

For general release

REPORT TO:	Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub-Committee 23 June 2020
SUBJECT:	Children's services response to COVID 19
LEAD OFFICER:	Rob Henderson, Executive Director, Children, Families & Education
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Learning
PERSON LEADING AT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING:	Rob Henderson, Executive Director, Children, Families & Education

CORPORATE PRIORITY/POLICY CONTEXT/ AMBITIOUS FOR CROYDON To offer a clear commitment to children in care and our young adults leaving care is fully aligned to our Corporate Plan for Croydon (2018-2022) in the following areas <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our children and young people thrive and reach their full potential• Everyone feels safer in their street, neighbourhood and home• Everyone has the opportunity to work and build their career. Corporate Plan for Croydon 2018-2022

ORIGIN OF ITEM:	It has been determined that an in-depth review of the support in place for vulnerable children as a result of the Covid-19 crisis was required.
BRIEF FOR THE COMMITTEE:	To provide reassurance regarding the most vulnerable children and what support is in place for them as we emerge from lockdown including educational provision.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This report provides an overview of the actions taken by the Children, Families and Education Department to support vulnerable children and families during the COVID 19 pandemic, including with and through schools. This report includes information in relation to risks, challenges and lessons learnt in light of possible future lockdowns. Specific information is included to highlight support provided to our looked after pupils, NEET cohort and how we have delivered the admissions process to ensure allocation of reception school places.

2. Education COVID 19 response:

2.1 Actions taken by the Directorate to support schools during the pandemic

General support for schools.

On March 20 2020, the Secretary of State for Education announced the closure of schools to all but vulnerable children and children of key workers until further notice. Education, nationally, and in Croydon, was required to be radically redesigned almost overnight.

The majority of schools remained open for vulnerable and key worker children, with some school developing a 'hub' model across two or more schools. Schools in the borough have worked in partnership to ensure enough provision was available.

Local Authority Officer and Advisers supported schools, recognising that each school has its own unique context and ecosystem and demands, followed a methodology of 'walking alongside' headteachers and school leaders in whatever their context. This involved (but is not an exhaustive list):

- Daily phone calls with headteachers and school leaders – checking on their welfare and that of their staff.
- A dedicated email account set up for schools and families
- Supporting schools and vulnerable families with free school meals and food parcels
- Co-ordinating Healthcare guidance with PH colleagues
- Ensuring National guidance had a Croydon context
- Regular meetings with Trade Unions and Professional Organisations.
- Twice weekly officers and advisers catch up meetings
- Devising recovery curriculum guidelines to support schools in the transition to wider provision
- Pastoral care of headteachers to support their wellbeing
- Virtual locality meetings with school leaders
- Transition guidance developed with school leaders
- Support the DfE Digital Devise rollout

The Local Authority make no distinction between the type of setting during the initial phases of the pandemic as we are supporting Croydon Children.

Schools have submitted attendance data to us on a daily basis and we have been able to oversee provision in the borough. As the graph below shows numbers of pupils in schools has significantly increased since 1st June when primary schools widened their opening. Attendance of vulnerable pupils has been low since the start of the lockdown, schools have worked with colleagues in CSC to ensure oversight of pupils not attending. They have reported any safeguarding concerns through the SPOC.

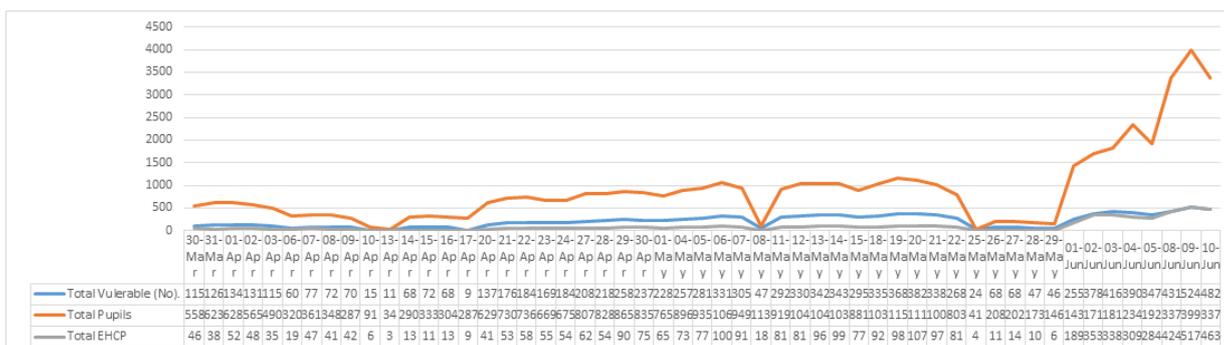


Table 1: Attendance across Croydon Schools

2.2 Response to Food Provision for Schools and Families

At the first notification of school closures in March, the Education Directorate developed a plan to support schools and families to continue to access good food, as outlined below.

