

## **Briefing paper from Paul Secker**

### **Introduction**

This briefing has two key strands for the Scrutiny Committee to consider

The first part of this report focuses upon the critical issues in respect of the Essex Children and Families Service supporting children, young people and families throughout the period from March 2020 /the lockdown due to Covid 19 and what we have done to address these issues, which are of course ongoing.

The second part of the report gives the background to the significant changes in respect of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements across Essex introduced in September 2019, and describes the Essex position in September 2020, one year on.

### **Essex Children and Families principles, priorities and practice during the period from March 2020 to September 2020**

#### **Principles**

We have tried to adhere to the following principles during this period, in keeping with the key guidance from the Department of Education. These principles have included:

- Keeping the child at the centre of all that we do, and ensuring that our decision-making is always child-centred
- That our practice is always risk -assessed, and that we prioritise support and resources for children who are at most risk
- That we are family focused, harnessing the strengths in families and their communities
- That our practice is evidence based, ensuring decisions are proportionate and justified
- Collaborative working, in partnership with parents and with other professionals
- That those children and young people facing the highest risks are visited most frequently

#### **Our Priorities**

We have been very clear that our priority has been to make sure that our high-risk children and young people are as safe and well as they can be.

This has meant keeping in touch with our most vulnerable children and young people – in essence these are children on Child Protection Plans , on Child in Need Plans

where we know there are degrees of significant harm , Children in Care , Care Leavers , and children with disabilities / special educational needs.

The assessments of these vulnerable children, and the supports we could offer them, have been really important

We have understandably been very concerned about children who have in effect been “hidden” during this time, in other words out of sight of professionals and their agencies. These include children at increased risk of experiencing neglect, domestic abuse and sexual abuse; many of these children have not been seen by schools, health visitors, Accident and Emergency, family GPs, youth clubs etc

I think we accept that these are unprecedented times, and that no-one has had all the answers in respect of addressing these issues.

### **Social Work Practice**

We had to rethink our practice, in order to adapt to the changing situation within lockdown and then the easing of restrictions

We had both early and then subsequently regular discussions about how we could visit vulnerable children and young people, what might these visits look like, how we could use digital technology to keep in contact with children and their parents/ carers, how we might hold Child Protection Conferences , how we could hold child-care reviews etc .

Initially we were very concerned about the scale of the Covid 19 pandemic and the impact this would have on families ; we were very concerned about parents becoming ill with the virus or indeed dying ; we became concerned about young people going out in the community and not adhering to social distancing etc. We anticipated the likely pressure points, for example significant increases in requests for children to be taken into care, the availability of foster-carers, the possibility of whole teams having to self-isolate etc

We recognised the challenges of trying to undertake meaningful, fair and balanced parenting assessments during lockdown in relation to children considered to be at risk of significant harm.

More recently, with children returning to schools and with the easing of restrictions, we have been planning for the expected surge / spike in referrals, especially of children at risk of significant harm.

The Department of Education did propose some flexibilities in delivering reviews, especially in respect of timescales, though Essex took the decision that we did not need to apply such flexibilities.

Throughout the past six months , we have prioritised having contact with our most vulnerable children , we have continued to have Children and Families Social Workers coming into our Quadrant Offices , we have continued to hold Child Protection Conferences and Child Care reviews within timescales, and we have been encouraging vulnerable children to be going back into schools

Our Children and Families staff have shown real commitment and creativity in trying to ensure our children and young people have been seen supported and safeguarded during this time

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Overall , there was initially a very understandable drop in the level of referrals to the Children and Families Hub - whilst referrals from the Police and Health agencies were relatively consistent with the pre-lockdown period, the referrals from education dropped substantially when most children were not in school - however since the return of children to schools in September , the referral rates are back to at least normal levels both in total and from schools

We have not been able to be clear, as we would want to be, about the full impact of Covid 19 on children and young people; we expect this will become a little clearer as time goes on

We continue to be very concerned , as stated earlier , about those children in essence hidden over the past 5/6 months – including those vulnerable children not going to school , mental health issues ( both for young people themselves and for parents), the stresses on families staying at home , those affected by unemployment and poverty etc.

To give the Committee comparable statistics, there are currently 661 children on Child Protection Plans in September 2020 and this compares to 580 in May 2020; the numbers of children in care in Essex in September 2020 is 1107, and this compares to 1077 in September 2019.

There have been three young people who have killed themselves in Essex this year , and for two of these Covid 19 appears to have been a factor ( less structure and routine in their lives, less connectivity with other young people through school and social activities ), though this figure is similar to the last two years . There have also

been two children who have experienced very serious chronic neglect, where they had not been seen during the Covid restrictions and where the Local Authority then needed to initiate Care Proceedings in respect of them.

The safeguarding of vulnerable children is always multi-faceted , and during the past six months , the issues of children who are home-educated , the vulnerability of children with disability and/ or special educational needs , those children/ young people who regularly go missing , those at risk of child exploitation , those groomed into County Lines , families with homelessness issues etc have all had a high profile.

We have also been focusing on the impact of our decision-making in relation to the BAME communities – particularly in relation to the proportions of BAME children and young people excluded from school , those involved in the Youth Justice System , the numbers of children in care and the number on Child Protection Plans .

But before moving on to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements, one of the most positive stories during this time involves a two-year old child in our care and her foster-carer. This child had experienced repeated seizures, was transferred to Addenbrookes Hospital, and was an in-patient there for eight weeks. We were very concerned for a period as to whether this child would survive (which thankfully they have). We would want to pay tribute to the foster-carer who stayed with the child in Hospital for the full eight weeks, without leaving the hospital once and not having contact with her own family members throughout that time.

