

WE ARE CARING.

WE ARE NEWHAM.



**How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected Children
in Care and Care Leavers?**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Children in Care, Care Leavers, Foster Carers and Children’s Social Services in Newham.

This report will reflect on the various periods of lockdown experienced by the UK and will make use of central government findings and research reports conducted across the voluntary and community sector and academic research to paint the national picture. It will also reflect on how, with COVID-19 restrictions lifting and the future still uncertain, Newham could better support and meet the needs of our Children in Care and Care Leavers in order for them to live a happy and safe life in the wake of a global pandemic.

The following report and subsequent series of recommendations has been constructed using feedback transcribed from one-to-one interviews with Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers, as well as multi-agency workshops with colleagues who provide support services for these cohorts in Newham – please find more detail on the research methodology used to inform this paper on page 10.

These recommendations have been laid out in line with the eight priority areas defined in **Newham’s Corporate Parenting Strategy** (2022) and can be found on page



19 of this document. These recommendations form a sub-section of the Corporate Parenting Strategy Action Plan which provides a quarterly highlight report to the Corporate Parenting Board.

In summary, Children in Care and Care Leavers experienced many of the same challenges brought by the pandemic as their peers who are not in or leaving care.

The UK’s three lockdown periods (timeline in Figure 1 on page 6) disproportionately affected the mental health of Children in Care and Care Leavers as a result of the following factors:

CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS WERE UNABLE TO SEE THEIR BIOLOGICAL FAMILY and



even sometimes siblings in person for significant periods of time. If they were able to have contact, it was over the phone or via video call.

THE TRANSITION TO VIRTUAL SUPPORT SERVICES TO SUPPORT AND SAFEGUARD THEM, as well as the increased



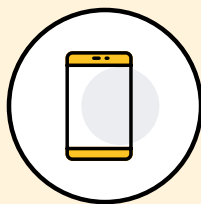
backlog of referrals for mental health support, made it extremely difficult for Children in Care and Care Leavers to access crucial support services face-to-face.

CARE LEAVERS OFTEN LIVE INDEPENDENTLY FROM A FAR YOUNGER



AGE than their peers. As a result, they were more likely to experience lockdown alone. This resulted in them having to navigate housing and financial difficulties, isolation and other challenges of lockdown without an in-person support system.

THE YOUNGEST CHILDREN IN CARE WHO WERE TOO YOUNG TO HAVE A PERSONAL MOBILE PHONE,



or access to social media accounts, struggled to keep in touch with friends during lockdown in a way that their older peers could.

CARE LEAVERS WHO EXPERIENCED ISSUES WITH THEIR ACCOMMODATION



saw increased delays organising housing repairs through their Housing Associations.

RESIDENTIAL HOMES WERE GRANTED INCREASED POWERS TO RESTRICT THE LIBERTY OF RESIDENTS



which included when they were allowed to leave the premises. This led to increased isolation amongst some of our Children in Care.

HOW HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTED CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS?



In addition, lockdown also disproportionately impacted those who care for this Children in Care and Care Leavers. Their Social Workers, Social Care staff and their foster families, reported struggling with their mental health, feelings of isolation, burn out and feelings of overwhelm.

These challenges are also reflected in children's support services, where colleagues reported many of the same negative consequences to their mental health.

The pandemic has had a significant effect on the rate of service improvement in Children's Social Care nationally. It is therefore crucial that Local Authorities as corporate parents, do not lose momentum when it comes to service improvement. Looking forwards, a significant cultural shift is required in order:

- For all colleagues in Newham Council to recognise and understand their Corporate Parenting responsibility;
- For services to continue to evolve and adapt to new and upcoming technologies;
- To refine practice and ways of working to promote efficiency savings;
- To 'flatten' the hierarchy of Children's Social Care settings to encourage open, transparent, honest, two-way conversations around service improvement to obtain feedback from those starting their careers in social care, all the way up to senior leaders;
- For all colleagues across services supporting Children in Care and Care Leavers to understand that service improvement is everyone's responsibility. Newham's journey to excellence will only be possible if every colleague pursues excellence within their own role, team and service.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that the following additional lines of enquiry be explored further. The following themes have not yet been fully dissected as part of this research report and have been identified as areas that are likely to have an impact of service delivery and service priorities over the next few years.

Additional lines of enquiry include:

- The impact of the pandemic on the experiences of unaccompanied asylum seekers settling in Newham;
- The longer-term impact of newly qualified social workers experiencing their placement year during a global pandemic;
- The impact of the relaxation of statutory adoption laws on the adoption process and the emotional wellbeing of young children being adopted;
- The physical health impacts of the pandemic that are yet to be fully realised, e.g. the backlog of dentistry and opticians appointments for NHS patients, the potential for increased obesity rates as a result of periods of lockdown, etc.
- A more in-depth study into the experiences of Children in Care and Care Leavers in residential homes, especially with respect to the changes in statutory Social Care laws affecting residential settings.
- The additional potential longer-term impacts of the pandemic that are yet to be fully realised.

For more detail on these lines of enquiry and possible hypotheses around the importance of these key themes in Newham, please go to the 'Impact' section of this report on page 23.



2. SCOPE

This report focuses on Children in Care and Care Leavers. The definitions listed below are based on definitions from Newham's Corporate Parenting Glossary (2022).

Children in Care and Care Leavers are an extremely diverse group of young people, united only by their care experience. Even though this cohort have this life experience in common, their lived experiences of being care are also extremely diverse. It is impossible to make assumptions about this cohort of children and young people who have all experienced having the Local Authority as their Corporate Parent, but who all bring with them a wide range of life experiences and family backgrounds. As a result, it is important that we do not generalise the life experiences of this cohort and assume that one child or young person's feedback is representative of the entire community in Newham.

As a result, it is important to note that the feedback, life experiences and recommendations proposed by and shared in this paper will not be the experience of every Child in Care, Care Leaver or Foster Carer.

Feedback from interviews has been anonymised and aggregated to ensure confidentiality for all participants involved. When a direct quote from one of the one-to-one interviews is referenced, it can be found highlighted in a standalone box. Direct quotes taken from one-to-one interviews should not be taken as a generalised experience of all Children in Care, Care Leavers, Foster Carers or Newham colleagues.

Screenshots of the anonymous feedback captures as part of workshops can be found in the Appendices at the end of this report.

Children in Care

'Children in Care' are children and young people between the ages of 0 and 17 who have the Local Authority as their Corporate Parent. This means they are living away from their biological parents and live in a residential home or in a foster home, sometimes with extended family or family friends where it is possible to do so. Please note that in Newham, we use the terminology 'Children in Care' as this is what our young people prefer, rather than Looked After Children (LAC) which has been historically used.

Care Leavers

The term 'Care Leavers' refers to a young person aged between 18-25 who has transitioned out of Children in Care services, but are still provided with support from the Leaving Care service in order for them to transition to independent living, where possible, and / or transition into Adult Social Care services.

3. INTRODUCTION

Overview of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the UK

As of the 27 March 2022, the UK has experienced:

20,905,515 POSITIVE CASES

of COVID-19
(Cases in the United Kingdom, 2022)



9 MONTHS OF FULL LOCKDOWN,

with residents unable to leave their homes or see their loved ones from other households in person by law (Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns and restrictions, 2022)



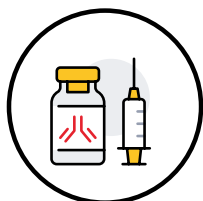
16 MONTHS OF COMPULSORY MASK WEARING

on public transport (Face coverings to become mandatory on public transport, 2022)



140,937,817 COVID-19 VACCINATIONS

administered
(Vaccinations in the United Kingdom, 2022)