Early response (from 19th March)

Guidance and recommendations were shared with all school, as follows:

- Schools should continue to cook for pupils still attending school.
- Where possible, schools may choose to cook extra hot food and families collect meals or meals be delivered to families most in need.
- Schools to provide food hampers for FSM pupils to support families for 1-2 weeks at a time – examples of healthy balanced foods to be included were provided.
- Schools purchase their own supermarket vouchers to issue to families in receipt of FSM (before the national scheme launched).
- Education directorate purchased £10,000 of emergency supermarket vouchers for those schools not able to issue their own.
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Launch of National Free School Meal Voucher Scheme

This scheme was hugely welcomed but created a huge amount of anxiety amongst school staff due to the technical difficulties and long wait time on the system. The Education Directorate offered a huge amount of support to schools to use the Edenred voucher system or find an alternative option to suit their school. This support is ongoing.

Launch of Family Support service

In early April, it was decided that a dedicated support inbox would be launched to offer advice and guidance and a referral service for schools and early year's settings worried about food provision, vouchers or families having limited access to food. The feedback from schools and families has been very positive. Referral statistics from the 650 e-mails received are below:

Referrals made to the hub for food packages to be delivered		Referrals made to Gateway for assessment for financial support		TOTAL REFERRALS
Shielded	Non-shielded	Shielded	Non-shielded	
16	98	8	65	187

Table 2

A community support services document has also now been created to enable schools to access ongoing support for those families most in need.

Surplus Food Distribution

In partnership with Legacy Youth Zone, 7 local schools (with high FSM levels) were identified to collect regular surplus food from Legacy and use this to create and distribute food packages to local families.

In partnership with Gateway, 9 local schools have been identified and now registered with FareShare and are collecting surplus food from one of four local collection points, every week. This is then being distributed to families in need.

2.3 Education support for Children Looked After.

The Virtual school team have been able to maintain all functions as usual while working remotely.

We have focused on weekly calls to Foster carers and young people in semi-independent accommodation to allow us to really understand our young people's picture. Each case has had individual consideration and risk assessments have been completed including Social workers and School staff, where returns to school has been appropriate. We calculate figures weekly. At present (in the open year groups, and as vulnerable young people) approximately 40% whole cohort has returned to school. (This is approx. 60% of our Y6 group, and 30% Year R and 1, with 15% of other pupils already attending as vulnerable pupils) This is under weekly review by our team and Social care and felt to be the best balance, of young people getting what they need at home where safety is the priority.

We have supported carers and young people to access their children's schools options for learning and to ensure schools have been aware of the specific needs of our cohort at this time via regular communication with the designated teachers.

We have issued our own online resources to support learning for our 450+ young people of school age. We have over 100 school age pupils signed up to Flash Maths academy online and similar numbers engaging with Britannica resources that we fund licenses too. We have sent lists of online learning resources to carers and on individual basis supported with home learning timetables and ideas as needed. We have maintained our online volunteer mentoring support for young people already in our system and this has ensured some of our most vulnerable Y11 students who were impacted by CV-19 have had ongoing weekly video sessions and tailored work sent. Similarly, our careers advice information and guidance programmes have been still running and accessible via our team and Social workers. Many of our young people have accessed our licenses to Kudos programme that offers a full careers interview and suggestion of next steps in the local area to our young people.

We have also been able to process and issue over 100 laptops/tablets to young people via a combination of our own PPG funding and the governments' laptop scheme. This will continue over the coming months and we expect every child or young person in our care who has needed a device and/internet to have been given this by the end of the academic year. This has meant young

people have been better able to stay in touch with schools and not lose out on learning and communication with their schools.

