

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Young People's Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health

Contact for further information:

Dave Carr, Head of Service, Policy, Information and Commissioning, (Start Well), Lancashire County Council, Tel: 01772 532066, dave.carr@lancashire.gov.uk

Executive Summary

The evidence of impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health is still emerging. There are strong indications that the pandemic has had a negative impact on the emotional wellbeing and mental health of many children and young people in Lancashire, who have required extra help or may do so in future. Partners have made significant changes in arrangements to better support children and young people but there is much more to do. It is proposed that Partners in Lancashire continue to look forward to delivering the NHS Long Term Plan and wider strategy for children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health, maintaining and enhancing current provision, but in doing so addressing the expected significant longer term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

The Health and Wellbeing Board is recommended to:

- Note the emerging evidence of impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health.
- Note the system wide response to help mitigate the short term impact.
- Agree that the outcome of the redesign of NHS Funded Services will be reported to the Health and Wellbeing Board at a future date.
- Agree the continued need for a whole system approach across all partners.
- To commit to principles of:
 - Ensuring sufficient resource to meet demand.
 - Implementation of the NHS funded Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) service redesign.
 - Mental health support for children and young people embedded in schools and colleges, building on the learning from Mental Health Trailblazer Teams.
 - Meeting new national waiting time standards for all children and young people who need specialist mental health services.
 - Investing in early and appropriate interventions, to prevent escalation in to crisis
 - Greater focus on the longer term development of digital services.
 - Co-production with children and young people, including of primary age and those in more vulnerable groups, to help young people to shape services to meet their needs and to play an active role in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing.

Background

There has been a significant focus on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health. The evidence is still emerging, and it will be some time before we know the full extent of the impact on children and young people in Lancashire. However, a number of national and local studies provide some indication of the mental health challenges for children and young people and the impact on specific vulnerable groups.

This report provides:

- An overview of the emerging evidence of impact
- Details of some of the significant elements of Lancashire's local system response
- Plans for moving forward in the short term
- Recommendations to ensure a continued and improved system-wide response.

Emerging evidence of impact

Among the sources of evidence is a rapid review undertaken by the Anna Freud Foundation. The review highlighted that:

- The nature and duration of the pandemic and lockdown measures are having significant impacts on children and young people's mental health, contributing to the onset as well as exacerbation of worry, fear, anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress.
- There are significant mental health challenges for those who have been hospitalised with the coronavirus.
- While children and young people are finding the stay-at-home measures and lack of social interaction increasingly challenging as the pandemic continues, many are also enjoying time at home with their parents or carers and families.

Groups who were particularly vulnerable were identified as:

- Children with pre-existing mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions. The reconfiguration of services as a result of the pandemic means that many vulnerable children and young people with existing mental health conditions are struggling to maintain the level of support they had previously
- Children from minority ethnic groups who are more likely to experience poor health outcomes and, therefore, are more likely to experience mental health difficulties during the pandemic.
- Children impacted by social and economic factors such as poverty and separation from parents and carers.
- Children and young people from homes where there is domestic violence.

Further evidence is provided by the Co-SPACE project, undertaken by Oxford University. This project is tracking the mental health of school-aged children and young people aged 4-16 years throughout the COVID-19 crisis with 10,000 parent/carers and 1,000 adolescents involved to date. Whilst not a nationally representative sample, the survey found that over a one-month period in lockdown:

- Parents/carers of primary school age children taking part in the survey report an increase in their child's emotional, behavioural, and restless/attentional difficulties.

- Parents/carers of secondary school age children report a reduction in their child’s emotional difficulties, but an increase in restless/attentional behaviours.
- Adolescents taking part in the survey report no change in their own emotional or behavioural, and restless/attentional difficulties.
- Parents/carers of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and those with a pre-existing mental health difficulty report a reduction in their child’s emotional difficulties and no change in behavioural or restless/attentional difficulties.

The table below summarises the findings.

	Emotional difficulties	Behavioural difficulties	Restlessness & attention difficulties
Children (parent report)	Increased	Increased	Increased
Adolescents (parent report)	Decreased	No change	Increased
Adolescents (adolescent report)	No change	No change	No change
Children with SEN & mental health difficulties	Decreased	No change	No change

Within Lancashire, initial data from providers of emotional wellbeing and mental health services indicates that referrals generally fell during the first month of lockdown, but have subsequently risen during May and June 2020, to around or above normal levels. At the same time, the Kooth digital platform, aimed at providing online support for 10-18 year olds, saw a 34% increase in demand nationally and access has increased by 50% in Lancashire, alongside expansion of the platform to include 10 year olds to support transition to secondary school.

It is clear that more young people have sought support during the lockdown period, and will continue do so as impact of COVID-19 continues to affect the way that young people live their lives. Equally, for those young people who have found it easier spending more time away from their school environment, the prospect of coming back may be challenging.

