="1541 592 2063 948" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin-top: 20px;"> <p><i>“Every child had a Covid-related risk assessment with a contingency plan should their main carer not be able to continue to care for them”.</i></p> <p>Ann James, Director of Children, Families and Safer Communities, Bristol City Council</p> </div>

ISSUES	REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES
<p><b>School attendance during lockdown for eligible cohort of children</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Centralised school attendance reporting meant there was a week’s time-lag with the data with risks of missing non-attendance of vulnerable children.</li> <li>Children and young people not having contact with professionals, including pastoral care at school, meant subtleties could not be spotted in the same way.</li> <li>There was low take-up of school places for vulnerable children during the period of lockdown, especially in low income areas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Council created a local reporting system; the <a href="#">Education Reference Group</a> focussed on attendance; there were integrated working arrangements including Hope Virtual School, Social Workers and education and skills colleagues – all working together to wrap around those families eligible for school during this period.</li> <li>The Designated Safeguarding Leads Network was the main way of checking and monitoring. The importance of the post was flagged.</li> <li>It was noted that there was, in general, historically less contact with households in mainstream practice, meaning a larger adjustment was needed to ensure continued education during lockdown period.</li> <li>Some children and young people who found mainstream settings challenging reported feeling safer online.</li> <li>The sector developed local partnerships with other settings when capacity and continuity were identified as risks and concerns.</li> <li>Many schools took on children temporarily during the lockdown period.</li> <li>Food packages and free school meals were provided to identified families who needed them.</li> <li>Schools worked together to provide a <a href="#">‘Think Family’</a> response if children from the same family attended different settings.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="1543 368 2063 719" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>“The environment we were in at that time was very much about the fear of Covid and everyone was in lockdown and being asked to remain in their homes”.</i></p> <p>Alison Hurley, Director of Education &amp; Skills, Bristol City Council</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1601 802 2063 1190" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>“For some young people in-person school bullying is the main concern as well as feeling unsafe on the school journey, so we need to think how to support those children back into education”.</i></p> <p>Dr. Carlene Firmin, Social Researcher</p> </div>



ISSUES	REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES
<p><b>Family tensions and stress</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tensions in households and other factors have led to teenagers leaving, or being asked to leave, the family home.</li> <li>Scarcity of foster placements exacerbated by Covid across the wider region with some foster placements breaking down (not specific to Bristol's experience).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Council invoked the amendments in the Children's Act needed to speed up assessment and approval of foster carers to meet the needs of children.</li> <li>Increased anxiety and tensions were reported in many families already under pressure.</li> <li>Use of placement stability plans with family work was identified as important, including providing extra emotional and practical support to families.</li> <li>There was a positive response in Bristol, with many additional carers stepping forward, which increased the carer base by 20.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="1335 300 2063 691" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>"Talking to young people how to keep calm, how to keep well, how to remove themselves from situations and resolve conflict before it escalates has been really important. Family work has been important - reaching out, providing extra emotional and practical support to family members in order to keep calmness and safety at home wherever possible".</i></p> <p>Ella Remes, Service Manager, BASE Barnardo's</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1525 767 2063 1018" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>"There has been increased anxiety and tensions in many families already under pressure".</i></p> <p>Tom Owen, CEO, The Green House</p> </div>

Understanding the risks and harms as we plan to move away from lockdown restrictions

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ISSUES	REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES
<p><b>Community support, detached youth work and contextual safeguarding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coming out of lockdown saw an increase in risks of criminal exploitation, including teenagers’ involvement in organised crime, street conflict and serious violence.</li> <li>• More children in Bristol are victims of ‘County Lines’ which involve organised crime networks trafficking children to deal drugs.</li> <li>• Economic disadvantage has come more into focus during this period, with the risk of it becoming worse within the context of an expected economic downturn.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased youth worker and community presence was noted as beneficial for enabling young people to feel safe.</li> <li>• Training in adolescence development was raised as important for focus on child welfare in communities.</li> <li>• There was a need to understand extra-familial factors; and a <a href="#">contextual safeguarding approach</a>.</li> <li>• Detached youth work could reach the most vulnerable young people – it was described as the most successful way of understanding how young people are coping.</li> <li>• Relationships could be built through detached work, enabling referrals to services where necessary.</li> <li>• Agreement across participants that street detached work was important to build relationships, gain intelligence and identify groups and locations of harm.</li> <li>• Collaborative working arrangements between Police, Council and Youth networks has enabled detached work to make positive impacts - Safer Options, noted as a positive culturally competent partnership, is the Council’s programme that supports young people in partnership with youth organisations, the Youth Offending Team, Police and other community safety partners.</li> <li>• There were examples of positive stories from youth groups of young people helping each other and neighbours; and helping out at foodbanks.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="1279 707 2060 959" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin-top: 20px;"> <p><i>“Our work is all about relationships; we need to be able to see young people and be able to act at the right time”.</i></p> <p>Ann James, Director of Children, Families and Safer Communities, Bristol City Council</p> </div>

