**COVID-19 Children’s Social Care – Guidance for Schools**

**Overview**

The government have published guidance around school provision for “vulnerable children” during the COVID-19 Outbreak. The [government guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people) defines a vulnerable child with a social worker to be:

*“children who have a child protection plan and those who are looked after by the local authority. A child may also be deemed to be vulnerable if they have been assessed as being in need or otherwise meet the definition in section 17 of the Children Act 1989”.*

The purpose of this document is to provide additional guidance to schools on how we will apply this guidance locally. This guidance considers our approach for the following children:

* Children currently subject to Child in Need Plans.
* Children currently subject to Child Protection Plans.
* Children in Care.

In addition to this we are providing some further guidance for schools at the end of this document relating to the ongoing assessment and approach towards:

* Children currently open to Early Help.
* Children not currently known to Early Help or Children’s Social Care.
* Planning for cases closures or step downs from CSC to Early Help.

**Assessment process to consider if a child should currently be in school**

Social workers have completed initial risk assessments of all children open to Children’s Social Care (CSC), and identified those children they have concerns about remaining at home during this period. CSC have now provided a list of children they have assessed as needing to be school at this time.

Individual schools should consider these list in the context of their own assessment of children in their schools. If CSC and school have a different view on the arrangements for a specific child there should be a discussion between the allocated social worker and school to consider the assessment and where possible agree the plan and ongoing arrangements. If the school cannot reach the social worker they should speak to the Senior Practitioner or Team Manager. A separate list of contact details for teams is being provided alongside this guidance.

In the event CSC and the school are unable to reach an agreement for a specific child, there should be escalation in the usual way. In the first instance there should be a discussion with the Team Manager and if agreement still can’t be reached a discussion should take place between the school and Service Manager.

**Children subject to Children in Need plans – assessed as lower risk**

Many children identified as children in need have been assessed as low risk if they remain at home at this time. Therefore it has been deemed appropriate for these children to remain at home. While it is reasonable for these children to remain at home at present, they will still need to be seen regularly by professionals.

The frequency of visits to these children should be agreed by the professional network. Visits to these children can be undertaken by CSC, school, or any other professionals currently involved with the family. A summary of the visit should be provide in writing to the allocated social worker.

Plans for these children will reviewed through virtual children in need meetings. If concerns about children increase or it is evident parents/carers are struggling to manage children at home, consideration should be given to these children being offered places in school during the week.

**Children subject to Children in Need plans – assessed as higher risk if they remain at home**

Where a child in need has been assessed to be at increased risk if they remain at home during the Covid 19 outbreak, they will be encouraged to attend school. Some parents will agree to send their children to school based on this assessment, however there will be some parent(s)/carer(s) that decide their child should remain at home at this time. In these circumstances CSC will update their assessment to consider the potential impact of that child remaining at home.

In these circumstances we will need to consider increasing visits to the family home and agree a plan with the professional network. This will include deciding who is best placed to undertake visits to the family home. Where possible/appropriate the school will support CSC with completing welfare visits to children in need in their homes. When a professional undertakes a welfare visit a summary of the visit should be provided in writing to the allocated social worker.

If concerns about a child in need’s welfare increases as a result of them not being in school, or we are concerned we are not getting to see a child, then consideration should be given to a strategy discussion taking place to consider what action should be taken next.

**Review of children subject to Children in Need plans.**

The assessment of all children subject to children in need plans will be kept under regular review. In the coming days and weeks, assessments are likely to change for some children, and concerns about some children will increase. Where a social worker or school update their assessments and concerns increase about a child, the professional network should reconsider the plan. If a child is not currently in school and concerns increase there should be consideration for that child to start attending school. The professional network should also consider if any further action should be considered.

**Children subject to Child Protection/Contextual Safeguarding Plans**

All children subject to child protection/contextual safeguarding plans are considered vulnerable, and should all be attending schools at this time (unless there are self – isolating). Where children are self-isolating due to Covid 19, an individual plan will need to be made for each child/family. There will need to be a plan that enables children to still be seen physically in the home, while minimising the risk to professionals visiting. A plan will be agreed on a case by case basis, and within the professional network

If a child subject to a child protection plan is not in school, in the first instance the school should contact the parent(s)/carer(s). They school should then inform the social worker of the absence. In the event the school are unable to contact the parent(s)/carer(s) the school should notify the allocated social worker immediately. If the school are unable to reach the allocated social worker by phone they should contact the MASH to advise them of the absence.

In certain circumstances arrangements will need to be made for a welfare visit to be undertaken to the family home. A decision will need to be made about who is best placed to undertake a welfare visit and where possible/appropriate schools will support CSC completing a welfare visit to gather further information about a child’s absence to inform the ongoing assessment.