The Virtual School has also been using the additional technological power in our new online ways of working to look at how best to facilitate support for our young people most affected by the current school opening challenges. We were able to glean from our Y11 cohort that they need support with their college transitions and have developed a series of bespoke online taster webinars of A-levels and other level 1/2/3 courses in different subjects for students to trial with us over the summer. The team are also working hard on what this year's summermix provision for extra-curricular work may look like for our young people. Similarly, we have more pupils than ever signed up for TLC live online tuition that assesses and supports the specific gaps in a students' learning and then develops online programme of tuition for them. This is proving a powerful way to track and maintain progress for our youngsters. We have trialled it this term with a group of out of borough young people who historically, have not had such strong support from us due to challenges with distance. The CV situation has really strengthened our ability to support these initiatives. This work has all been made possible through our now almost fully staffed team (28 staff), that gives us capacity to serve our 850+ young people better. We have used our PPG funding and our staffing fund (high needs block), to make all this growth this possible. We are able to monitor our young people closely through their individual workers. This gives us insight and allows us to target spend better than ever before.

2.4 Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities

Since the introduction of COVID-19 pandemic measures the SEN Service has adapted practice to maintain performance and work virtually whenever possible.

The Government has made two temporary changes to SEND legislation. The first of which changes the Local Authority's absolute duty to secure special educational provision and health care provision in accordance with an EHC Plan to 'reasonable endeavours' to secure the provision and the second amends the duty to meet timescales for EHC needs assessment and EHC Plans, if the reason for delay relates to incidence or transmission of Coronavirus.

Education, Health and Care Co-ordinators have continued to undertake EHC needs assessment for Croydon's children and young people with special educational needs. Currently 180 children's EHC needs assessment are in the process of being co-ordinated. Assessments of children and young people's needs are being undertaken by practitioners virtually or based on phone conversations and school and health records. Despite the challenges of the current circumstances the SEN Service has issued 75% of EHC Plans within the regular timescale of 20 weeks and continues to work with school and parents to undertake annual reviews of EHC Plans. The SEN Service has developed approaches to maintain rigorous decision-making processes virtually.

The Youth Disability Service has remained open three days a week and has been providing post 19 care, support and training for independence for young

people with complex and severe learning difficulties; prioritising attendance for young people whose family circumstances are such that 'lockdown' and staying at home puts a strain on the family and the young person's well-being.

The Early Years Inclusion and Intervention Team have worked hard to develop and publish resources on the Local Offer website for parents and carers of young children with SEN, in particular for those with autism. Team members are keeping in contact with parents and, for those children with special educational needs who will be starting school in September, team members have been arranging meetings between early years settings, schools and parents to support planning for the autumn term.

The Department for Education has charged Local Authority's with working with schools to undertake risk assessments for all young people with EHC Plans, to establish whether these young people are safer at home or school and the approach to maintaining children's educational progress through reasonable endeavours to meet children's SEN. We have has 3200 children and young people with an EHC Plan, to date we have received risk assessments for 1125 of the children. Each risk assessment is reviewed and if there are concerns about a young person's well-being the child's social worker and the school are contacted. We have engaged the support of the lead education HMI for London in following up the provision of risk assessments from for children and young people who are placed in independent sector schools. This support has been welcomed and is already resulting in improved responsiveness from schools in providing risk assessments and, we anticipate, in increasing the numbers of young people with EHC Plans who attend on-site education during this term.

All our special schools are now open with increasing numbers of children returning week on week. Attendance at Enhanced Learning Provisions (ELPs) is also increasing; most ELP provisions have remained open throughout with an offer of places to all ELP pupils.

Some parents are still reluctant to agree a return to school before September – reasons vary, and include concerns about using public transport, fear of infection from children of key-workers, siblings not returning. Croydon schools are maintaining regular contact with parents and are reassuring parents it is safe to return as required. A numbers of children are not able to return due to medical conditions (up to 40 at St. Giles)

Schools have commented positively on the:

- Support from Croydon school transport service with willingness to adapt to changing demand for school places and offering flexibility to reflect part-time attendance and different drop off and pick up times
- Guidance and resources from the EP service as well as access to the parent advice line.
- Support from speech and language service

2.5 Support for vulnerable pupils

Learning Access has continued to have the safety and wellbeing of pupils at the heart of its work throughout Covid-19. Officers have continued to stay in touch with families and have liaised with their schools and other services where

needed. Examples of this work include securing food support for a family who was struggling to secure food; online mentoring for a young man who was becoming increasingly anxious about Covid-19; and continuing to liaise with the schools and other services in respect of a pupil who has been out of education for some time to ensure he has education.