The Local System Response during COVID-19

Since the start of lockdown, many services providing support to children and young people have continued to operate:

- The Lancashire Emotional Health in Schools Support Service, which offers training and support for the school and college workforce, has reshaped the service offer to deliver more online and telephony based services.
- The voluntary sector Emotional Health and Wellbeing Partnership has continued to support children and families, with increased use of telephone and video.
- Primary Mental Health Workers have continued to support professionals to identify and meet needs, working across agencies.

- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have remained open, with face to face contacts where needed, but also making increased use of technology to work with children and young people.

As well as increased use of video and telephony to replace or supplement face to face contact where appropriate, there have been some significant changes to help mitigate the current and potential impacts on children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health:

- The Lancashire and South Cumbria Healthy Young Minds Website has been expanded to include COVID-19 specific resources alongside the planned launch of information, advice and resources to support children, young people, parents/carers and professionals identify and manage emotional wellbeing and mental health issues. Access to the site peaked in April 2020 with over 1,700 page views.
- School Improvement Teams, working with schools partners, have developed guidance to promote positive emotional wellbeing and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and in planning for schools to re-open.
- A *Team Around the School* approach is helping to identify those children and young people who may be particularly vulnerable, and in need of additional help.
- The Kooth online digital platform is now providing all young people aged 10-18 in Lancashire with free access to online support and counselling.
- Self-referrals by children and young people to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) across Lancashire and South Cumbria will be implemented in July 2020, initially through the Mental Health Crisis line.
- The Mental Health Crisis Line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and staffed by trained mental health professionals who are able to provide assessment and referrals to appropriate services.
- A new "Safe Space" pathway ensures that children and young people presenting out of hours at Accident and Emergency Departments are not placed in a paediatric bed inappropriately.
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) 0-19 service provision, to address the issue of older adolescents who have previously had to access adult services, has commenced on a phased basis. Blackpool Teaching Hospitals Trust achieved full implementation in early April 2020, Lancashire and South Cumbria Foundation Trust from end of June 2020 and East Lancashire Hospitals Trust commenced a phased implementation on 1 April 2020 with full implementation by 1 September 2020.
- Real time surveillance data has been used as part of the approach to suicide prevention, with an intelligence led approach to communications using social media, and through partner agencies, targeted on high risk locations. Data has also helped identify clusters/groups to target more specific interventions and ensure wider networks get the support they need.
- The Children's Safeguarding Assurance Partnership has included a focus on children and young people's mental health and has key role in providing assurance moving forward.

Plans moving forward

The Children and Young People's Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Transformation Plan for Lancashire (2015-2020) was first published in January 2016. That document set out the initial iteration of a five-year plan for Lancashire, to support local implementation of the national ambition and principles as set out in 'Future in Mind – promoting, protecting and improving our children and young people's mental health and wellbeing' (2015).

The Plan's continued aim is to improve the resilience, emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people, especially those who are at increased risk due to their vulnerability, such as those within and on the 'edge of care', making it easier for them and their families to access help and support when they need it whilst improving the standard of mental health services across Lancashire and now, South Cumbria.

From April 2020 through to March 2021 is the final year of this Transformation Plan, and there remain some key deliverables including the final stages of evaluation and subsequent implementation of the redesign of NHS funded Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Whilst some elements of the redesign have been brought forward as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, completion of the final design, evaluation and further consideration of overall affordability of the proposed model have been delayed.

It is proposed that we will continue to look forward to delivering the NHS Long Term Plan and wider strategy for children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health, maintaining and enhancing current provision, but in doing so addressing the expected significant longer term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key aspects of future plans are expected to include:

- Implementation of the NHS funded Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) redesign.
- Mental health support for children and young people embedded in schools and colleges, building on the learning from Mental Health Trailblazer Teams working in Morecambe Bay and the recent successful bid for funding to establish Trailblazer Teams in East Lancashire.
- Investing in early and appropriate interventions, to prevent escalation in to crisis, and helping to avoid scenarios where specialist skills and resources cannot meet demand.
- New national waiting time standards for all children and young people who need specialist mental health services.
- Greater focus on the longer term development of digital services alongside face to face delivery.
- Co-production with children and young people, including of primary age and those in more vulnerable groups, to help young people to shape services to meet their needs, and to play an active role in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing.

There were challenges in securing appropriate funding to fully meet demand, discussed previously by the Health and Wellbeing Board, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 is likely to make those challenges more acute.

Ensuring that children, young people, parents, carers and professionals can receive appropriate and timely support will require a continued whole system response, across all Partners. Whilst there are areas of individual expertise and distinct roles, as a system we should look to increasingly pool our collective resources so that children and young people can access the help they need in a timely manner, whether that is to build and maintain resilience, to receive some low level support, access crisis services, or receive longer term specialist interventions. Across the system, partners need to ensure that there are sufficient resources to meet demand.

List of background papers

Anna Freud Foundation: Emerging Evidence Children and Young People's Mental Health
<https://www.annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/our-research/>

Co-Space Study: Changes in children and young people's emotional and behavioural difficulties through lockdown <https://emergingminds.org.uk/co-space-study-4th-update/>

Lancashire and South Cumbria Transformation Plan (2019 Refresh)
<https://www.healthyyoungmindslsc.co.uk/publications>