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**Key Messages from Learning from Lockdown**

This work was commissioned by ALDCS so that Directors of child and family services’ decisions can take workforce views and evidence from practice into account as we move into the next stages of recovery and reinvigoration, as the pandemic continues and as the longer term impact of lock downs and recession on children and families lives play out.

This headline report offers a high level summary of the detailed feedback and quotes from the c. 150 staff who attended 16 discussion forums in July and August 2020. The full report also draws in learning from other practice forums conducted in the lockdown period and from pertinent research evidence.

We would urge Directors to situate this feedback within the much bigger picture:

* Recognising our role in addressing the structural inequalities laid bare by the pandemic and the global and local Black Lives Matter uprisings following the death of George Floyd in May 2020. The hiatus in day-to-day activity caused by the pandemic, and the resonance with the emerging evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on BAME people opened a space in which the voices of those experiencing racism and oppression were heard and listened to in a unique way.
* Acknowledging that our social welfare system was built in a different period of history, on service tramlines that often impede holistic working. As such, child and family services – particularly where early help and targeted support is very limited - is often responding through processes and mechanisms that are not serving well to offer the support needed to keep families safely together.
* We have huge challenges but also a rare opportunity to change the ways in which our organisations work, rethink the structures within which work takes place and change the professional cultures that shape practice responses. The decisions made will take social work and the wellbeing of the most marginalised in our communities in particular directions. We can choose to revert back to familiar ways of working, even if we are not convinced this is the right thing to do. Or we can use this opportunity to work together on a new vision for ourselves our organisations and our communities. Our strong recommendation is that we grasp this opportunity with both hands.
* This work raises an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand the imperative to embrace the potential unleashed by our radical lurch into digital practices over recent months. On the other the need to keep focused on the core and abiding centrality of building and maintaining strong relationships of trust as the keystone for all of the work we do. Holding both these in mind is vital as we seek to reinvigorate social connectedness among staff and across communities, and in ensuring that attention to relationships shapes our approaches to blended digital/face to face (f2f) practices.
* We hope that you’ll join us at the Research in Practice Leaders’ Forum online in November and December 2020 to think through these challenges with colleagues from across England. For details of all five online sessions see: <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/events-training/2020/november/towards-a-fairer-future-addressing-inequality-in-recovery-leaders-forum-session-2/> and scroll down for links to the other sessions. Book your place using the links on each page. You need to be logged into your Research in Practice account to book.

The speed and virulence of the Covid-19 pandemic is testing local and national services across the globe. Emergency responses as the virus struck hard and fast in London were broadly able to ensure that those who needed support most were able to access it and we should be proud of that.

The dedication of child and family services staff, often putting themselves at risk in order to protect others, all in the context of the relative isolation of lockdown cannot be underplayed. These staff did not receive the public accolade of doorstep applause, but carried out their work diligently, often feeling publicly undervalued, but determined to carry on.

It is in this context that we spoke to c. 150 people from across the London boroughs. They came from a range of practice settings: early help, children in need, child protection, children in care, youth justice and care leaver services. We spoke to practitioners, managers, Heads of Service, Workforce Development staff, those responsible for Quality Assurance, and to Principal Social Workers. We want to thank everyone who took the time to speak to us, to provide us with additional information about what they are doing, and who were willing to share their experiences so vividly and openly. We want you to know that we heard your voices, we listened, and we are doing our best to share them. However, we also want to remind you that you also have voices and can speak for yourselves and your communities and urge you to continue to do so.

Speaking to members of the workforce in July 2020, rather than in April or May, meant that they reflected not only the immediate impact of the pandemic on their lives, their work, and the families they work with, but also provided a perspective on the impact of some of the changes in practice implemented during the pandemic, and the extent to which these should, or could, be incorporated into a new version of the future.

Our collective understanding of Covid-19 is changing as we learn more about the virus, its transmission pathways and impacts. In September 2020, we are only six months into our journey of understanding and responding– we are nowhere near the end. We know a good deal more about how effective alternative ways of working are, for whom, and in what circumstances, but we don’t yet know it all. This headline report and the full report should be read with that in mind.

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**Digital practice** during the response to the pandemic was much more successful than people (families and workers) expected it to be, certainly initially. There is a temporal aspect to this - people also spoke about some virtual relationships wearing thin over time, and as workers and families became more familiar with using digital methods for communicating. The strain on many workers of providing a key worker response from their own home was highly evident. ‘It’s more like living in the office than working at home’ was a quote that summed this up well. Attention needs to be paid to staff mental health and well-being and their ability to be responsive to increased referrals and the impacts of a pandemic-induced recession in the immediate future.