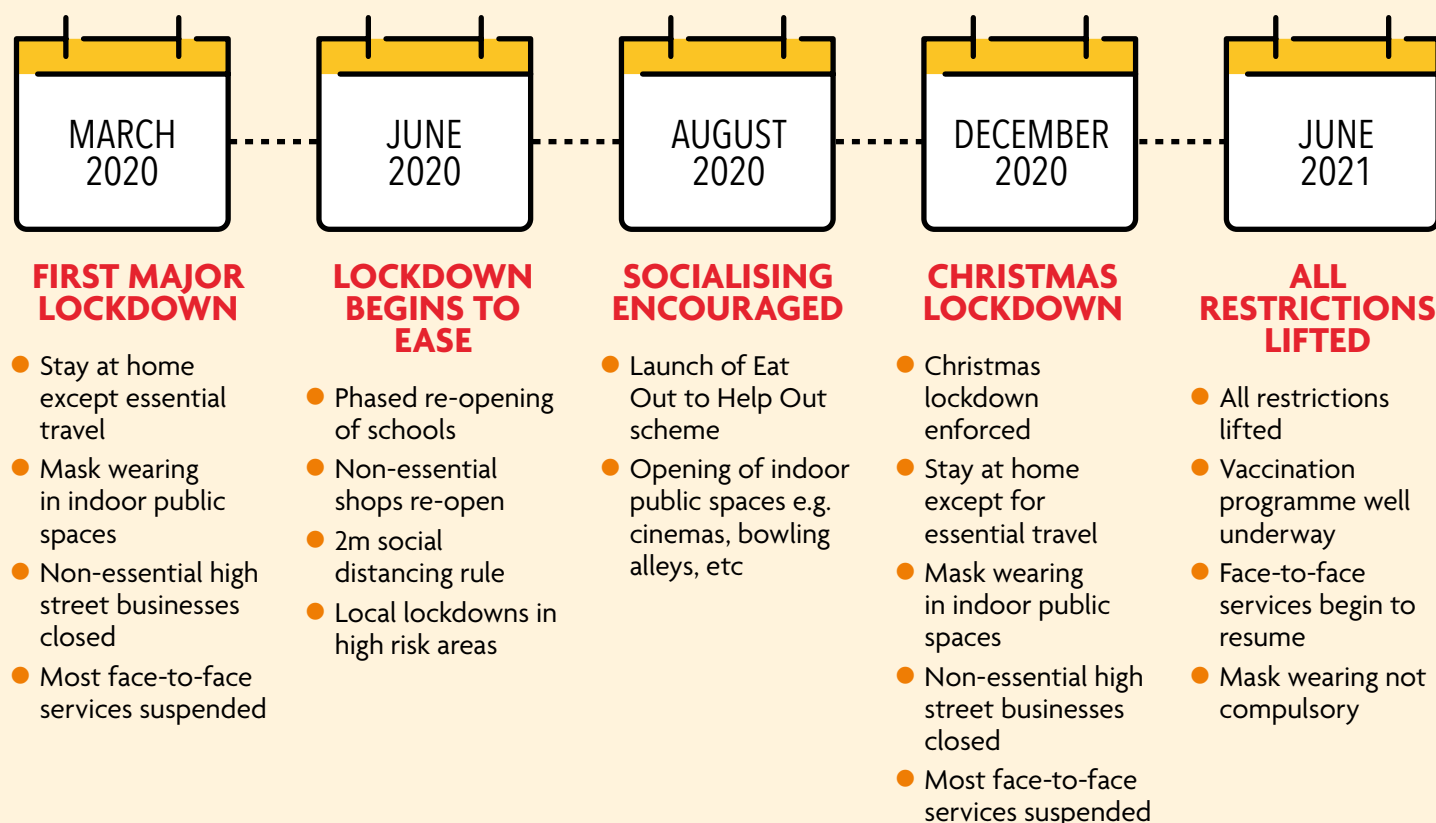
7 MONTHS OF VIRTUAL TEACHING

for almost all students (Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns and restrictions, 2022)



In March 2020, the sudden implementation of restrictions limiting in-person interactions with people outside of your home or 'bubble' forced in the UK forced almost all traditionally face-to-face interactions to transition into the virtual space practically overnight.

Figure 1: Timeline of key milestones in the UK's COVID-19 restrictions (Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns and restrictions, 2022)



Changes in Children’s Social Care Legislation

The UK government’s COVID-19 restrictions resulted in significant changes in laws regarding Children’s Social Care, later described as ‘unlawful’ by the Court of Appeal (Turner, 2022). These included:

The relaxation of The Adoption and Children Regulations 2020 from 24 April – 25 September 2020, which resulted in the following changes nationally (Concerns Covid-19 regulations erode children’s rights - Coram Voice, 2020).

- Pre-COVID, Social Workers had a statutory responsibility to visit their assigned young people every 6 weeks. This law changed this allowing social workers to meet their young people ‘as soon as is reasonably practicable’.
- Relaxing the regulations around contacting Children in Care, so Social Workers were no longer required by law make contact, e.g. make a phone call, to check in on the child once every six weeks.
- Six-monthly reviews of Child Protection cases were changed to ‘where reasonably practical’.
- Ofsted inspections of children’s residential homes twice annually was no longer required by law.
- Children’s Homes were allowed to enforce ‘the deprivation of liberty’ of children if they are showing symptoms of COVID-19 in accordance with the Coronavirus Act, putting children’s rights at risk.
- Children can be placed with emergency Foster Carers, who, although approved as carers, may not be approved to care for the number of children placed with them.

Increased risk of domestic abuse and child exploitation during lockdown periods

- The relaxation of these crucial safeguarding laws was perceived as particularly harmful to children and young people as periods of lockdown brought with them a concerning increase in domestic abuse, substance abuse and child exploitation (A year of lockdown: Refuge releases new figures showing dramatic increase in activity - Refuge Charity - Domestic Violence Help, 2022), (The Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people, 2021).
- Domestic abuse charities noted increases in both calls and referrals, and particular concern was given about children and young people witnessing and/or experiencing such abuse (Impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, 2020).
- A 2020 report by the NSPCC found that periods of lockdown resulted in increased stress for parents and

carers, increased vulnerability of children and young people (who spent significantly greater amount of time online and unable to leave the home) and a reduction in safeguarding services we rely on to safeguard our children and young people (Romanou and Belton, 2020).

Increased Financial Insecurity, Poverty and Austerity

- Lockdown restrictions at the height of the pandemic in 2020 and early 2021 also resulted in an increase in concerns around financial security. The government’s furlough scheme aimed to protect the jobs of those who could not work due to the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, however, unemployment rate still increased to 4.8% in May 2020, with 1 in every 20 people out of work (King, 2021). Increased financial security during the pandemic was a reality for many of Newham’s residents and, since March 2020, Newham saw the number of households on universal credit more than double (Brighter Futures: A Foundation for Change: A Strategic Needs Assessment on Youth Safety, Newham Council, 2021).
- Unemployment had an even greater impact on young people during the pandemic: according to the Resolution Foundation, ‘young people aged 18-24 were the age group most likely to have experienced extended worklessness over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic’ (Murphy, 2021).
- For those with the stability of a secure job during lockdown, many reported challenges finding and maintaining a positive work/life balance, with remote working invading the family home, making it easy to work far longer hours or to log onto work during unsociable hours. This was evidenced in the PWC report ‘The COVID-19 Remote Working Experiment’ where participants highlighted feelings of loneliness, blurred boundaries, increased working hours and reduced work-life balance as a result of remote working (The COVID-19 Remote Working Experiment, no date).
- As a result of this increased demand for many Local Authority support services, Councils across the UK reported increased expenditure and decreased revenue, with the Government funding £10.4 billion in additional funding to compensate English councils for their estimated in-year COVID-19-related financial pressures in 2020–2021 (Ogden, Phillips and Sion 2021). This has resulted in increased financial strain on statutory services, as well as significant cut backs and increased savings targets.

4. THE NEWHAM CONTEXT

Data on Children in Care and Care Leaver Population

In Newham, as of November 2021, we have 383 Children in Care and 415 Care Leavers (Newham’s Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022-2023, 2022).

Table 1: Information on the number of children and young people in our care.

AT A GLANCE	2018 19	2019 20	2020 21
Number of children in our care as at 31st March of each year	378	411	383
Number of children (0-17 years old) per 10,000 in Newham in our care as at 31st March of each year	44.0	48.0	44.0
Percentage of our children in care living with foster families (in Newham and out of the borough) as at 31st March of each year	72%	68%	75%
Percentage of our children in care outside the local authority area as at 31st March of each year	63%	68%	67%
Number of care leavers we support 1st April - 31st March of each year	113 (17-18 yr olds) 289 (19-21 yr olds)	95 (17-18 yr olds) 301 (19-21 yr olds)	110 (17-18 yr olds) 295 (19-21 yr olds)
Percentage of our Care Leavers in education employment and training 1st April on 31st March of each year	63% (17-18 yr olds) 48% (19-21 yr olds)	61% (17-18 yr olds) 49% (19-21 yr olds)	62% (17-18 yr olds) 48% (19-21 yr olds)
New starters in care during 1st April - 31st March of each year	219	219	184

4.2. Newham-Specific Challenges

With almost a quarter of all residents aged under-18, a high proportion of Black African, Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi residents compared to the rest of London and more than 200 languages spoken amongst residents, Children’s Social Care in Newham experiences different challenges compared to its neighbouring boroughs (Brighter Futures: A Foundation for Change: A Strategic Needs assessment on Youth Safety, Newham Council, 2021).

Currently, children and young people under 25 make up over one third of Newham’s population – a greater proportion than the London average. Newham’s population is also projected to grow by 10% over the next ten years, with the population of children and young people aged between 0-25 projected to grow by 5% (compared to 6% in London overall) (Brighter Futures: A Foundation for Change: A Strategic Needs assessment on Youth Safety, Newham Council, 2021).