ISSUES	REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES
<p><b>Children’s and young people’s mental health</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There were reports of a lot of ‘Covid anxiety’ among young people, e.g. deep concern about the ability to socially distance, what to do about needing to travel by bus, and fear of mixing at school – especially for those from families with health issues.</li> <li>• With the increase of online platforms enabling visual contact, body image and presentation was affecting some young people’s mental health.</li> <li>• The children who were hard to reach during lockdown became isolated and may present with increasing mental health issues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linking children’s services, mental health services and schools more closely to deliver effective and confidential mental health support to young people was raised as important, and that young people should be involved in co-designing those services.</li> <li>• Participants reported a renewed focus on mental health and wellbeing during lockdown which is being maintained during the recovery period; a focus that has placed mental health fully within the remit of safeguarding concerns.</li> <li>• Young people set up a blog to support other young people. Young people co-authored a report about their experiences, <a href="#">‘Mental Health and Covid-19: In Our Own Words’</a>.</li> <li>• There have been Council-led initiatives to provide a voice to children and young people including #wearebristolkids and the developing ‘Belonging’ strategy by the Youth Council.</li> <li>• Online skills of youth workers have been raised; with a focus on art/backgrounds rather than faces within online engagement, which has helped to overcome some anxieties about being online.</li> <li>• There were reports of children and young people with anxiety and mental health issues feeling supported online as it was less daunting and more accessible for them.</li> <li>• The Working Group was told to expect an increase in demand for mental health services when schools return.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="1603 272 2063 520" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>“Young people are reporting an increase in mental health concerns”.</i></p> <p>Anthony Hill, HYPE Barnardo’s</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1603 831 2063 1254" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>“Schools should treat mental health as a safeguarding responsibility. This corresponds to the wider work around trauma informed approaches to behaviour”.</i></p> <p>Henry Chan, Safeguarding in Education Team Manager, Bristol City Council</p> </div>

ISSUES	REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES
<p><b>Back to school</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk of low attendance.</li> <li>• Concerns from young people about confidentiality if they disclose any concerns and issues.</li> <li>• Schools’ difficulties accommodating pupils due to social distancing rules and concerns and anxiety from parents and children.</li> <li>• Children and young people finding it difficult to disclose issues and concerns to teachers and other professionals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was reported that some young people don’t feel safe going to school.</li> <li>• The Working Group was told some parents felt frightened about sending children back to school; refugees and asylum seekers being particularly concerned. This required proactive work to engage marginalised groups.</li> <li>• A point was made that schools’ issues, including concerns about accommodating pupils safely could be partially addressed by outdoor learning where possible.</li> <li>• Return to school was seen as an opportunity to identify those who need support, such as if there is truancy.</li> <li>• It was noted that Hospital Education has smaller classes and a higher student to staff ratio, and extra support being available with stronger links with families than main stream.</li> <li>• Live virtual lessons went ahead in some settings.</li> <li>• There needed to be support for young people to support their peers – requiring clear messaging: <i>“what to do if a friend tells you something in confidence.”</i></li> </ul> <div data-bbox="1525 544 2063 943" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin-top: 20px;"> <p><i>“Outdoor learning can be restorative, and can address mental health needs. In Orkney GPs prescribe outdoor activity to boost mental health. Using outdoor spaces can also help meet distancing requirements. Weather doesn’t need to be a barrier”.</i></p> <p>Fiona Carnie, Educationalist</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1525 1015 2063 1267" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin-top: 20px;"> <p><i>“Clear messaging to peers is important – one of the best ways to identify support and safeguarding need”.</i></p> <p>Dr. Carlene Firmin, Social Researcher</p> </div>

