

## **Summary for Members of the key findings from the research evaluating the response to COVID-19 by Early Years Services in Devon**

### **Background**

During March 2020, the UK went into lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic. A wide range of services in Devon needed to adapt at speed to continue to provide services to children and their families.

In Devon, there were many ways in which services were adapted. The research was undertaken to consider the approaches that were rolled out, the impact of those approaches, and the lessons we might take from the experience of these rapid changes.

The Devon services included were the Early Years Complex Needs Service, Public Health Nursing – specifically the Health Visiting service, and Children Centre Services.

Evaluation methods included a parent and staff online survey, case study interviews with parents, and depth interviews with practitioners. The findings are based on 400 responses to the parent survey, 168 responses to the staff survey, three case study interviews with parents, and 12 interviews with staff.

The evaluation will inform the Best Start in Life strategy for Devon and to provide timely and helpful information for commissioners, service leads, members and families across Devon.

### **Key Findings**

#### **How have Early Years Services responded to COVID-19?**

- Services have moved quickly to respond to the need for remote service delivery and made use of technology.
- Services took existing service delivery methods and interventions and adapted these so that they could be delivered through virtual and digital means.

#### **What has been the impact of the move to Virtual and Digital Services (VDS) on Early Years Services and children and families in Devon?**

- The pace of change has been challenging for staff.
- There was an increase in uptake of services by a number of groups including those living in rural areas, dads, working parents, and those with anxiety. Whilst many people were happy to access services remotely, another group of parents prefer face to face services. Remote services were noted as cost and time efficient to deliver.
- Staff found that digital technology improved communication and meeting attendance and led to better information sharing.
- Face to face contact was seen as essential in making assessments around safeguarding.

- Staff found the varying approaches taken across children and family services difficult, with different interpretations of the guidelines meaning some services were home visiting whilst others were not. This caused some tension and a feeling of vulnerability for some staff.
- VDS were viewed as more or less accessible depending on parental preferences and family context.
- The top reasons for delays in seeking help from services seemed to be driven by parent's understanding of the extent to which services were running. It would be prudent to consider whether communications around service availability are as good as they can be.
- The move to remote services empowered some parents but impacted on others to a greater extent leaving some feeling isolated and without the opportunities for support from social interaction for themselves and their baby/child(ren). This was noted as a specific challenge to new mums/parents, and to families managing children with additional needs/SEND.
- The impact on children's outcomes is unclear but may include child mental health difficulties, behaviour difficulties, social and emotional development, separation anxiety and speech and language development. Staff felt it would be important to monitor these areas going forwards.
- The home environment affects children's development and resilience. Some children may, through the course of the pandemic, find their home environment has changed significantly, and may be increasingly one where a range of 'new' issues face their caregiver(s).

## What can we learn from the Early Years Response to Covid 19 to inform future work?

- That VDS have a place in the delivery of Early Years Services, but careful consideration should be given to ensure that services are accessible to all in line with their preference for delivery as far as this is practicable.
- Consideration should be given to the continuing role of VDS and how we can maximise the advantages, whilst minimizing any disadvantages for service delivery.
- That judgments around safeguarding can be very challenging when working remotely and consideration needs to be given to how VDS can be used in a safeguarding context. Practitioners would like further opportunities to discuss this, and training on the use of technology specifically in managing risk and safeguarding.
- That there may be groups who have previously been seen as resilient who may be challenged by the recent pandemic events and have a greater need for service use going forwards. New mums and families with children with additional needs/SEND have found the past 12 months a difficult time.
- That VDS seem to work best where there is an established relationship with a family.
- That there may be a place for a 'mixed approach' for delivery of some services and alternating between face to face and remote contacts.
- That there is a benefit noted from working remotely and using technology such as Teams which can improve information sharing and links between staff.
- That there has been a gain for staff in work life balance from remote working which has in turn enabled flexibility in responding to service users. Some staff in contrast have found remote working very challenging.
- That wherever possible services working with families and children should attempt to dovetail and work towards consistent approaches and guidelines.

## Conclusion

Some families have thrived over the past 12 months and have benefited from the experience with increased attachment and time to support their child in their development. Conversely, many families have struggled, for example new parents and those with children with additional needs/SEND. Some families who may have in the past been considered resilient have been challenged by the circumstances of the

pandemic and now need greater support than before. Similarly, some staff have found remote working empowering and bringing a good work life balance, whilst others have found the physical distance from colleagues and reduced opportunities to discuss professional issues face to face challenging.

The pandemic has inevitably raised challenges for service delivery. However, it has also presented a chance to pause and reflect on what we've learned to date from such rapid change. There is a now an opportunity going forwards to shape service delivery, taking the best of the gains that face to face contact and virtual and digital delivery can bring, so that we can achieve the very best outcomes for children and families in Devon.