Other aspects of the teams work such as SPOC; complex admissions applications; children missing from education and elective home education have continued to be business as normal but working from home. We have switched to engaging with parents of electively home educated children remotely. This has been well received by families. We are also carrying out wellbeing calls to our more vulnerable families. One of these calls identified a safeguarding concern that led to a SPOC referral.

Prosecutions and fines for absence from school have stopped as a result of Covid-19. As schools widen their attendance the service is now focused on providing support to schools to ensure vulnerable children resume attendance and do not become missing from education.

Finally the service has supported the wider directorate's response to Covid-19 by providing supplementary guidance to schools; delivering PPE; and assisting colleagues in SEND.

2.6 Education support for Post 16 Transitions and NEET

Our response to COVID-19 has been to support young people we will continue to be guided by our Corporate Plan priorities that everybody has the opportunity to work and build their career and that every child and young person in Croydon has access to high quality education and youth facilities. We want to continue to raise their aspirations, increase their opportunities, help them to make the right career choices, and develop the necessary wider skills to provide businesses with a potential future talent pool.

There are a huge range of services on offer to young people in Croydon to support them to find employment and training opportunities, and many have adapted their offer to meet the needs of our young people during the crisis. Introducing new ways of engaging, new virtual and online methods of delivery, and stepping up their health and mental wellbeing support.

Partners are following the government's temporary flexibilities through the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) to make it easier for colleges and apprenticeship providers to support learners to continue and complete their courses remotely and to make appropriate arrangements to support key gateway points in studies such as end point assessments and working with qualification.

NEET Prevention Support (14-17 year olds)

The NEET Team continue to work with schools to ensure that all pupils in years 11 and 12 are applying for places for the next academic year and receiving offers. To support this work, details of local providers who are able to support pupils with their post 16 transition were shared with schools and also posted on the Young Croydon website. Furthermore, virtual appointments

have been offered for pupils and / or their parents / carers who have any concern or would benefit from personalised information and advice. Throughout the lockdown, schools/colleges have been providing outreach services to those pupils deemed as particularly vulnerable. From 15th June 2020, schools will be providing some direct contact education to pupils in year 10 & 12. Once schools are able to accommodate this, we will continue to provide the Risk of NEET (RON) programme in targeted schools is a 6 to 10 week programme working with year 10 and 11 pupils in school who have been identified most at risk of becoming NEET. The programme focusses on making the right choices, building resilience and confidence, careers advice and guidance. Explore virtual delivery to particularly vulnerable pupils. NEET Support (16-18 year olds and up to age 21 for care leavers)

An Instagram video has been created and posted on the Youth Service's Young Croydon platforms, signposting the website for information and also to the NEET team's inbox to request transition into EET support.

An Opportunities Bulletin is distributed (at the beginning of each month) to all young people on our database whose is recorded as either NEET or Not Known. This bulletin is also circulated to professionals working with the cohort, likewise posted on the Young Croydon website. We continue to deliver our 'Local Offer for Care Leavers' which sets out the services Croydon Council provides to care leavers. This is given to all care leavers. The document was produced in consultation with care leavers, understanding their perspectives and designing a system which responds to their needs.

2.7 School Place Planning and Admission & Early Years

The council continues to meet its planning duties (s13-14 Education Act 1996) to promote high standards of education and fair access to education; secure provision for children with SEN; and respond to parental preference.

Ensuring sufficiency of school places and that residents have access to high quality schools within the borough is central to achieving our priorities / outcomes: 'Our children and young people thrive and reach their full potential; and Children and young people in Croydon are safe, healthy and happy, and aspire to be the best they can be.'

We continue to work with the childcare sector to ensure sufficient childcare for children of critical workers and vulnerable children, alongside the wider opening of schools for eligible year groups.

All children who applied for a reception place for September 2020 have received an offer of a place, with 84% being allocated a place at their 1st preference school on national offer day – 16 April; and 96% receiving one of their first three preference schools. In-year applications are being processed and offers made in line with current processes. School admission appeals will take place in line with the temporary changes to the School Admission Appeal Regulations 2012, during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Work is underway to get an estimate of the like number of children and young people and associated costs in relation to the suspension of tree travel from September 2020.