Communication and messaging

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ISSUES	REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES
<p><b>Clarity of guidance; types of messaging; and perceptions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally, guidance highlighted vulnerabilities for those who had social workers, so people prioritised those - others may have been left behind.</li> <li>• Families were worried about being in breach of lockdown if they reported missing children.</li> <li>• Information and guidance for young people wasn't clear enough.</li> <li>• Young people found it difficult to access appropriate information.</li> <li>• Messages about Covid-19 were frightening for some children.</li> <li>• Young people at risk of exploitation have been perceived as causing harm.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was reported that some young people were unaware of available support – there was a need better communication.</li> <li>• A need for clear messaging for all parents whose children are missing during a lockdown – including the need to contact social services. Strong message required, including <i>'we can support parents support their children'</i></li> <li>• It was highlighted that there was a need for positive messaging about youth services, including cementing the idea that youth workers are a critical service, being a trusted point of contact and engagement for young people and their families.</li> <li>• Participants advised that there was a need for child friendly advice and guidance.</li> <li>• Training and clear messaging required about extra-familial harm and contextual safeguarding, building on the innovative work the Council has undertaken with Dr Firmin.</li> <li>• There had been positive and innovative responses to the need for virtual communications, including extra training and information for professional practitioners and members of the public as a result of expanding the online usage, including <a href="#">Association of Child Protection Professionals' podcasts</a>.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="1503 491 2063 778" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>"The pandemic has brought this into focus - locally there is not enough clarity over the availability of support for young people".</i></p> <p>Anthony Hill, Service Manager, HYPE Barnardo's</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1592 850 2063 1246" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>"The effect of lockdown with the associated messages has left some children and young people feeling like a burden as there is so much going on in society".</i></p> <p>Rob Farrow, Head of Service (Young People), Learning Partnership West</p> </div>

Service provision and joint working

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ISSUES	REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES
<p><b>Equitable access to services; information sharing, commissioned services, and partnerships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not known how many children, young people and families have not been able to access appropriate services.</li> <li>• Safeguarding and confidentiality concerns with online services, not knowing who else could be in the room with the young person.</li> <li>• Myths about what professionals could do during lockdown.</li> <li>• Some misunderstanding of youth worker’s rights and responsibilities during lockdown created a gap in provision.</li> <li>• Funding mechanisms were described as complicated - “Currently a jigsaw”.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council’s Children and Families services continued to work through lockdown and children still had face to face visits from Social Workers and other practitioners on a risk assessed basis.</li> <li>• It was noted that some children who weren’t connected to Social Workers (who may have become vulnerable due to effects of Covid-19) would not necessarily have received all available support.</li> <li>• Sharing more information with Police meant detached workers could identify hotspot areas and contact young people.</li> <li>• Access to statutory services are mainly 9-5 – this could prevent or delay support; services should be more balanced with community work, meaning a need for infrastructure outside usual office hours.</li> <li>• Most provision went online; access to IT devices, although there was some distribution, was not available for all.</li> <li>• Face to face provision for vulnerable children and young people should be maintained as much as possible.</li> <li>• Information had been shared more openly across the youth sector with statutory organisations.</li> <li>• Age range of the Council’s current youth services commissioning was discussed, that it could include over 18’s.</li> <li>• The city already had strong relationships and partnerships, with the Council’s Children’s and Education services being a key part. Covid-19 had shown that this needs to be built on and utilised even more.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="1527 805 2063 1161" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin-top: 20px;"> <p><i>“Online support usually only works if there is already a relationship between the young person and the youth worker – it’s difficult to start relationships over a computer”.</i></p> <p>Molly Flitcroft, Member of UK Youth Parliament and Bristol Youth Council</p> </div>