Newham also faces significant socio-economic challenges and has high levels of deprivation and poverty:

OVER 22,000 CHILDREN LIVE IN ABSOLUTE POVERTY with the highest rate of children in temporary accommodation in the country living in Newham.



DEMOGRAPHICS SUCH AS DEPRIVATION have resulted in Newham being disproportionately affected by Covid-19, with benefit claimants doubling during the pandemic.



NEWHAM'S JOINT STRATEGIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT stated that 102,000 residents were either furloughed or on unemployment benefit. Under a government economic scenario, 42,000 jobs in Newham could be lost in the next recession.



27% OF RESIDENTS in Newham are paid below the London Living wage, which accounts for around 36,000 residents.



1 IN 5 ADULTS WITH CHILDREN in Newham are over-indebted, which rises to 1 in 4 where there are 3 or more children in the family.



(Brighter Futures: A Foundation for Change: A Strategic Needs assessment on Youth Safety, Newham Council, 2021).

It is important to remember this as we reflect on feedback given to us by our Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers who are living in a borough that already, pre-COVID-19, was experiencing significant socio-economic challenges and demand on Children's Social Care services.

Newham's Improvement Journey

In 2019, Newham Children's Social Care was rated inadequate by Ofsted triggering a significant and rapid improvement journey. Newham Children and Young People's Services was at a critical point in their improvement journey at the height of the pandemic.

In March 2020, the workforce was required to adapt in a significant, complex and challenging way during to continue to provide statutory services in a COVID-secure manner. Although some may have been worried about how an authority undergoing such a rapid and intense improvement journey would make such significant adaptations to their services so quickly, Newham adapted well to providing service remotely and adapted with relative ease to online platforms.

This is reflected in a recent Ofsted monitoring visit of the Children in Care and Leaving Care services in October 2020 (Monitoring visit to Newham children's services, 2020), where they noted significant progress in service provision for Children in Care and Care Leavers, stating that there are 'tangible and visible signs of improvements in care planning are evident.'



This is important context when reviewing feedback from one-to-one interviews with older Care Leavers, especially those who have transitioned out of the Leaving Care Service at 25 during the pandemic. Older service users were more likely to have lower satisfaction with the support they have received from Newham Social Care, whereas younger cohorts reported far higher satisfaction with the service, having experienced significant improvements throughout the last 2 years of the improvement journey.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Consultation Work

As part of the research conducted to inform this paper, we consulted with the following groups for feedback in the form of one-to-one interviews.

	NUMBER OF SERVICE USERS CONSULTED
Children in Care (between the ages of 7 and 11)	2
Care Leavers (between the ages of 18 and 26)	5
Foster Carers	5
Total number of service users consulted:	12

All Foster Carers, Children in Care and Care Leavers listed on the services’ distribution lists were invited to participate in a one-to-one feedback session on Zoom and were given a £20 gift voucher in compensation for their time in line with Newham Youth Empowerment Services guidance on reward and recognition for participation work.

All of those who wanted to participate in the study were given the opportunity to do so and all conversations were recorded and transcribed for this project. Where any concerns were expressed, an escalation to the relevant Service Manager or Head of Service was made and, for those who did not wish to remain anonymous, the service was able to follow up with them around their individual feedback.

As part of the process, all one-to-one interviews were recorded where consent was given by the participants to do so. These recordings were then transcribed and anonymised before feedback was shared with the service.

In addition, workshops were held across the partnership, capturing feedback from Children’s Social Care, Brighter Futures, the Virtual School and CAMHS on how colleagues thought the pandemic affected their service users, as well as themselves and their practice. Workshops also took place at the Care Leavers’ Forum where members were able to share their experiences anonymously using menti.com

Limitations of this research report include the small sample size of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers who were interviewed as part of this process. As a result, it is recommended that an additional feedback opportunity is made available for Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers in order to gauge how widespread the challenges detailed above are amongst our service users.

6. THE FINDINGS

Structure of the Report

The following sections of the report detail findings of secondary research, one-to-one interviews with Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers and multi-agency workshops with colleagues across the partnership. This is followed by a series of recommendations for the service.

Research findings will be presented thematically under the following key topic areas:



SUPPORT SERVICES

- Transition to Providing Services Virtually
- Digital Exclusion
- Mental Health Repercussions for Social Care Colleagues



MENTAL HEALTH OF SERVICE USERS

- General Context
- Loneliness
- Worries about School and the Future
- University



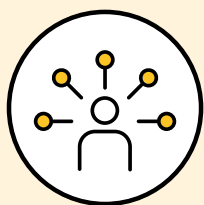
FOSTERING

- Mental Health of Foster Carers
- Support for the Families of Foster Carers living with Foster Siblings
- Service Communication with Foster Carers



MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SERVICES (CAMHS)

- Waiting Times



SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEND)



CHILDREN'S RESIDENTIAL HOMES

- Changes to Legislation
- COVID-19 Guidance
- Feelings of Isolation

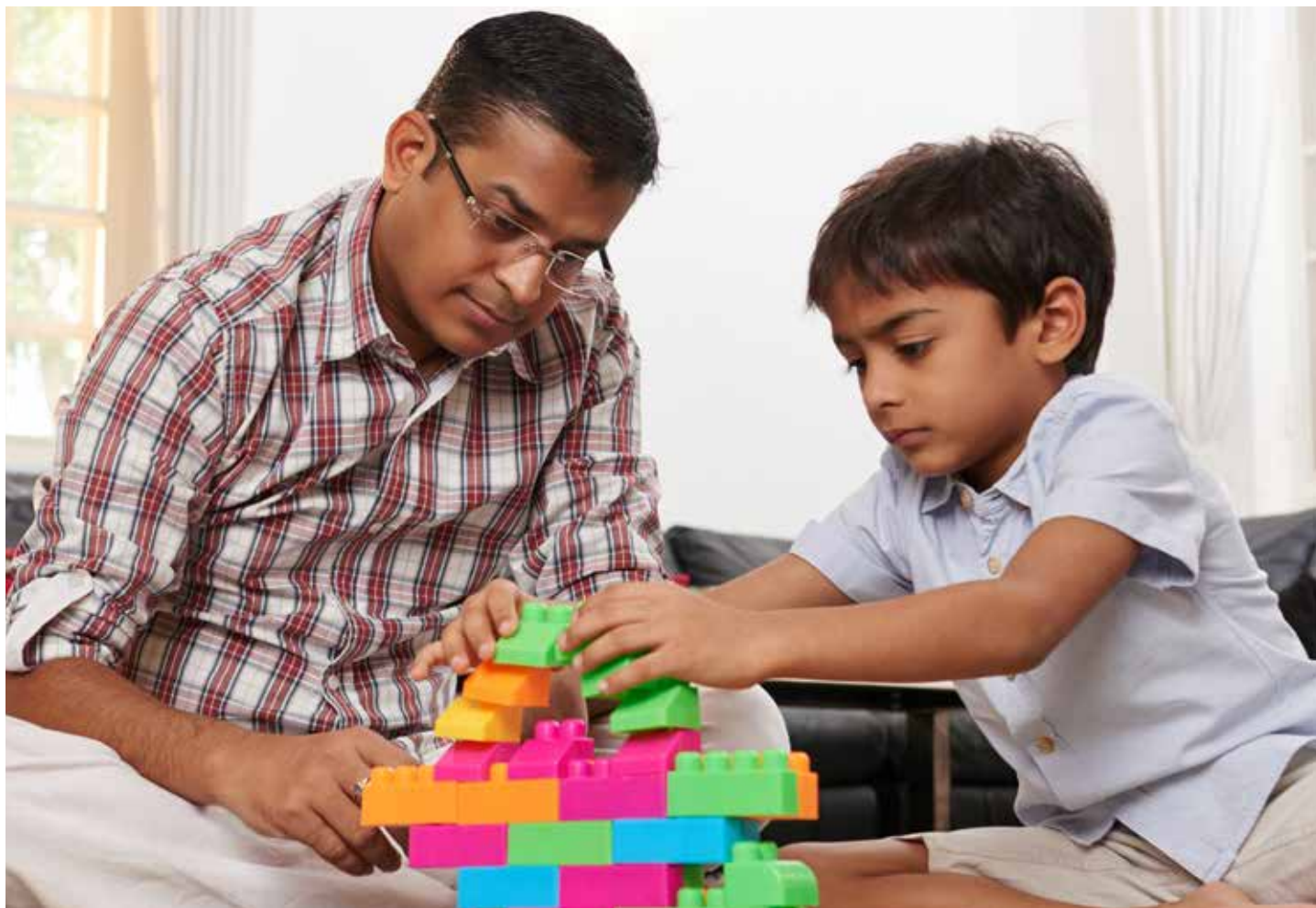


IMPACT

- Summary



RECOMMENDATIONS



7. SUPPORT SERVICES



Transition to Providing Services Virtually

Described as ‘the largest transformation in practice that English Children’s Social Care has ever experienced’ (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021, p.1), the week of 16 March 2020, Newham Children’s Services was forced by law to move all statutory services online and to support children, young people and families through online platforms, such as Zoom and WhatsApp.