2.8 Key risks and challenges

- Low pupil attendance rates
- Sufficient Social distancing within the environment.
- Staffing attendance – particularly of anxious colleagues or BAME colleagues.
- School estate may not have enough classrooms needed to apply social distancing
- Ensuring that families have access to food provision
- Pupils being able to access on-line learning
- Achievement gaps
- Increased rate of children and young people suffering trauma as a result of COVID 19 and long period of time away from school
- Possible increase in CME and EHE referrals
- Possible increase in safeguarding disclosures
- Lack of clarity about what provision will look like in September
- Summer holiday provision
- Concerns about how well pupils will transition into Reception, KS2 and Year 7

The Education Directorate has produced a working action plan outlining the response to the risks and concerns identified above, see Appendix 1

3 Vulnerable children and families COVID-19 response

3.1 Single Point of Contact and assessment service

The Front Door continues to manage all referrals into Early Help and Children's Social Care. The Service is working remotely and ensuring all referrals meet the agreed timescales for response and action. Strategy Meetings are taking place by phone and partners dial in to support the planning for children and young people at risk of or who have suffered significant harm.

SPOC and Assessment managers continue to work together closely to ensure that those children most at risk are responded to in a timely manner SPOC staff have been provided with details of resources and support that families can access, linked to COVID 19 needs. Our Emergency Duty Team (EDT) covering adults, housing and children continues to manage out of hours emergencies, we have supported the team with back up workers when necessary. EDT staff have been provided with comprehensive details of support services available to vulnerable families and adults and are provided with weekly updated information around emergency accommodation for children, families and vulnerable adults

Assessment teams are managing duty remotely. Social workers remain responsive to Section 47 enquires, with the main duty social worker being office based where appropriate. All children subject to a Section 47 enquiry are being visited at home, with face to face interaction taking place to properly assess risk. Children subject to a new Section 17 assessment have a face to face visit, with managers then risk assessing if virtual visits are appropriate. Managers are reviewing assessments following the first and subsequent visits

3.2 Visiting children and families

Social workers and their managers are continuously reviewing and assessing risks and protective factors for the families they work with, and visits against the three priority groups are reported and monitored on a weekly basis (see table 3 below)

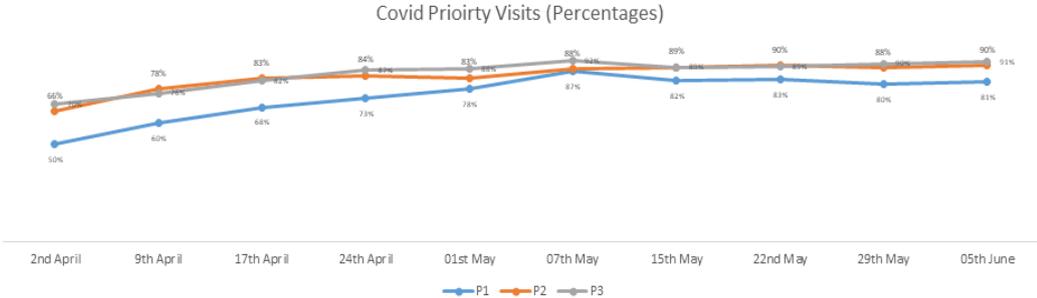


Table 3

In priority 1 cases, where children and young people are subject to child protection plans or where there are safeguarding concerns social workers continue to carry out face to face visits to the required timescales. For priority 2 and 3 every other visit, subject to the risk assessment described above. is virtual social workers and family support workers continue to complete virtual visits video/face time every two weeks. Close liaison between the education directorate and children’s social care is supporting the promotion of school attendance for vulnerable children, although this continues to reflect the national picture of lower levels than we would like. Families that are self-isolating have been identified and their specific needs recorded, working closely with the Council’s response to shielded residents.

3.3 Systems and processes

Cases where care proceedings have been initiated have all been reviewed to ensure actions are being taken to keep these on track. Close consultation with the local judiciary has resulted in a hybrid approach, with families offered remote hearings which they can choose to take up if they wish.