Equality and inclusion

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ISSUES	REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES
<p><b>Structural inequalities; Perceptions and assumptions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Groups of children and young people have been disproportionately affected by lockdown, specifically low income and Gypsy Roma Traveller backgrounds.</li> <li>Assumptions and perceptions about young people involved in street conflict, serious violence and/or drug related offending were raised as barriers to support and safeguarding.</li> <li>Stigma and perceptions surrounding mental health and also lack of cultural competent mental health services prevent young people accessing appropriate support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The digital divide had been highlighted by Covid-19; equality of access to digital connectivity was raised as a priority.</li> <li>Focus was required on young people with additional needs; and young carers who maybe caring for someone still shielding.</li> <li>Culturally competent service provision to support complex needs of young people from diverse backgrounds was raised as essential. The Council’s Safer Options and Children &amp; Young People’s services have a partner approach based on cultural competent practice led by young people, informed by communities. This positive approach should be built upon with more coproduction with community organisations.</li> <li>A focus was needed on Gypsy Roma Traveller young people and children from disadvantaged backgrounds in general, ensuring they received essentials such as food parcels. Social prescribing services were highlighted as valuable for supporting and signposting young people and families.</li> <li>Positive messaging and communication about mental health is helpful for young people.</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="1563 405 2022 756" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>“There was some success in getting IT equipment to young people during lockdown, this brought into focus a need to fully recognise and act on digital poverty”.</i></p> <p>Jack Beech, Chief Operating Officer, Creative Youth Network</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1370 842 2022 1264" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><i>“Lots of organisations refer to young Black people as offenders, and that narrative makes it really hard for those young people to be supported as victims of exploitation. We need to think about those organisations who already have close relationships in BAME communities and how they can be utilised and co-production can take place”.</i></p> <p>Maya Mate-Kole Golden Key/ The Call In; Commissioner, Commission on Race Equality</p> </div>

## Summing up

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### Understanding immediate risks and harms associated with a lockdown

With less ability for professionals and youth workers to make face to face contact visits, the Working Group heard evidence about hidden harm. Some children and young people were not able to disclose to trusted professionals who would usually be in a position to make referrals to the Council, and so there were less opportunities to safeguard and reduce risk. The Council acted quickly and appropriately, undertaking risk assessments and prioritising face to face contacts with the most vulnerable families. Those children open to Social Workers still received face to face visits which mitigated the risk of hidden harm. The Council, with partners, acted speedily to focus on school attendance where centralised reporting mechanisms didn't hit the mark. Members heard that the Designated Safeguarding Leads Network was well utilised and is a positive and invaluable resource.

Poor school attendance during lockdown for the eligible cohort of children was a concern, especially as the vast proportion were the most vulnerable in the city. Members heard that fear of Covid-19 and communication to stay at home was a strong factor over-riding the messaging that the option of school was a good one.

Members were advised that risks of intra-familial harm were likely to have been exacerbated by lockdown – this, together with less availability of safe spaces, with the extra pressure and stress young people and families were under, meant the issue of hidden harm extended to children and young people the Council and services were not aware of – those who would not have previously considered themselves vulnerable came to be so. Evidence was heard that it was unclear for this cohort how to access support. More than that, some children and young people felt burdened with a sense of responsibility about the issues of wider society which meant feeling as though they wouldn't meet any criteria for support anyway.

Whilst safe spaces for young people diminished due to closures and lockdown, Members heard that this did not mean all young people retreated to the home and so all outside spaces were less problematic. This perception may have led to missed opportunities to safeguard young people who for different reasons needed to be in different environments. These perceptions extended to determining the support available for different cohorts, including the perception of whether young people are victims or perpetrators when involved in drugs and street conflict. Members heard that arrests of young people increased during this period and drove activities underground making it more difficult to identify those vulnerable young people at risk of criminal exploitation.

Another issue regarding identifying those needing support during lockdown which brought structural inequalities into focus was that of access to online activities and contacts. Members heard that schools knew who the students were who were unable to access digital platforms and worked hard to provide resources and learning packs, and also that there was a mass-distribution of devices with connectivity which involved close sophisticated

*“Connectivity is something we really do need to crack across the city”.*

Alison Hurley, Director of Education & Skills



joined up working across youth networks, the Hope Virtual School and the Council. But, Members heard there are still gaps across the city where families are unable to connect virtually.

Members heard evidence that the extra tensions and stresses associated with lockdown led to some young people leaving the family home and, in some areas, foster placements breaking down, although this was not the experience in Bristol. Despite the scarcity of foster placements being exacerbated by Covid-19 in some areas, Bristol saw a significant rise in people applying to be foster carers, and with that an actual increase of 20 carers. Evidence was heard that the Council responded by using the amendments in the Children's Act needed to speed up assessment and approval of foster carers which Members agreed was the appropriate thing to do and commended officers and Bristol's foster carers who all stepped up to ensure looked after children were kept safe. Placement stability plans were cited as good practice, linked to family work providing extra emotional and practical support to families.