Remote working has completely reshaped the way we think about service delivery, especially in Children’s Services, a service that relied heavily on face-to-face interaction before the pandemic. The transition to providing services virtually has brought with it increased efficiency in services, better partnership working and creative thinking. However, there was also a clear link between remote working and increased feelings of isolation, poor work/life balance, barriers to assessing safeguarding risk, mental health challenges for colleagues and increased workloads and burn out.

The transition to remote working promoted collaboration and partnership working. No longer limited by having to meet in-person, virtual meetings facilitated communication across teams, directorates and the entire partnership. Colleagues could more easily share ideas and collectively problem solve in a multi-agency approach. Social Care colleagues were forced to upskill themselves in the use of multiple IT platforms, such as Zoom and MS Teams, and colleagues across the service reported increased attendance and participation at meetings that were online, rather than in-person. As a result of the pandemic, services that support Children in Care and Care Leavers communicate better and engage with more colleagues and partners. The services understand each other better and partnerships have been established and strengthened.

This is also true for the attendance of service users, where it was reported that serial non-attendees (service users who continually refuse to attend services) attended appointments over the phone that they never would have done so in an in-person setting, which showed that the use of online platforms as part of a hybrid approach can prove beneficial for some children and young people where it is not a safeguarding risk to do so.

“We would go out and shut the door [and let them know] we’ll go in another room, we can’t hear you. That is your private time.”

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription on how they tried to ensure their child had privacy during virtual therapy sessions

In addition, faced with the inability to provide services in a traditional way, the pandemic encouraged innovation and creative thinking in service delivery. An example of this is the Special Education Needs (SEND) service hosting guided bedtime reading sessions in the evenings on Zoom for parents and carers of young people who struggled to adapt to the routine of lockdown.

In contrast to this, children and young people reported feeling as if their privacy had been invaded by Social Workers and Therapists engaging with them in their homes. Both Foster Carers and Children in Care and Care Leavers reported feeling as if they couldn’t openly share and communicate with their friends, family and support workers for fear of being overheard by others in their home.

For younger children in particular, virtual meetings sometimes proved to be more frightening, intimidating and overwhelming than in-person interactions with their Social Worker. This was evident through some young people hiding their faces on video calls and turning their cameras off.

Many support services reported communicating effectively with service users in ways they never would have considered pre-COVID. The Special Education Needs (SEND) service reported young people emailing their workers directly to request specific support and equipment, something that had never happened before the pandemic.

Although communication between colleagues, services and within the partnership improved in many ways as a result of the transition to remote working, Children in Care and Care Leavers have reported a lack of communication between themselves and their Social Worker or Personal Adviser. Of those interviewed, Care Leavers shared that following discussions with their support worker, they were not kept in the loop with actions concerning them, causing a breakdown of trust between them.

During the pandemic, Newham has recognised that there is no one correct platform through which to effectively deliver services (in person, virtually, via email, via phone, etc.), rather a hybrid approach and flexibility is required to provide each young person and family with the tailored support and communication that they want and need. Many services have stated that they understand that online support services do, in fact, work better for some children and young people, especially those who experience severe social anxiety. As a service, there is an understanding of how to deliver effective practice virtually where safe and appropriate to do so. Many services now offer the option of a hybrid service comprising of virtual and in-person support where the young person and their family would prefer it.

However, it is important to note that for a few individuals, virtual services enabled them to mask concerning behaviours and living conditions, such as dangerous living conditions. As a result, it is clear that, although virtual services have limitations when it comes to assessing risk, a hybrid approach involving a mix of in-person interactions and virtual support can prove beneficial for some service users.

Services now understand that importance of smart working and implementing new technologies and virtual platforms to enhance practice. Now, in March 2022 as we begin to see the end of lockdown restrictions, services are continually made aware of how new technologies can be implemented to promote efficiency and more effective practice. Without the push the pandemic provided, it is likely that such open-mindedness around integrating technology into practice would not have been achieved in such a short space of time.

Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion proved a significant barrier to online service delivery nationally, especially amongst service users under the poverty threshold. This is a reality for '22% of people' in the UK who 'do not have the necessary digital skills for everyday life' according to the UK Consumer Digital Index (Exploring the UK's Digital Divide, 2019). The ONS found that '5.4 million Britons had either not gone online or used the internet in the last three months.' Although, these statistics largely comprise of an older population, ONS data also showed that '700,000 secondary school pupils didn't have a tablet or computer to access the internet at home and 60,000 had no internet access at all.'

Digital exclusion is a stark reality for Newham's residents. Of a survey of Newham residents in 2017, 8% of households were found to have no internet access inside or outside the home, with 16% of households do not have broadband. When we consider the age group of 16-24 year olds in Newham, 1% have no internet access (Understanding Newham 2017, 2018, p. 23).

Although it is true that the vast majority of service users, therefore, had internet access, Ofsted stated following their October 2020 visit that 'There were differences in children and young people's access to technology and therefore in their ability to engage in remote learning, access the job market or keep in touch with friends and family.' A study by the Munro et al. (2021) also noted that it is not only service users' access to technology that creates a barrier to engaging with services, but also 'it should not be assumed that all young people have high levels of digital literacy'.

Digital exclusion in Newham is has been made very apparent through our Inclusion Matters Newsletter for parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs (SEND). The Newham Parent Carer Forum have requested paper copies of the newsletter as a result of some parent carers not having internet access.

There is a clearly established link between poverty and digital exclusion. Many of the families supported by Children's Social Care are living below the poverty threshold and would therefore be disproportionately impacted by digital exclusion. In a borough where over half of children are living in poverty, we cannot underestimate the impact of digital exclusion on Newham's residents during the pandemic.

Mental Health Repercussions for Social Care Colleagues

Despite the positive repercussions on service improvement provided by remote working, many Social Workers have reported feelings of loneliness and isolation as a result of working from home, a sentiment shared by remote workers nationally with 67% of people working from home feel 'less connected to colleagues' with 67% of people working from home feel 'less connected to colleagues' according to a 2021 study by the Royal Society for Public Health (Survey reveals the mental and physical health impacts of home working during Covid-19, 2021).

In particular, frontline workers, especially health workers, have been proven to 'experience negative psychological consequences during health emergencies', who are more likely to display 'distress, exhaustion, detachment, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms over time' as a result of lockdown and working on the frontlines of a global pandemic (Impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, 2020).

An important reflection raised by multiple social care colleagues was how upsetting they found discussing and dealing with the traumatic experiences of service users in their homes. Often trained to create physical boundaries between work life and home life, some struggled with the blurring of boundaries caused by remote working. This was more prevalent amongst colleagues who deal with the highest risk service users, e.g. colleagues who work with service users experiencing sexual exploitation.

Although remote working enabled increased efficiency and collaboratively working, some colleagues reported feeling uncomfortable with service users being able to see into their homes and private lives. There were reports of a minority of Social Workers keeping their cameras off during interactions with service users in response to this invasion of privacy.

Pre-pandemic, there was nationwide concern that the Social Care workforce would be significantly reduced by staff sickness due to COVID-19. Fortunately, these fears were not realised with the pandemic having little impact on the workforce's sickness levels, but the pandemic did bring with it increased caseloads for Social Workers across the country (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021) with 79% of respondents to Community Care's annual caseloads survey stating their caseloads were 'completely unmanageable' or 'hard to manage' (Blackwell, 2021).

It is not surprising that, given all of the increased mental health pressures and workloads brought by COVID-19 restrictions, vacancies in social care settings increased also, with the shortage of Children's Social Workers reaching a 'five-year high', resulting in a significant strain on Social Care services across the UK (Children's social worker shortage reaches five-year high, 2022).



8. MENTAL HEALTH OF SERVICE USERS



General context

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, children and young people globally reported increased feelings of depression and anxiety. A recent study stated that this was largely in response

to 'perceived threat of the virus, confusion, disruption, and isolation imposed by this type of health-related crisis', although other studies have shown that worries about school and the future also contributed to increased levels of depression and anxiety. Despite the rising prevalence of mental health disorders pre-pandemic (Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS Digital 2020), it is clear that the global pandemic further exacerbated the already rising prevalence of anxiety and depression.

Some studies have shown that 'levels of distress were higher in young adults as a potential consequence of increased consumption of social media' (Impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, 2020), (Chandra et al., 2021).

The decline in children and young people's mental health became particularly difficult to spot due to national school closures as trusted adults in education settings are usually the 'the first place that children and young people can and do seek support for their mental health and wellbeing' (Impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, 2020).