Expert assessments such as parenting assessments have been taking place as required, with the benefit of full PPE. Risk assessments are also underway to support face to face contacts between children and birth families.

Quality assurance activities have continued at pace during the lockdown period. Deep dive reviews of the quality of child in need plans, of child protection plans open for over 9 months and the quality of practice in pre-birth work have all been completed. Plans are in place to disseminate the findings to continue to improve day to day practice.

3.4 Impact on activity

The service is confident that all statutory requirements have been met during the COVID-19 pandemic, however there has been a reduction in activity at the front door (SPOC) for services, although seasonal patterns needs to be taken into account. Table 4 below shows the reduction over March and April in contacts to children’s social care and referrals to early help, as well as contacts that become referrals to children’s social care.

As a result the SPOC and assessment services are currently holding lower caseloads. Staff are being retained in anticipation of rising demand for services from the autumn, as more children and young people attend school and partner agencies such as health have more contact with residents. Activity levels are monitored and discussed on a weekly basis to ensure the service is ready to respond.

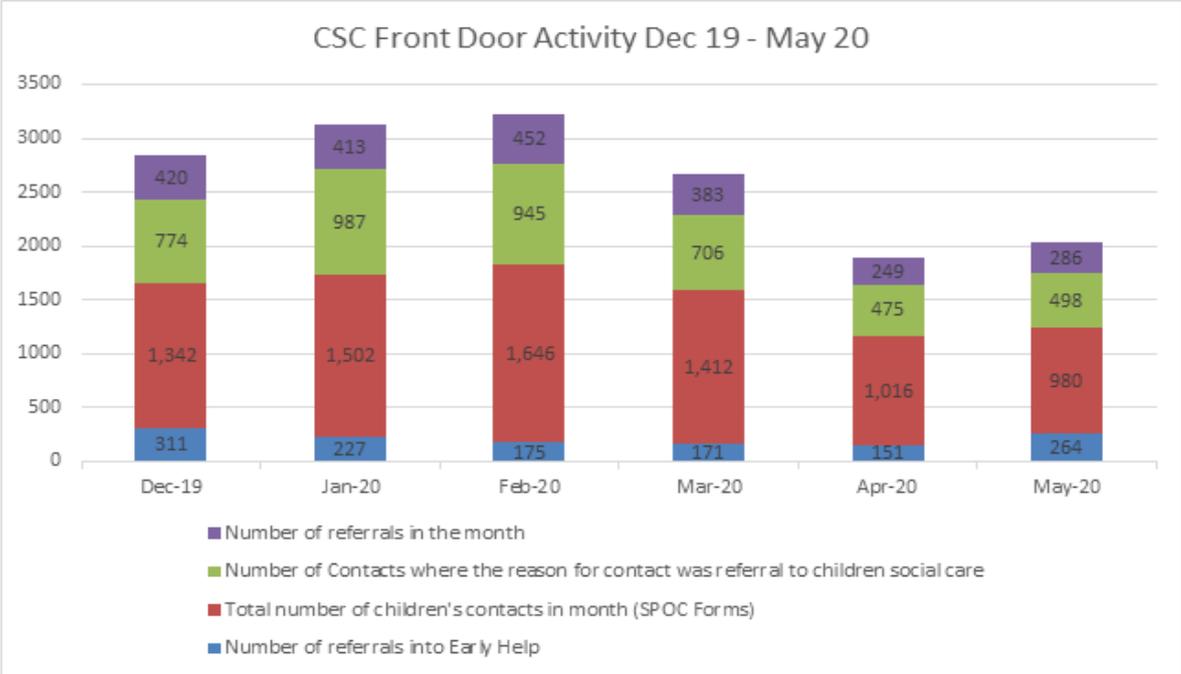


Table 4

Tables 5 and 6 below track activity levels around care and placement orders, and the number of children in Croydon’s care. There is limited headline impact over the same time period for these two areas, although there are reports that the pandemic has prevented unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people reaching the UK, which may be a driver for the decrease seen in these numbers since December 2019. The children looked after service are working closely with other Gateway authorities and the Home Office to share intelligence and anticipate where possible the impact of the relaxation of lockdown arrangements in the UK and abroad.