### **Understanding risks and harms as we plan to move away from lockdown restrictions**

Enabling and building relationships was a thread running through the evidence heard about young people in the community; and increased youth worker presence across communities was cited as beneficial to children and young people's well-being and sense of safety. Members heard, therefore, that where possible extra face to face contact should be prioritised and resourced; and also good communication and education to workers and communities about adolescence development would be beneficial to child welfare in communities.

Members heard evidence of the benefits of increased detached youth work during this period; it was described as "the most successful way of understanding how young people are coping." Evidence was heard that good relationships can be built through detached work, at which point valuable intelligence could be gathered to help identify those in need of support; and more successful referrals to appropriate services could be made.

*"Detached youth work needs to remain a key part of any service offer in the future".*

Rob Farrow, Head of Service (Young People), Learning Partnership West

Evidence was heard that the Council, in collaboration with Police and Youth networks, follows a contextual safeguarding approach to identify and support young people, and that it was an important focus coming out of lockdown. Members heard that during the lockdown period Safer Options, the Council's programme that supports young people at risk of criminal exploitation in partnership with youth organisations and community safety partners including the Police, had an increase in referrals, and continued to have a positive impact as lockdown restrictions relaxed. Safer Options was noted as a positive culturally competent partnership which should be developed further.

There was evidence provided of positive stories of young people helping each other and neighbours, including helping out at foodbanks; although there was also troubling evidence of some children struggling though poverty and mental health issues.

As the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the stresses and strains of family life, especially with the worries and restrictions associated with it, Covid-19 has also shone a light on mental health. Evidence was provided of Covid-anxiety among children (including deep concerns about how children can effectively social distance when on buses and at school, and, relating to this, a fear of transmitting the virus to vulnerable family members) - this affecting mental health and could be a factor in school attendance as they re-open. Members heard evidence of the renewed focus on mental health and wellbeing during lockdown being maintained and placed fully within the remit of safeguarding concerns. There was advice that there should be an expectation of increased demand for children and young people's mental health services as schools reopen.

*"The Designated Safeguarding Lead Network has been invaluable; I think having that post in a mainstream school with somebody with that responsibility is fantastic. Having that DSL Network is useful all the time, during lockdown it was essential".*

Jim Bowyer, Head Bristol Hospital Education Services

Members were told that the reasons underlying the risk of low school attendance as they reopen extends to some parents feeling frightened about sending children back to school. Evidence was provided that concerns of parents and professionals about accommodating pupils safely could be addressed by outdoor learning, which was described as restorative – with weather not needing to be a barrier.

As schools reopen, this time was highlighted as an opportunity to identify those who need support, such as if there is truancy. Members heard that Hospital Education has smaller classes and a higher student to staff ratio, and extra support is available; and that there are also stronger links with families than in main stream.

*"There have been much better conversations around multiagency working, hosted by the Council, with school nurses; and also with mental health services".*

Kate Gough, Head of Bristol Youth Services, Creative Youth Network

Finally, Members heard that some children and young people may not disclose concerns to a teacher due to lack of reassurance that they will be treated in confidence; and so clear messaging was needed to help young people support their peers, Dr Carlene Firmin describing this as "one of the best ways to identify support and safeguarding need".

*"We need to explore technological benefits - the way we engage with young people will change and should change, we need to ensure anything we do is co-produced with those children, young people and their families to make change effective and meaningful to communities in Bristol".*