This was echoed by CAMHS colleagues who noted that, similarly to their peers, Children and Care and Care Leavers, in general, experienced more worries, a conclusion that is in line with the following national findings:

- A recent study reported that 'every local authority consulted identified mental health support for Care Leavers as a pressing issue' (Emily, Seana, Newlands and Garia Alba, 2021).
- The Children's Commissioner reported that Children in Care are 'four times more likely to suffer with their mental health' (Children's Commissioner's proposals to support children in care, 2021).
- The Children in Care and Care Leavers from the Young Person's Benchmarking Forum 'identified mental health as their primary priority for Local Authorities to be address coming out of the pandemic' in May 2021 (Care Experience & Post 18-Mental Health Event, 2021).
- Children in Care and Care Leavers in Drive Forward's Policy Forum 'identified mental health as their key campaign area' (Care Experience & Post 18-Mental Health Event, 2021).

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The resilience of Children in Care and Care Leavers during lockdown was dependent on the stability of their living situation and relationships with their care giver. There was a clear link established between the quality of care received in the home and the resilience the young person exhibited during the pandemic:


- Young people well settled into their placements, in long term care, with positive and established relationships with trusted adults coped better during the pandemic and were more connected to support resources.
- Young people who were new into care, who were already experiencing instability and anxiety around their living situation and relationships with their care giver experienced a disproportionately challenging time coping during the pandemic.

This resonated with feedback received from our Foster Carers and children and young people: Foster Carers with strong and secure relationships with their young person dealt better with the pandemic than those with less resilient relationships.

Loneliness

Loneliness was a key factor in young people's increased feelings of depression and anxiety over lockdown (Impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, 2020). For young people who have experienced multiple changes in their location/ placement over a short period of time, their relationships with peers are often more fragile than young people who have remained in one school for the entirety of their education. Those less-established relationships were the first to be impacted by the pandemic, with Children in Care and Care Leavers often being the first to stop attending Zoom quizzes, FaceTime catch-ups and virtual get-togethers with friends. For those with well-established friendships, Newham's Care Leavers reported easily transitioning to meeting on virtual platforms (such as FaceTime and House Party) and are now, with restrictions lifting, resuming in-person social activities.

Despite reports of increased isolation nationally from children and young people during the pandemic, CAMHS colleagues reported that some Children in Care and Care Leavers found that the pandemic enabled them to relate better with other young people in a way they may have struggled to pre-pandemic. Children in Care and Care Leavers may feel isolated and different from their peers as a result of their care experience, but some saw the pandemic as an opportunity to bond with their peers since everyone was going through the same challenges. In fact, some young people actually reported feeling less lonely over lockdown. With everyone confined to their houses, many children and young people had more spare time during lockdown to reach out to friends, chat and play games together in a way that was reported to not often take place pre-pandemic.



I don't have a phone, but I use my mum's phone, so I can't be always using it to chat with [my friend]."

Quote from Child in Care interview transcription

- All Care Leavers who were interviewed as part of the research for this report shared that they were able to regularly keep in contact with the friends and family via video call, but preferred face-to-face contact with them. This is in line with a study that found that 'a majority of participating parents report that their children are keeping in regular contact with family and friends via video-chat' (Impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, 2020).
- However, this was not true for our youngest cohort of children and young people who often were not allowed to have a mobile phone or social media accounts due to their age. Our Children in Care shared they found it difficult maintaining friendships during home schooling periods of lockdown without a mobile phone, having to use their Foster Carer's phone to contact their friends, who often didn't have phones and phone numbers themselves.

This is reflected in national studies where ‘parents had concerns about their children’s lack of communication with others outside the household’ (Impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, 2020, p.7). Nationally, children and young people shared that ‘not seeing their friends’ was one of the hardest things about lockdown (Life on Hold: children’s well-being and Covid-19, 2020).

Despite this barrier to children and young people keeping in touch with their friends during periods of home schooling, there were reports of Children in Care moving to new schools during the pandemic and finding home schooling an effective way of integrating into their new class.

Many Children in Care and Care Leavers also struggled with being unable to see their birth families in person and reported this having a negative impact on their mental health. Some Children in Care and Care Leavers have siblings living across multiple different foster families, making in-person contact during periods of lockdown incredibly challenging.

Some children and young people strongly disliked virtual contact with their families as they did not see it as meaningful without physical contact. In fact, there were instances of Children in Care presenting as missing during the pandemic so that they could go and see their biological family (COVID-19 series: briefing on children’s social care providers, October 2020, 2022).

However, it is true that, for a minority of our children and young people, the transition to virtual contact was a positive experience. CAMHS colleagues reported that for the children and young people who had to travel into a contact centre to meet their biological parent(s) who had a history of occasionally not turning up to contact appointments, the use of video calling provided more predictability and stability to children and young people’s lives. They could contact their biological families from their respective homes, at a time that suits them, that could be easily rearranged if required. This increased flexibility rendered contact more predictable and stable for some of our Children in Care and Care Leavers.

“[They] adjusted really well to [their new school], meeting [their] new friends on Zoom. So when [they] did finally go back, it was as though they had been to school and they’d met everyone.”

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription

Worries about School and the Future

During lockdown, in-person education settings largely ceased in-person teaching and transitioned onto virtual platforms. Young people in education generally displayed increased anxiety around their education and future plans (Impacts of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, 2020).

Nationally, the transition to home schooling proved extremely challenging for many reasons, including, but not limited to, the reliance on parents and carers to home-school their children, digital exclusion and lack of physical space appropriate for learning. According to the Good Childhood Report from the Children’s Society (2021), 61% of parents said that ‘the pandemic had a negative impact on their child’s education’.

For some of our Children in Care and Care Leavers, home schooling proved a significant barrier to their learning. Children and young people with care experience may require additional support in education settings to achieve the same levels of attainment as their peers. The transition to home schooling proved a challenge for those children and young people with teachers and teaching assistants unable to provide the one-to-one support and guidance an in-person setting would allow for.

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Others, however, thrived home schooling. Foster Carers of children and young people with special educational needs shared that home schooling gave them the opportunity to benefit from one-to-one support, enabling them to achieve higher levels of attainment than they would have had in mainstream schooling.

Pre-COVID, Children's Social Services relied heavily on trusted adults in schools to flag suspicions of exploitation and safeguarding risk. Without the face-to-face contact that schools provide, Children's Social Services across the country were missing out on that crucial intelligence schools offered. This is reflected in the decline in referrals to Children's Social Care nationally during the pandemic, which fell by 'up to half' during the pandemic which is thought to have been the result of a 'loss of direct contact between children and their schools or health workers' (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021).

Newham Social Care also experienced a drop in referrals in line with the national trend, which was referenced in Ofsted's October 2020 briefing where they noted that 'there was a drop in the number of children being referred to children's social care as being at risk of harm in the initial months of the first national lockdown' (Monitoring visit to Newham children's services, 2020).

However, it is important to note that schools remained open for vulnerable children and young people, including Children in Care. However, it was up to the foster families as to whether their child or young person was home schooled or attended in-person teaching. Often, factors such as the vulnerability of Foster Carers to COVID-19 played a significant role in this decision.

The UK government advised that 'children allocated to a social worker' should continue to attend school in-person, however 'less than 10% did so.' (Lockdown school closures may have increased risk of abuse for vulnerable children, new UK study finds - University of Birmingham, 2022). Of the Foster Carers interviewed who did send their child into school for in-person teaching during the pandemic, they shared that it proved extremely valuable for providing respite.

Foster Carers across the country shared frustrations and challenges in supporting their children and young people to learn new and challenging content that they often struggled to understand.

Despite the challenges brought by home schooling, some Foster Carers shared stories of how schools went above and beyond to support families during home schooling, including teachers picking up children and young people and dropping them off at school while their Foster Carers were self-isolating, and even video calling Foster Carers to talk them through lesson content so they felt more confident home schooling their child or young person.

"[The teacher said] look, let her come [into school]. That was a great support for me."

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription

"Trying to help [child's name] with trying to do the school work, it was frustrating. I was trying to teach as best as I could."

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription

"Without a teacher, you can't do it, it's just impossible to do."

Quote from Child in Care interview transcription talking about their home-schooling experience


University

2020/2021 saw nine of Newham's Care Leavers start university, with sixty-eight Newham Care Leavers in university education (Annual report: Newham Virtual School - Academic year 2020-21 2022, p. 20).

The pandemic has completely re-shaped the university experience, limiting in-person interactions, social events and opportunities, as well as limiting in-person teaching, with most lectures being held virtually. Care Leavers at university shared that virtual lectures encouraged a lack of routine, enabling them to wake up two minutes before lectures, log onto virtual classes from their bed, while they were doing housework or while they were on your phone.

It is important to remember that nationally university students struggled with this same lack of work/life balance and routine as a result of lockdown and this is not a challenge experienced by only Care Leavers. Nationally, university students struggled with the blurring of boundaries between school and home (Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experience and mental health of university students studying in Canada and the UK: a cross-sectional study, 2022).