Some clear views have emerged about the areas of practice where digital engagement is most helpful (such as Children in Care reviews and initial contacts with Early Help services), and areas of practice where digital contacts were perceived to be less helpful, or should not be used unless absolutely necessary (such as child protection investigations or at initial child protection conferences). Overwhelmingly, no-one thought that digital practices should be stopped completely, although returning to ‘business as usual’ may be a tempting option. The overriding message is that while digital working can enhance and add to practice, this needs to be from firm foundations in quality, ethical decision-making and rights-based practices.

Future thinking should focus on blended digital/f2f working and determining the principles for deciding which methods work best for which forums and when. Children and families’ preferences must be at the forefront. There is a cautionary note here: that digital working will reinforce and expose cultures, behaviours and practices that were not working well anyway. Careful attention should be paid to practice quality, ethical decision-making and rights-based practices.

The summary report identifies the key issues to be taken into account in moving to establishing permanent hybrid f2f/digital and also hybrid home/office working practices with children and families and inter-professionally.

**The Children’s Services response** to the pandemic was generally viewed as successful in supporting consistency and assessment of risk across the capital. In the initial stages of the pandemic this provided necessary structure, shared decision-making and responsibility, mitigating the potential for significant numbers of staff becoming ill, and reflecting the general reduction in service availability. The mobilisation of staff to new roles raised some very interesting reflections, for instance on the perspectives and empathic responses non-social care staff brought to conduct shielding calls.

One risk noted was the strain on families of limited access to support where early help teams have been re-directed into other roles/or services are highly limited – this is unsustainable without having a longer term negative impact. Areas for very immediate concern and additional support would include UASC and care leavers who have been particularly isolated in lock down, were often ineligible for furlough and many in extreme poverty; new parental and child and adolescent mental health issues and lack of respite services to families with disabled children.

The experience of living and working through the pandemic generated significant learning about how organisations could swiftly become more responsive and adapt to changing circumstances. The report draws out some of the key priorities identified by the workforce.

**Organisational capacity to change:** Historically and politically, local authorities are viewed as very large organisations where change is difficult to achieve and being responsive is not viewed as an existing strength. Organisational practices changed very quickly during the pandemic - approval routes for resources were fast-tracked, communications were streamlined. Children’s Services in particular demonstrated the capacity and capability to be responsive.

A strong message was the experience of an unprecedented shift to families **welcoming** CSC contact and practical support, and how the provision of immediate practical support may be positively influencing relationships in the longer term. A key question in the immediate is how will your organisation actively resist a return to ‘business as usual’ that participants recognised as often lacking in practical, meaningful support and dominated by form filling and assessment exercises?

Living through this has encouraged practitioners, managers and strategic leaders to think differently about the extent to which they can and should be driving development forward. Workforce experience has changed expectations about what’s possible, we all need to capitalise on this moment.

**Pan-London working:** Throughout our discussions the benefits of pan-London interaction and activities were evident. We identified some areas for potential fruitful pan-London collaboration – emergency planning, workforce development and recruitment in particular. These issues are expanded on in the full report and highlight the benefits of working together more collaboratively using virtual methods and ensuring that the workforce is equipped with the right skills and capabilities to make best use of the digital options available for learning, for practice and for working in partnership with families and colleagues.

**Structural inequalities:** The pandemic is shining harsh light on the structural inequalities embedded in society and in our Children’s Services responses, the most significant being poverty and racial inequality. The increased risks of coronavirus for BAME people is increasingly apparent and the death of George Floyd and the resultant Black Lives Matter marches have impacted significantly on the London workforce and the communities they work with.

We heard mixed evidence – in some boroughs meaningful actions and long term planning for anti-racist action were evident. The commitment of senior leadership in responding actively has been strongly noticed and valued. Conversely, where this was felt to be absent this was keenly felt by staff. We heard very positive stories of young, black members of staff ‘walking taller’ in the wake of the whole organisation Zoom meetings that acknowledged structural racism directly.

Many places were looking closely at the positive recruitment of BAME colleagues to senior positions, which may be the most straightforward place for initial activity. There are more difficult, long term, entrenched issues of institutional racism that will need strong leadership on cultural change in multi-professional working (for instance, re. stop and search and re. safety planning around DAV with BAME families).