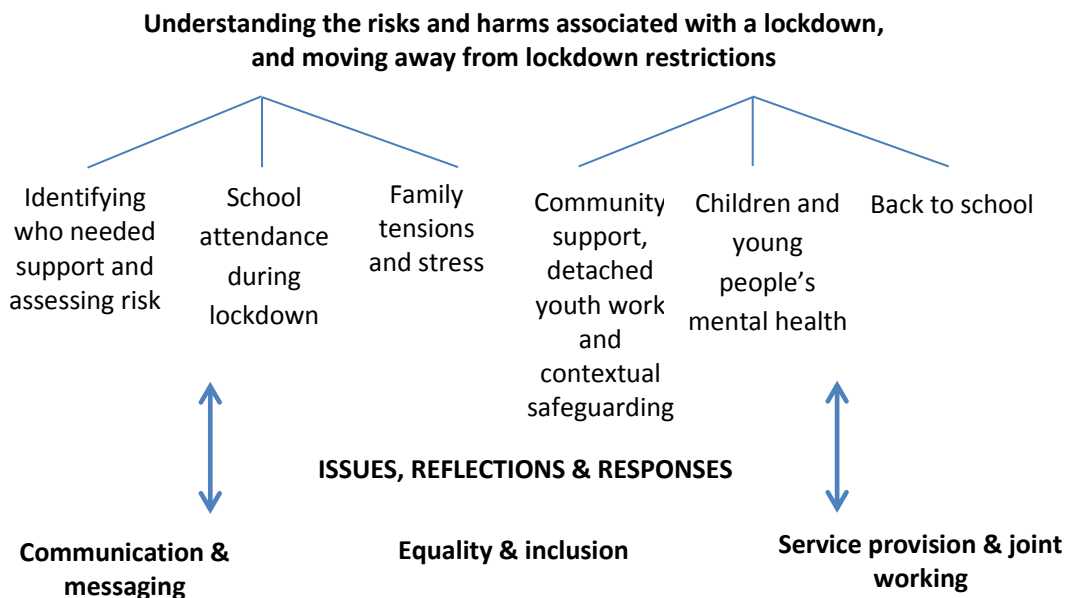
Victoria Caple, Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit Partnership Manager, Avon & Somerset Police

**Recognising the relationships and interconnectivity across organisations, partnerships and people**

The Working Group has taken a holistic approach to the evidence, recognising the relationships and interconnectivity across organisations, partnerships and people involved in safeguarding children and young people.

This approach provides an insight into the need to understand the underlying arrangements, structures and views we generally don't see which lead to negative outcomes that we react to and need to manage on a daily basis.

The evidence presented to Members has highlighted the key themes of (i) Communications and messaging; (ii) Service provision and joint working arrangements; (iii) Equality and inclusion. They influence reflections and responses (positive and negative) relating to all 6 areas detailed in the findings.



*“The lockdown period reinforced the protective benefits of a universal health visiting and service”.*

Gerry bates, Head of Children’s Services, Sirona Care & Health

*“Due to lack of capacity in many areas during this period, it was important to pull together expertise and share best practice to tackle complex issues that practitioners were raising”.*

Wendy Thorogood, Chair, Association of Child Protection Practitioners

## Communications and messaging; Service provision & joint working; Equality & inclusion

The findings show that the way guidance and communication is presented informs people's responses. For example, Members heard how families delayed reporting missing children as they were worried about breaching lockdown rules; and messaging about Covid-19, so as to be strong, came across as frightening for some children, causing anxiety and in some cases a feeling of being a burden due to the focus on crisis in society.

Participants called for clear and 'child-friendly' messaging and clarity surrounding where and how support can be accessed, and who it is for. Evidence was heard how there were myths and misunderstandings about what practitioners would and could do; and it was highlighted that reinforcing the importance of youth workers to the system would help with much needed information sharing, and afford confidence leading to trust and stronger relationships with young people and their families.

Training and clear messaging around extra-familial harm and contextual safeguarding, including challenging perceptions of young people who are criminally exploited was also called for.

*"Our approach should be how do we ensure a person-centred psychologically informed approach required to overcome challenges associated with perceptions of, for example, a young person as offender rather than exploited and at risk of harm".*

Maya Mate-Kole Golden Key/ The Call In;  
Commissioner, Commission on Race Equality

Evidence was heard that partnership working, although well-established across the city, improved in some areas, including closer working relationships and communications across agencies (for example between schools and Social Workers); and Covid-19 has shown how important collaboration and intelligence sharing across the system is.

The collaboration that led to distribution of laptops with connectivity was an example of the 'art of the possible', although Members heard that virtual working practice requires consideration around confidentiality and safety and, despite the successful distribution to many families, the continuing digital divide means there is work to do to ensure fair and equitable access for all.

*"Better connections across partnerships have developed with short focused meetings, and, in terms of success and learning, it is those very quick concentrated sharing of ideas and experiences that people have found very helpful to understand the challenges in other bits of the system".*

Ivan Powell, Independent Chair, Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership

Members heard that the funding mechanisms for commissioned services were over-complicated, described as a 'jigsaw puzzle', and there was a discussion as to whether the age range for commissioned youth services should be raised.

Members heard how the pandemic had shone a light on structural inequalities across society, which all make the task of keeping children and young people safe more difficult, and so a focus on bias, cultural competency, economic disadvantage and health inequalities was called for.