It is important to remember that Care Leavers often live independently from a much younger age than their peers and are often solely responsible for time-keeping and meeting deadlines with little support. In response to the evidence that Care Leavers at university were disproportionately affected by lockdown periods, discussions are taking place nationally around the corporate parenting responsibility of universities to provide pastoral support for Care Leavers (Learning on the margins: Care leavers in higher education, no date).



“I’ll be on my lecture, put my headphones in and start cleaning the bathroom.”

Quote from Care Leaver interview transcription



9. FOSTERING



Mental Health of Foster Carers

It is clear from one-to-one interviews with Foster Carers that they also saw a decline in their mental health during the pandemic. Instead of fulfilling

their pre-pandemic Foster Carer role, they took on many additional components they were not expecting when they originally signed up to be a Foster Carer. Not only were they the primary support for a vulnerable young person, potentially with special educational needs, but they also became their full time teacher, chef and full-time carer, as well as having to support their own mental health and that of their family.

The pandemic also brought to light unresolved trauma in many people's lives, something which has led to the increased uptake of counselling and mental health services across the UK (Our major new report examines the pandemic's impact on the nation's mental health 2021), something that was highlighted in Foster Carer interviews. Although it is clear that the pandemic challenged everyone's resilience, it also encouraged many to pursue counselling and therapeutic services for themselves that they probably wouldn't have done so without the pandemic, leaving them now with improved mental health and a more profound understanding of themselves.

“You’re dealing with children from traumatic backgrounds, also a teacher, then you’re the bad person for forcing the kids to do the work they don’t want to do.”

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription

“[Newham] need to do something for the Foster Carers’ own children’. They give up a lot as well and we need to show appreciation for that.”

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription

“We had communication from our supervising social workers [during lockdown], but that is their job. There was nothing coming from management to say thank you or to recognise that it was a tough time.”

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription

Support for the Children of Foster Carers living with Foster Siblings

In addition to this, an interesting reflection from interviews with Foster Carers is the gap in support services for the children of Foster Carers who are living with foster siblings.

During the height of lockdown, during extended periods of government orders to stay at home, there were reports of Foster Carers’ own children experiencing overwhelm working from home whilst their parent cared for their foster sibling. Currently, there is a gap in support services for Foster Carers’ own children to vent and share their frustrations and concerns around their family life and the fostering experience in safe and non-judgemental space.

Service Communication with Foster Carers

In general, Foster Carers who gave feedback as part of one-to-one interviews for this research project shared the disappointment that the service has paused appreciation events for the fostering community and that the service seldom acknowledged the additional sacrifices Foster Carers and their families made during the pandemic to care for some of Newham’s most vulnerable young people. In particular, Foster Carers shared a desire for increased communication from senior management to show appreciation for the sacrifices made by the fostering community in Newham.

Foster Carers also shared confusion around COVID-19 guidance and regulations and suggested that up-to-date, regular communications on the pandemic, COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination guidance from Newham would have been and would be helpful due to the large volumes of fake news shared during the pandemic.

Now that Children’s Social Care services have proven they can work efficiently across virtual platforms, it is essential that we harness the power of new technologies to keep service users and families updated and informed about decisions and changes made about them and about any outstanding requests they may have for the service to action.



10. MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SERVICES (CAMHS)



Waiting Times

The Looked After Children Nurses reported that, from April 2021, the team were still firefighting the major consequences of the pandemic for Children in Care and Care Leavers and

are still working through the backlog of Mental Health referrals. This is a reflection of the national picture, with two-fifths of children referred to children's mental health services in 2020/2021 receiving two contacts within a year of referral (Waiting times and outcomes, 2021).

This was reflected in Ofsted's findings in October 2020 (COVID-19 series: briefing on children's social care providers, October 2020, 2022), where they reported that 'Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) often already did not have enough capacity to meet children's needs, and this worsened during the pandemic.' This is also reflected in feedback from Foster Carers, who detailed experiences of lengthy waiting times to access support for their child/young person.

During the pandemic, the majority of service provision transitioned into the virtual space. This included mental health services that moved online onto platforms, such as Teams and Zoom.

“Virtual therapy when they're in their own room is not gonna have the impact of obviously being in a therapist's room with them face-to-face is going to have.”

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription

The two key goals of mental health services, particularly for Children in Care and Care Leavers, are:

- 1) Making good therapeutic change;
- 2) Maintaining a positive relationship with an adult to show that it is possible.

CAMHS colleagues shared that 'starting new relationships online was almost impossible' and proved a real barrier during the pandemic while mental health services were mostly conducted virtually. This was as a result of:

- **The physical distance between the practitioner and patient**

- This can limit therapists' abilities to read non-verbal cues.
- Can result in a difficulty establishing an emotional connection with patients and being able to read how they were feeling.
- This can also have an impact on establishing trust with patients, which relies on many non-verbal cues.

- **Challenges maintaining patients' privacy**

- This includes the inability to create a therapeutic 'safe space' in a physical office, for example, with many patients engaging with therapy from their home where others may overhear them.
- This may prevent patients from having a safe space where they can open up.

- **Therapists experiencing increased fatigue and boundaries between their professional space and home**

- This is a similar challenge to that experienced by Social Workers, as detailed previously, where increased workload, a transition to a new way of working and the additional stress of experiencing a global pandemic led to negative mental health consequences for frontline workers.

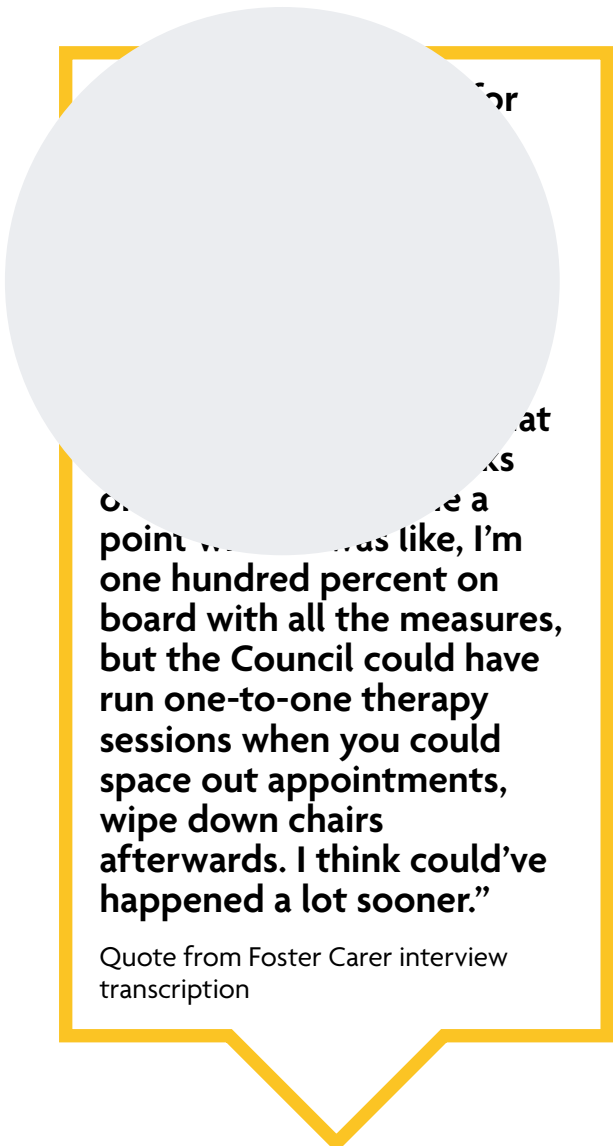
- **Therapists adapting to new ways of working and experiencing technological issues**

- Internet connection and learning how to use new platforms were just two of the many ways that the quality of therapeutic interventions may be impacted through conducting services remotely.

(Cultivating online therapeutic presence: strengthening therapeutic relationships in teletherapy sessions, 2020), (Psychotherapists' Challenges With Online Therapy During COVID-19: Concerns About Connectedness Predict Therapists' Negative View of Online Therapy and Its Perceived Efficacy Over Time, 2021).

However, the transition of mental health support into the virtual space kept the door open to maintain those crucial relationships with existing service users.

This resonates with Foster Carer feedback, where frustrations were shared that in-person teaching in large



...at
...s
...e a
point ... was like, I'm
one hundred percent on board with all the measures, but the Council could have run one-to-one therapy sessions when you could space out appointments, wipe down chairs afterwards. I think could've happened a lot sooner."

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription

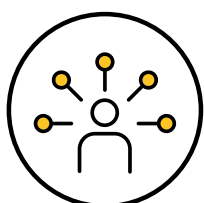
numbers resumed fairly quickly, but mental health support, such as CAMHS counselling sessions, delayed returning to in-person services for significantly longer when their child would have found face-to-face support more effective.