If a professional undertakes a welfare visit to a child subject to a child protection plan a summary of the visit should be provide in writing to the allocated social worker.

**Parents who make a decision not to send a child subject to child protection/contextual safeguarding plans to school**

There will be some situations where despite this guidance parent(s)/carer(s) will make a decision their child should remain at home during the Covid- 19 outbreak. In these situations CSC will remind parent(s)/carer(s) of the government guidance that their child(ren) should be in school.

In the event parent(s)/carer(s) still make a decision to keep their children at home a clear plan will need to be agreed with the professional network to ensure these children are seen regularly. There should be a discussion with the professional network about who is best placed to undertake visits to the family home. When a member of staff from school undertakes a welfare visit a summary of the visit should be provide in writing to the allocated social worker.

We need to remain vigilant in our approach to these children, and they will require close monitoring and regular visits from CSC and school. There will also need to be additional reviewing of these children by the professional network through increasing the frequency of virtual Core Groups.

If concerns about a child’s welfare increases as a result of them not being in school, or we are concerned we are not getting to see a child at all, then consideration should be given to:

* A strategy discussion taking place to consider what action should be taken.
* The matter being taken to legal gateway.

**Children in Care**

Most children in care will be able to stay at home during this period, unless there are specific concerns identified from CSC, schools or carers. Most children who are in stable and/or permanent placements will be able to stay at home. If we have concerns regarding the stability of a child’s placement it is likely the child will be in school.

Most children who are on care orders or interim care orders at home with parents will be expected to attend school, as are other children in placements where there is identified risk. Decisions about these children will be based on the specialised risk assessments undertaken by CSC.

In the event a child in care (placed with parents) does not attending school, and the risk assessment recommends they should, a clear plan will need to be agreed with the professional network to ensure they are seen regularly. There should be a discussion with the professional network about who is best placed to under visits to the family home. When a member of staff from school undertakes a welfare visit a summary of the visit should be provide in writing to the allocated social worker.

If concerns about a child’s welfare increases as a result of them not being in school, or we are concerned we are not getting to see a child, then consideration should be given to:

* A strategy discussion taking place to consider what action should be taken.
* The matter being taken to legal gateway.

**Guidance for professionals on visits to children in their home**

Government guidance is clear that we should avoid all unnecessary contact at this time, this includes professionals contact with children and families. With this in mind it is crucial all professionals minimise direct contact with children and families in their home, and it essential all professional follow government guidance to minimise the risk of spreading Covid 19.

Physical visits to children and families should only take place if deemed necessary and as part of the current assessment. Where deemed safe and appropriate to do so other means of seeing children and families should be considered i.e. facetime, what’s app etc. The professional network involved with each family should agree key workers who visit the family bearing in mind the above guidance. This is to ensure the safety of children, families, and our staff.

**Additional Guidance in relation to:**

**Children currently open to Early Help**

Children currently being supported by Early Helpwill largely not attend school during this period, however if school have any specific concerns about children remaining at home and not attending school during this period, it is the school’s discretion to decide if children can attend school. Many schools are already making their own arrangements to undertake welfare visits to children and will continue to make the most appropriate decisions about children in their schools. These may well be children in your school who are causing you ‘concern’ but not open to any formal services.

If any school has concerns regarding a child open to Early Help in the first instance schools should discuss any concerns they have with Early Help. CSC and Early Help have established weekly step up/step down meeting and will consider any children where there are increasing concerns and may require a statutory social work service.

**Children not currently known to Early Help or Children’s Social Care.**

In the event a school has concerns about a child not currently known to either Early Help or CSC a referral can be made into the MASH in the usual way. If a school/professional has concerns about a child that relate specifically Covid 19, at this time CSC would encourage professionals to ring the MASH for a conversation about individual case before completing a MARS.

In recent days there have been an increase in contacts to the MASH regarding potential safeguarding concerns posed by children not adhering to government lockdown. These will need to be considered on a case by case basis, however, in most circumstances these are more likely to be considered as a public health issue rather than a safeguarding issue. Therefore CSC would welcome conversations with professionals about these situations in the first instance, as it will help avoid unnecessary referral being made.

The main principal is that if you are in doubt about a possible safeguarding concern, contact the MASH and have a conversation about any concerns you have.

**Review of guidance**

At the present time, things continue to evolve and change daily and in the coming days advice from central government may change again. We will continue to keep this guidance under regular review and consult closely with schools regarding these arrangements to ensure they continue to provide an effective and helpful response for children and families in Warrington.

**Date of this guidance**: 27th March 2020