## Recommendations

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The People Scrutiny Working Group recommends that;

1. The Council has an excellent record of working with partners and experts to tap into and share best practice and develop innovation, including the contextual safeguarding work with Dr Firmin. The Council should continue to ensure the rich resource and knowledge across the sector for training and support is utilised; including being informed by expertise and insight of local youth organisations and engage with national support and advice, including from the Association of Child Protection Professionals.
2. The extra pressure on the Children's Services and Education and Skills Directorates since March has been highlighted, and the Council should consider ways to offer extra support for the work force. This is noted within the context of welcoming the growing satisfaction with support and leadership in the survey of children's professionals and practitioners, which should be acknowledged and built on to ensure each member of staff, from operational practitioners to senior leaders, feel able to manage the expected increase in demand for support as children return to school with continued uncertainty.
3. The positive increase in networking and close partnerships facilitating big changes quickly and efficiently should be captured and built upon; and networks such as the Designated Safeguarding Leads Network, brought together and supported by the Education and Skills directorate, should be encouraged, developed and incorporated into collaborative plans to help utilise expertise and build capacity and resilience.
4. The Council, in consultation with partners and communities, should investigate how to produce clear child-friendly advice and guidance about keeping safe and well during lockdown restrictions with a focus on mental health. It could explain the effects of Covid-19, how people may be affected and react, what support is available, and how to access that support. Any guidance should be adaptable and reactive to a fast changing environment, and be available for all school settings, youth networks, and community groups.
5. The Council, with city partners, should explore more ways to support parents, carers and families cope with the extra stress and strains Covid-19 has, and continues to, put them through. This may include family and household guidance in the form of tips, advice and coping strategies to help prevent and diffuse stressful circumstances escalating into unmanageable and harmful situations.
6. It is welcomed that the Council has continued to commission detached youth work across the city. This should continue and be built on as a priority; and its value should continue to be considered by the Council when planning for future commissioned services.
7. The positive role of volunteers and mutual aid groups during this period should be learnt from and the Council should explore further ways of supporting them. Social Prescribing within community settings should be encouraged and further developed,

helping to provide much needed local information and signposting for families and young people.

8. The Council should work with city partners to place a greater focus on tackling the digital divide, and explore options that would enable every household and child to have equitable access to the internet.
  9. The Council, building on the existing positive work including #wearebristolkids and the developing 'Belonging' strategy by the Youth Council, should continue to explore how services to help children and young people stay safe and foster well-being could be more accessible. This could include building on the existing community outreach by inviting more co-design of provision, increasing cultural competency with stronger involvement of grass roots community organisations and with focussed training, investigating how Council services could be accessed in different ways and at different times, and listening to and learning from children's and young people's voices.
  10. This report should be considered by the Executive and the senior leadership team, and that all findings should be taken into account when planning to mitigate both the continuing negative effects of Covid-19 on children and young people, and the risks of pandemics causing similar issues in the future.
- 10a. This report should be considered at the appropriate partnership groups and boards (including but not restricted to the following):
- Health and Wellbeing Board
  - Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership (Keeping Children Safe)
  - Children and Families Programme Board
  - Learning City Partnership Board
  - Race Equality Covid-19 Steering Group
- 10b. The development of plans to keep children and young people safe within the context of the impact of Covid-19 and to build resilience for the future should be considered by the People Scrutiny Commission at the scheduled meeting on 14 December 2020, and there should be a review in the 2021-22 work programme.

Cllr Hiscott and all the Members of the People Scrutiny Working Group (listed below) would like to thank all those who submitted evidence and participated in the Evidence Sessions, sharing their knowledge and experience, which has helped provide valuable scrutiny.

Members noted the high level of commitment, flexibility and insight of the Council's leadership team and the whole workforce, as well as that of all city partners – especially the Youth organisations, schools, Bristol's exceptional community groups and volunteers, the Police with community safety partners, and of course, children and young people themselves who have needed to adapt and support each other during this time – and extends sincere thanks to them all.

People Scrutiny Working Group

Cllr Claire Hiscott (Chair)

Cllr Celia Phipps (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Eleanor Combley

Cllr Carole Johnson

Cllr Tim Kent

Cllr Gill Kirk

Cllr Cleo Lake

Cllr Brenda Massey

Cllr Ruth Pickersgill

Cllr Tim Rippington

Cllr Steve Smith