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### **The Essex Multi -Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA)**

The new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements for protecting children were set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017, with guidance provided in the revised Working Together – published in August 2018.

These changes followed from Alan Wood's review into the role and functions of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs), and the part they played in protecting and safeguarding children. In essence, Wood concluded that LSCBs were not sufficiently effective, and Wood recommended that there needed to be action by government to reform the framework for Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA), and to improve learning from serious events affecting children.

The Wood report set out a new framework for improving the organisation and delivery of multi-agency arrangements to protect and safeguard children, re-casting the statutory framework underpinning LSCBs, Serious Case Reviews, and Child Death Overview Panels

We in Essex had little argument with Wood's comments about the effectiveness of LSCBs – it has always been a challenge to evidence the real impact of LSCBs , and

Wood's report found that there tended to be a clear relationship between the effectiveness of a LSCB and the quality of the Independent Chair.

The key proposals from the Wood Report were

- Replacement of LSCBs with a new more effective strategic framework that set out the strategic multi-agency arrangements for child protection
- This would have three Statutory Safeguarding Partners – Police, Health and the Local Authority, to share leadership and responsibilities for the multi-agency arrangements
- The Chief Officer within each agency would have responsibility and authority for ensuring full collaboration
- Encouraging local areas to determine how they organise themselves to improve outcomes for children
- No longer an Independent Chair with decision-making responsibilities
- Introducing the concept of "Independent Scrutiny"
- Moving the overall responsibility for the Child Death Overview Panel to the Department of Health

The Statutory Safeguarding Partners in Essex implemented these arrangements in September 2019.

### **The Essex Position- September 2020**

We are one year since the introduction of the new MASA in Essex in September 2019

I think there is a consensus that it is still relatively early days in respect of the new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements , and of course since March there has been the understandable focus on Covid 19 and its impact on children and families, on individual agency responses and upon our multi-agency practice

Essex retained the name of Essex Safeguarding Children Board as it was considered to be easily recognisable both to partners and externally, but we have a different structure now and no longer have an Independent Chair with decision-making responsibilities. We appointed a new Chair/Facilitator, David Archibald, to the new revised role and he is a very experienced Chair of LSCBs and was previously a Director of Children's Services.

The Statutory Safeguarding Partners have met regularly throughout the last year - four meetings of the Statutory Safeguarding Partners themselves and four ESCB Executive meetings

In addition we have had frequent meetings, initially weekly, now fortnightly of the Statutory Safeguarding Partners across Southend, Essex and Thurrock during the Covid 19 period.

It was always our intention to review the MASA across Essex at this time, one year on. Each Statutory Safeguarding Partner has been asked to consider how well the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements are working, their impact on practice, how well the Statutory Partners have been working together with equal responsibility and what have been our strengths and what have been the challenges . The Essex Child and Families perspective is described below.

### **Essex Children and Families perspective**

We think we are still adapting to what “equal Statutory Safeguarding Partners” really means

Many practitioners both within Social Care and within partner agencies still consider that the Local Authority/ Children and Families is the lead agency for safeguarding children and young people

This is not surprising – Local Authorities have been the lead agency for child protection/ safeguarding since 1970 -we have clear and specific duties from the Children Acts in relation to Children in Need , Children at risk of significant harm etc ...and Working Together 2018 still describes the DCS and the Lead Member as the key points of professional and political accountability with responsibility for the effective delivery of these functions

Working Together 2018 does though emphasise that these duties can only be discharged with the full co-operation of other partners and the Children and Social Work Act 2017 strengthens these relationships by placing new duties on the Police and Health “ to make arrangements to work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children “

So the Statutory Partners have the duty to make the arrangements work, but key specific safeguarding responsibilities are still in effect with the Local Authority.

These Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements will understandably take time to fully develop.

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### **Strengths of the new MASA in Essex**

In addition to the Essex Statutory Safeguarding Partners meetings, the Southend, Essex and Southend Statutory Partners Meetings during Covid 19 have been very helpful – enabling effective partnerships to develop, and they have provided short-cuts in respect of issues that needed problem-solving, including:

- Ensuring SEND children can attend local specialist schools during lockdown
- Children/ young people not attending Accident and Emergency

- Re-running the Safer Sleeping Campaign and Accidents in the Home Campaign
- Sharing of information weekly re all child deaths across SET
- Concealed pregnancies
- Weekly updates re Essex Police activity involving children and young people

**The strengths within our own MASA have included:**

- Have enabled a better understanding of the challenges and priorities of each partner agency, and how partner agencies have been responding to Covid 19
- Have enabled stronger working relationships to develop between partners
- Have been able to focus on recovery and what this is likely to mean across the partnership – potential increases in demand / spikes / referrals in respect of domestic abuse, child sexual abuse, neglect - all hidden from agencies during Covid 19
- Have enabled us to discuss the significant increase in Child Safeguarding Practice Review referrals
- Ensured representation from each statutory safeguarding partner on each Stay Safe group
- Have enabled us to become increasingly aware of the homelessness issues, families being re-located from London, and implications for both services and the families themselves

**Challenges**

**There are understandably ongoing challenges within our MASA – these include:**

- We have not been able to be as clear, as we would want to be, about the impact of the new MASA upon children and families themselves.
- We have not resolved equal funding until 2022/2023
- The frequency of personnel changes, particularly Senior roles within Essex Police, has had an impact on cohesion/ continuity
- We have only had a limited Education perspective, as Education are not one of the named Statutory Safeguarding Partners
- There have been some ongoing tensions between Health and Social Care in respect of Child Death Review funding, Child Safeguarding Practice Review referrals, and overall expectations of Social Care
- Independent Scrutiny is still evolving – we have decided that our real scrutiny is from our children and young people, as well as from practitioners and families.

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