An unexpected positive of the pandemic was the improved transition of young people between support services in different geographical locations. The virtual setting prevented young people from being immediately cut off from existing support services when they were transitioned to a new geographical location; an issue that has proven extremely destabilising for Children in Care in the past and in the wake of the pandemic as face-to-face services resumed.

During the pandemic, the new role of Newham's Emotional Health and Wellbeing Nurse was appointed, who works to provide additional support for Newham's Care Leavers. As greater awareness of this role and the referral process for this service develops, this new support service will be crucial for ensuring Care Leavers can access the mental health support they require without delay.



11. SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS (SEND)



Service Response to the Pandemic

Newham's Special Education Needs (SEND) service is also undergoing a rapid improvement journey in line with Ofsted feedback. The service,

that provides support to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in Newham, showed evidence of successfully transitioning to virtual working through creatively adapting to restrictions, establishing strong partnerships with other services and prioritising the most vulnerable service users for additional support.

The SEND service committed to phoning families in Newham with an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) once a week to check in with their most vulnerable families. The service hosted additional support activities for parents and carers, such as uploading support videos to YouTube and hosting evening bedtime reading sessions to support carers to establish routine for their children.

In addition, the service identified families who required support obtaining food and medication and ensured all service users had the necessities they needed, for example by providing letters to Foster Carers of young people with SEND to enable them to be prioritised in supermarket queues and online shopping. They also ensured technology needs were identified and laptops were distributed where possible to service users open to Social Services.

“Newham supported us really well. They couldn't have done any better.”

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription from a carer of children and young people with SEND

The SEND service reported some unexpected benefits of the pandemic, the most positive of which was the strengthened relationship with SEND parents, including parents learning to Braille alongside their visually impaired children. One child even sent an e-card to their support worker in Braille during the pandemic. The restrictions forced services to think outside of the box and to creatively provide services for our most vulnerable in society.

Social Care and Education colleagues who cared for children and young people with sensory difficulties reported that staying at home made their child calmer and that their child felt happier during lockdown. Although the first two weeks of adjusting to a new lockdown routine was proved challenging, especially for children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the simplified routine of staying at home, without the additional challenges of sensory overload, frequent social interactions and many transitions and changes of location and activity throughout the day resulted in many children with SEND responding to and coping better with their day-to-day life.

In addition, there was evidence of the service allowing parents and carers to spend lockdowns out of borough if it would benefit the child or young person. The flexibility brought by lockdown and having hospital appointments and schooling online meant that families were able to spend lockdown in a location that was better suited to their young people's lockdown needs.

The SEND service innovatively explored methods of vulnerable, high-risk young people maintaining relationships with their friends at school while they stayed at home. One example of this was the AI Robot pilot where a robot were assigned to three different vulnerable, high risk children and young people with SEND. These robots were assigned to individual children who were able to control the robot remotely from home. This project promoted social inclusion and the maintenance of crucial friendships and relationships with peers and trusted adults in their support system, something we know is a significant challenge Children in Care and Care Leavers are faced with.

The service understood the necessity for carers of children and young people with SEND to have respite outside of the home. This need was heightened during the pandemic when agencies stopped sending out agency respite support workers to families. The service organised for Black Cabs to pick up families from their homes to take them on sightseeing tours of London while maintaining COVID-19 restrictions and without breaking their 'bubble'. The pandemic opened up opportunities for the service to collaborate with Parks, Public Health and Sports and Leisure on outdoor social activities for SEND families, prioritising the most vulnerable to attend, which often involved Children in Care.

“The second lockdown we were at our holiday home, then we went into lockdown so I called Social Services to ask if we could stay where we are because it was a better environment outside with the beach, so we stayed there for three months.”

Quote from Foster Carer interview transcription

In the SEND service, the pandemic highlighted the need for collaborative and partnership working across services, the importance of regular communication with families and the positive outcomes that come from innovation and creative thinking in service provision. Most importantly, it has shown that some of our most vulnerable young people thrive using a hybrid approach to support services and, instead of immediately reverting back to pre-COVID, traditional service provision, it is important adapt our support for each and every young person across Children's Social Care and Education.

Although Newham's Special Educational Needs Service is only at the start of their improvement journey and there are significant improvements to be made, we can be hopeful through the evidence of creative thinking and collaborative working evidenced during the pandemic as a sign of future improvements to be made over the coming years.



12. CHILDREN'S RESIDENTIAL HOMES



Changes to Legislation

The relaxation of The Adoption and Children Regulations 2020 from 24 April – 25 September 2020 resulted in the following changes for Children's homes:

- Ofsted inspections of children's residential homes twice annually was no longer required by law.
- Children's homes were allowed to enforce 'the deprivation of liberty' of children if they are showing symptoms of COVID-19 in accordance with the Coronavirus Act, putting children's rights at risk.

These legal changes have since been deemed 'unlawful' by the Court of Appeals (Turner, 2022), however, during the time that they were in place, they did result in challenging experiences for Children in Care and Care Leavers living in residential settings.

Newham Care Leavers in residential settings shared that their independence was significantly restricted during the pandemic and they were not allowed to go out when they wanted to according to the residential home's COVID-19 restrictions.

Care Leavers also shared that they experienced significant confusion around COVID-19 guidance and expressed that they wish they had been better communicated with around changes to COVID-19 guidelines, rules and restrictions.

Those in residential settings received a letter once a month from Ofsted which explained what the current rules were and what that meant for them. However, children and young people living in residential settings that participated in interviews shared that these letters were found to be confusing and unclear. There would have been a preference for a Social Worker to sit down with them and read through the guidance with them to clarify any confusing language. In addition, there was confusion that friends in different residential homes reported having different rules.

Those in residential settings also shared that their lockdown experience lacked deep and meaningful conversations, with staff making small talk rather than taking the time to sit and chat with residents, resulting in feelings of isolation. As part of one-to-one interviews those in residential settings shared that they wanted someone chat to in their residential homes and felt that was currently a gap in support services.

As part of this research report, the impact of COVID-19 on those in residential settings has not been fully explored and it is recommended that additional research takes place into the experiences of Newham's Children in Care and Care Leavers in residential settings during in, and in the wake of, the pandemic.



13. IMPACT



Summary

In summary, Children in Care and Care Leavers experienced many of the same challenges brought by the pandemic as their peers who are not in or leaving care.

The UK's three lockdown periods disproportionately affected the mental health of Children in Care and Care Leavers as a result of the following factors:

- Children in Care and Care Leavers were unable to see their biological family and even sometimes siblings in person for significant periods of time. If they were able to have contact, it was over the phone or via video call.
- The youngest Children in Care who were too young to have a personal mobile phone, or access to social media accounts, struggled to keep in touch with friends during lockdown in a way that their older peers could.
- The transition to virtual support services to support and safeguard them, as well as the increased backlog of referrals for mental health support, made it extremely difficult for Children in Care and Care Leavers to access crucial support services face-to-face.
- Care Leavers who experienced issues with their accommodation saw increased delays organising housing repairs through their Housing Associations.
- Care Leavers often live independently from a far younger age than their peers. As a result, they were more likely to experience lockdown alone. This resulted in them having to navigate housing and financial difficulties, isolation and other challenges of lockdown

without an in-person support system.

- Residential homes were granted increased powers to restrict the liberty of residents which included when they were allowed to leave the premises. This led to increased isolation amongst some of our Children in Care.

In addition, lockdown also disproportionately impacted those who care for this Children in Care and Care Leavers, their Social Workers, Social Care staff and their Foster families, who reported struggling with their mental health, feelings of isolation, burn out and being overwhelmed.

These challenges are also reflected in children's support services, where many services are still firefighting the backlog of support requests from the pandemic – delays which are reflected in the wait times Children in Care and Care Leavers are still experiencing to accessing the support they need from many services.

Limitations of this research report include the small sample size of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers who were interviewed as part of this process. As a result, it is recommended that an additional feedback opportunity is made available for Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers in order to gauge how widespread the challenges detailed above are amongst our service users.

The pandemic has had a significant effect on the rate of service improvement in Children's Social Care nationally. Children's Social Care demonstrated unprecedented resilience and adaptability by transitioning almost all traditionally in-person support services to virtual delivery almost overnight.

HOW HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTED CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS?

It is crucial Children's Social Care do not lose momentum when it comes to service improvement. Looking forwards, a significant cultural shift is required in order for services to continue to evolve and adapt to new and upcoming technologies.

Looking forwards, a significant cultural shift is required in order:

- For all colleagues in Newham Council to recognise and understand their Corporate Parenting responsibility;
- For services to continue to evolve and adapt to new and upcoming technologies;
- To refine practice and ways of working to promote efficiency savings;
- To 'flatten' the hierarchy of Children's Social Care settings to encourage open, transparent, honest, two-way conversations around service improvement from those starting their careers in social care all the way to senior leaders;
- For all colleagues across Children and Young People's services to understand that service improvement is everyone's responsibility. Newham's journey to excellence will only be possible if every colleague pursues excellence within their own role, team and service.