Children’s Services have an opportunity here: it seems vital to us not to lose the momentum of the moment and to engage directly with BAME members of our communities – hearing their voice and experience rather than channelling our responses through well-worn service pathways developed without their input.

**How we view the families we work with:** During our discussions, people shared a range of views about children, young people and families. It was hard for people to respond to our question ‘what have you valued most about the people you work with in lockdown?’ We were struck by language used about families that we heard in a number of sessions. Terms that are unhelpful to relationship-based, trauma-informed practice (e.g. ‘resistant’ ‘hard to engage’ ‘disguised compliance’ and the notion that families might be using the pandemic to avoid services) were used liberally.

Conversely others talked about the way the pandemic has been experienced as a leveller, in which they were able to see more clearly the common human experience, relate to people on a personal level, and appreciate the ‘whole person’ rather than the ‘presenting problem.’ This was experienced by workers towards families; recounted as videos of young people’s experiences shown in digital decision making meetings; also experienced by workers towards senior leaders and their colleagues, in part due to the window on people’s lives that virtual working at home provides.

For some people this was a revelation, and they reported that it has changed the way they think about engaging and working with others. For others, as noted above, a deficit-based perspective continues to dominate their perceptions of families in the community. We cannot stress enough that the culture and behaviours of the workforce influence outcomes for families much more than the choice to work digitally or face-to-face – local authorities need to take care that this remains a priority.

**Listening to other voices:** Our full report should be read in tandem with other research being done into child and family services work in the pandemic and the work being done by other workforce groups in London.

**Conclusion:**

In the outputs from our discussions, there were plenty of examples of innovative practice, of reimagining ways of working to meet the current crisis, which we look forward sharing in the full report. We’ve all been stretched into new ways of thinking by the pandemic. The opportunity is to resist reverting back to ‘the old normal’ and to use what we have achieved in such a short time as a unique, once in a generation opportunity to change the way we do what we do.

There is a cautionary note here: that digital working will reinforce and expose cultures, behaviours and practices that were not working well anyway. Careful attention should be paid to practice quality, ethical decision-making and rights-based practices.

Key actions for local authorities:

* Review the full report, and test out some of the conclusions with your own staff – we did not speak to everyone, and your experiences may be different
* Prioritise the development of practice guidance for working digitally: this will not be the same for all LAs, but should have some common content, and ideally have a set of shared principles underpinning it
* Look after the mental wellbeing of your workforce as this will impact on your capacity to meet demand over the coming months
* Undertake workplace assessments and reasonable adjustments, and give very clear guidance about hybrid working arrangements and expectations to all staff
* Prioritise the activity in your LA focusing on systemic racism – the workforce is looking for positive action and will feel very let down if this doesn’t happen
* Find ways of continuing to communicate regularly with all staff in informal ways – it changed the way they see strategic leaders, and made them feel that they mattered
* Review your Early Help offer, and where this was reduced or removed, restart as soon as possible

The move to introducing digital practices has been rapidly introduced without the usual time allowed for careful planning, and the temptation is to overlook the risk of it compounding existing challenges and to move ahead at pace to develop new policies and guidance. Developing standards and guidance for digital practice without considering which practices and cultures need to be strengthened and which need to be disrupted, will very possibly reinforce existing cultural and behavioural norms. Exploring and addressing these first is going to be key.

As part of this ongoing project with ALDCS, Research in Practice is able to provide support to London local authorities to collectively:

* Work to develop a digital practice framework and build capacity within the workforce to embed it in practice and quality assure it.
* Identify shared approaches to support the children’s workforce to utilise digital practices and the new home / office interface in ways which promote emotional health and well-being and support effective practice.
* Highlight and share existing Research in Practice resources which provide constructive challenge to existing cultures and behaviours where these are less helpful and reinforce those positive evidence-informed practices where these are embedded. Research in Practice can also set out a framework for change (including addressing issues of systemic racism and inequality).

Local authorities may wish to collectively or individually extend this to include the following:

* Support the exploration of shared digital recruitment practices.
* Provide bespoke support and advice to local authorities experiencing specific issues of culture and practice, themed around particular topics, or roles.
* Support the detailed exploration of a virtual workforce development offer, building capacity for workforce development staff to build their own resources, reuse existing content and work together to share best practice and streamline activity.
* Support the development and integration of methods and approaches which foreground the active participation of children, young people, families and communities in developing service pathways, supporting workforce learning and driving innovation.