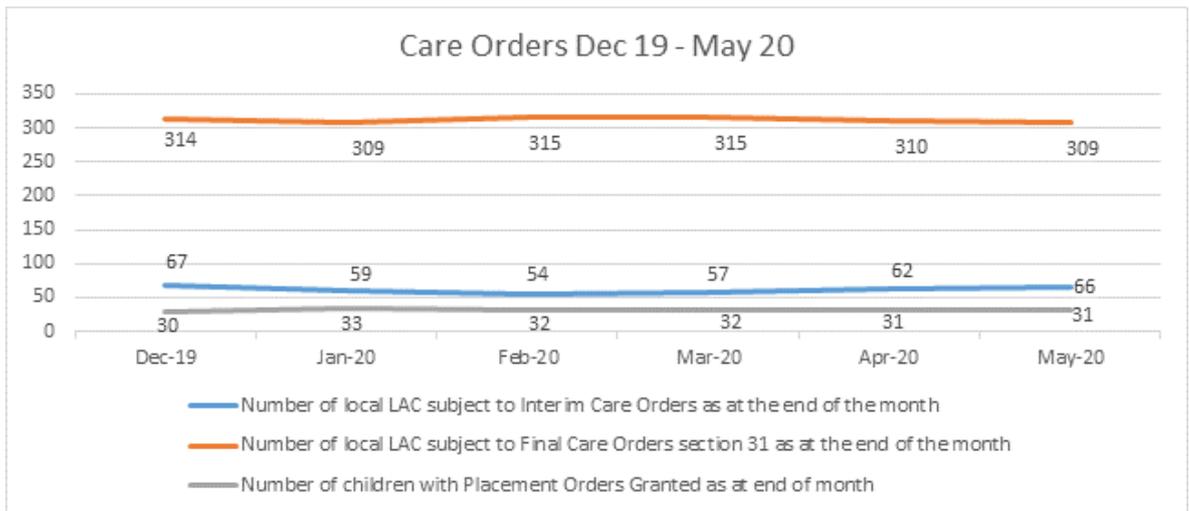


Table 5

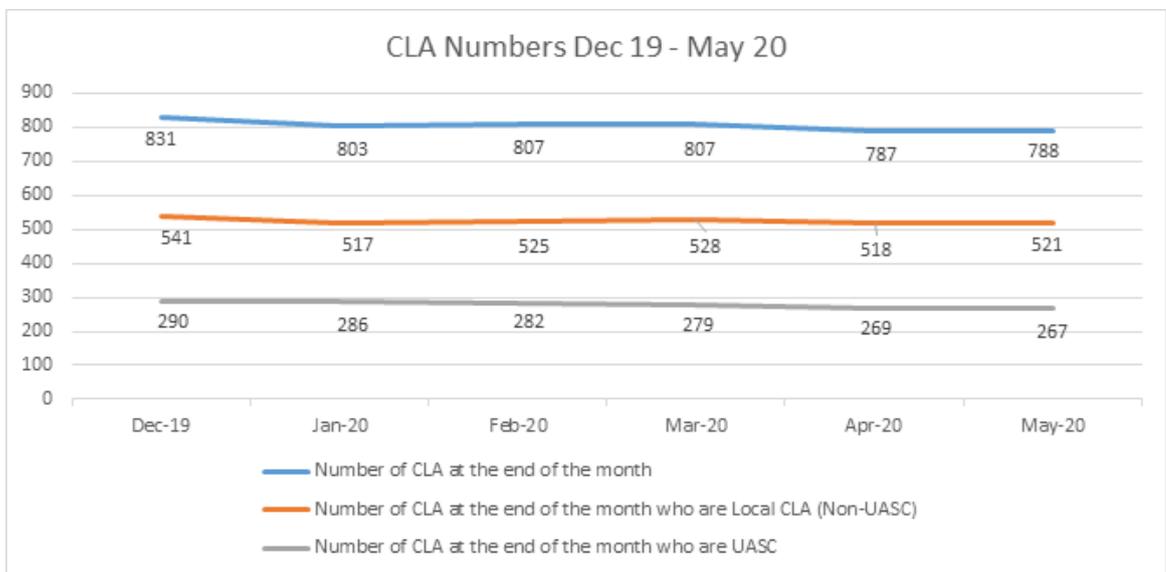


Table 6

Contact Officer: Robert Henderson
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Background Documents: None

Appendices: Appendix 1: Education Directorate Covid-19
 Transition Action Plan