All colleagues that provide services for Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Families must acknowledge their duty to promote and actively seek out service improvement opportunities if we want to continue to improve service efficiency and efficacy at the rate that was achieved during the pandemic. It is crucial that the improved collaborative and partnership working fostered by the transition to remote working is harnessed and focused into service improvement and transformation so that we can achieve curiosity, innovation, creativity and practice excellence across services that support our Children in Care and Care Leavers.

Although the restrictions brought on by the pandemic are now, in March 2022, almost entirely removed, it is still unclear what the long term impacts of the pandemic will be on Children in Care and Care Leavers and what further restrictions may be implemented to control the spread of future waves of the pandemic. We are also unsure what the long-term effects of the pandemic will be for these cohorts as many of the long-term impacts may be still to be realised.

As a result of this research report, it is recommended that the following additional lines of enquiry be explored further:

- The impact of the pandemic on the experiences of unaccompanied asylum seekers settling in Newham, as well as on the Children's Social Care services supporting them;
 - This will be of particular importance due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine which is likely to result in increased demand on Children's Social Care services over the coming year. Newham has the largest population of Ukrainian residents in the UK and this will likely result in a great number of Ukrainian immigrants settling within Newham as part of the Ukraine Family Scheme launched in March 2022.
- The long-term impact of newly qualified social workers experiencing their placement year during a global pandemic and whether this has impacted on the quality of practice demonstrated by these social workers and on the service and service users in the years to come;
- The impact of the relaxation of statutory adoption laws on the adoption process and the emotional wellbeing of young children being adopted;
- The physical health impacts of the pandemic that are yet to be fully realised, e.g. the backlog of dentistry and opticians appointments for NHS patients, the potential for increased obesity rates as a result of periods of lockdown, etc.
- A more in-depth study into the experiences of Children in Care and Care Leavers in residential homes, especially with respect to the changes in statutory Social Care laws affecting residential settings.
- The additional potential longer-term impacts of the pandemic that are yet to be fully realised.

14. YOU SAID, WE RECOMMEND

Below, a series of recommendations have been proposed in response to challenges shared by Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers in the wake of the pandemic.

Some of these recommendations are directly in response to suggestions from service users as part of the one-to-one feedback sessions and are not related to COVID-19, but rather to general service improvement.

The recommendations have been split into the priority areas laid out in the **Corporate Parenting Strategy** (Newham's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022-2023, 2022) and form a subsection of the Corporate Parenting Strategy Action Plan that will present a highlight report detailing progress on the actions below to the Corporate Parenting Board every quarter. Please note that we do not have recommendations for all of the below priority areas as a result of this research.

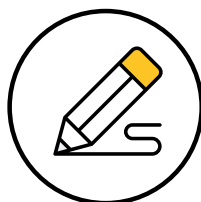
Corporate Parenting Strategy Priorities

For us to be good parents to you while you are in our care, we aim to achieve the following eight priorities fed back to us by yourselves and the trusted adults in your lives.



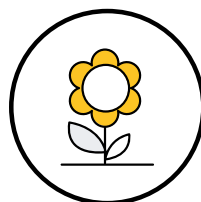
1. TRUSTED AND SAFE RELATIONSHIPS:

You feel loved, connected and safe.



2. EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING:

Hold high aspirations for you and give you the same opportunities to achieve at school, college and university as your peers where possible. Increase the number of care leavers in education, training and employment.



3. OPPORTUNITIES GROWING UP:

Being in care should be a positive experience that equips you for a successful life.



4. IDENTITY:

You have a strong sense of identity and an understanding of your care story.



5. CO-PRODUCTION:

Your life experiences are at the heart of how we design services, how we work with you and how we check if they are working well.



6. HOME & HOUSING

You will live somewhere where you feel safe and loved.



7. HEALTH AND SUPPORT:

Improve health and well-being by ensuring high quality health services and information are provided to you and your carers.



8. CARING FOR THOSE WHO CARE:

You have the opportunity to thrive through the support their carers and workers give you. Those who support you have all the resources they need to care for you to the best of their ability, know that we appreciate them and feel supported by Newham Council.

You Said, We Recommend

1. TRUSTED AND SAFE RELATIONSHIPS:



You said:



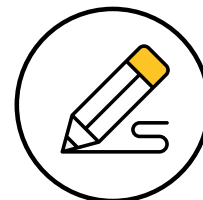
Some service users responded better to virtual support services.

I am not kept in the loop with things my Social Worker promised they would do. They don't follow up on actions or let me know if there are delays in getting back to me.

We recommend:

1. Newham offers service users the option to have a hybrid approach to support services where possible and appropriate. Service users will be able to receive a mixture of in-person and remote interventions and services that meet their needs and do not result in any additional safeguarding risk for the child or young person.
2. The creation of a template for Social Workers and Personal Advisers to use to send service users after every visit that details a summary of discussion, list of actions and timescales.

2. EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING:



You said:



The Virtual School Bulletin doesn't look very engaging so I don't look at it very often.

I would like to find voluntary experience, but don't know how to organise this.

I would like help applying for jobs, writing my CV and with interview skills.

The training you do when you leave care isn't very detailed and could cover more relevant topics, e.g. information on loans, your credit score, etc.

We recommend:

1. Rebranding the Virtual School Bulletin to make it more engaging, dynamic and age appropriate for Care Leavers.
2. For Care Leavers in Higher Education, where we can offer them appropriate work experience for their chosen career path, we should aim to do so.
3. Promote and raise awareness with service users about the Virtual School's workshops that support with employability skills and raise awareness with Personal Advisers on how to refer young people onto this training.
4. Review the training and awareness-raising Children in Care receive during their transition to Leaving Care to refine the content according to what young people wish they had known before they left care.

5. CO-PRODUCTION:

You said:



When people ask us for feedback, they don't tell us what they do with our feedback and what the results were.

We recommend:

1. The development of guidance for co-production with Children in Care and Care Leavers in partnership with Youth Empowerment colleagues. This document will detail the service's expectations of colleagues who consult service users, including outlining our expectations that colleagues report back to participants on how their feedback has been used and what changes have been made as a result of their participation in feedback sessions.

6. HOME & HOUSING

You said:



My friends and I get notices to say my rent is overdue, but Leaving Care is supposed to pay my rent.

When I have problems with my flat, it's impossible to get a hold of the housing association for them to fix it.

We recommend:

1. Newham reviews the process through which Leaving Care accommodation is paid to avoid Care Leavers receiving notices regarding overdue bills to their property which may lead to unnecessary stress and anxiety.
2. Reviewing the escalation process for Care Leavers who experience difficulties organising housing repairs and challenges with their housing association.
3. Conducting an additional feedback opportunity for Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers to gauge how widespread the challenges detailed in this report are amongst our service users.

7. HEALTH AND SUPPORT:



You said:



I have been trying to organise my free gym membership my Personal Adviser doesn't know how to organise this for me.

I would like more support for my mental health.

We recommend:

1. Creating a clear and concise pdf pack of health benefits you are entitled to as a Child in Care, Care Leaver or Foster Carer.
2. Make sure that all Care Leavers and Personal Advisers are aware of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Specialist Nurse role that has been introduced for Care Leavers and how to refer to them for mental health support.
3. Reviewing the escalation process for Children in Care and Care Leavers who experience delays obtaining mental health support.

8. CARING FOR THOSE WHO CARE:



You said:

We don't often consider the biological families of Foster Carers who also sacrifice a lot to welcome a foster child into their home.

Foster Carer appreciation events have stopped. The Foster Carer Support Group organises all the fun events for the young people and their families themselves.

It would have been helpful to hear about updates in COVID-19 guidance from Newham so we knew what news to believe.

We have to do 4 compulsory trainings a year and they aren't always relevant, e.g. how to set up your work station when working from home. I would like training specific to my child's needs.

Newham gave us a deadline to complete our compulsory training and threatened to cut our allowance if we didn't do it, even though we were in a pandemic and life was already extremely stressful.

We seldom hear from management that they acknowledge how difficult the pandemic was for us Foster Carers.

We recommend:

1. Re-introducing appreciation events for Foster Carers and their biological families.
2. Working with the Foster Carers' Support Group to put on a series of fun excursions and appreciation activities.
3. Creating a safe and non-judgemental space for the biological families to vent and share any frustrations around their family life.
4. Offering Foster Carers the chance to join Public Health's distribution list for reliable and accurate COVID-19 updates.
5. Obtaining feedback from Foster Carers on what training they would like to receive and aim to offer different training according to need.

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For any queries regarding support for Children in Care and Care Leavers, please visit our Local Offer site at <https://families.newham.gov.uk/kb5/newham/directory/advice.page?familychannel=9&id=WaKyz0vmK0M> or email our monitored mailbox at PersonalAdvisers@newham.gov.uk