

Scrutiny Report



15 July 2021

CYPSC Update on Children's Services of April 2020 – March 2021 and current impact of Covid.

Name of Scrutiny Committee **Children and Young People**

Report sponsor **Dr Mac Heath**
Director of Children's Services

Exempt / confidential / not for publication	Yes / No
Council Plan reference	Ref number / Not in Council Plan
Wards affected	All wards / list individual wards

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to give a summary overview of the performance and challenges faced of Children's Services over 2020-2001 and to consider the impact of Covid over the previous year, and the emerging legacy that is now beginning to be seen as restrictions for communities begin to lift and the challenges children and families have been experiencing begin to be understood.

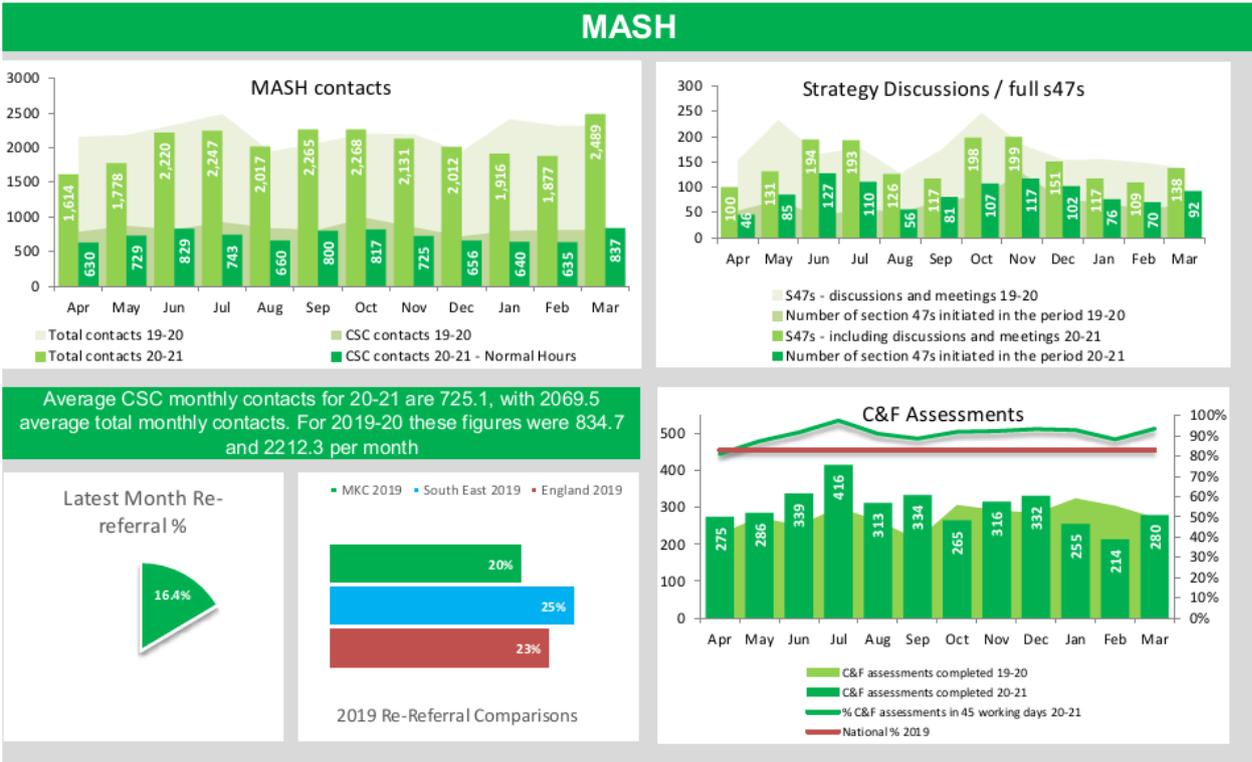
Children's Social Care

Children's Social Care has continued to operate effectively over the last year. Although services were disrupted, with and working with families having frequently to be organised differently, staff continued to visit, with all cases rated Red, Amber, Green (RAG) in relation to risk and need and were considered by managers on a weekly basis.

The service consistently had to adapt its approach in line with National guidelines and restrictions and regularly interpret guidance from different government departments, alongside working closely with internal partners such as Public Health, Health and Safety, Comms, etc., alongside our wider statutory and voluntary partners.

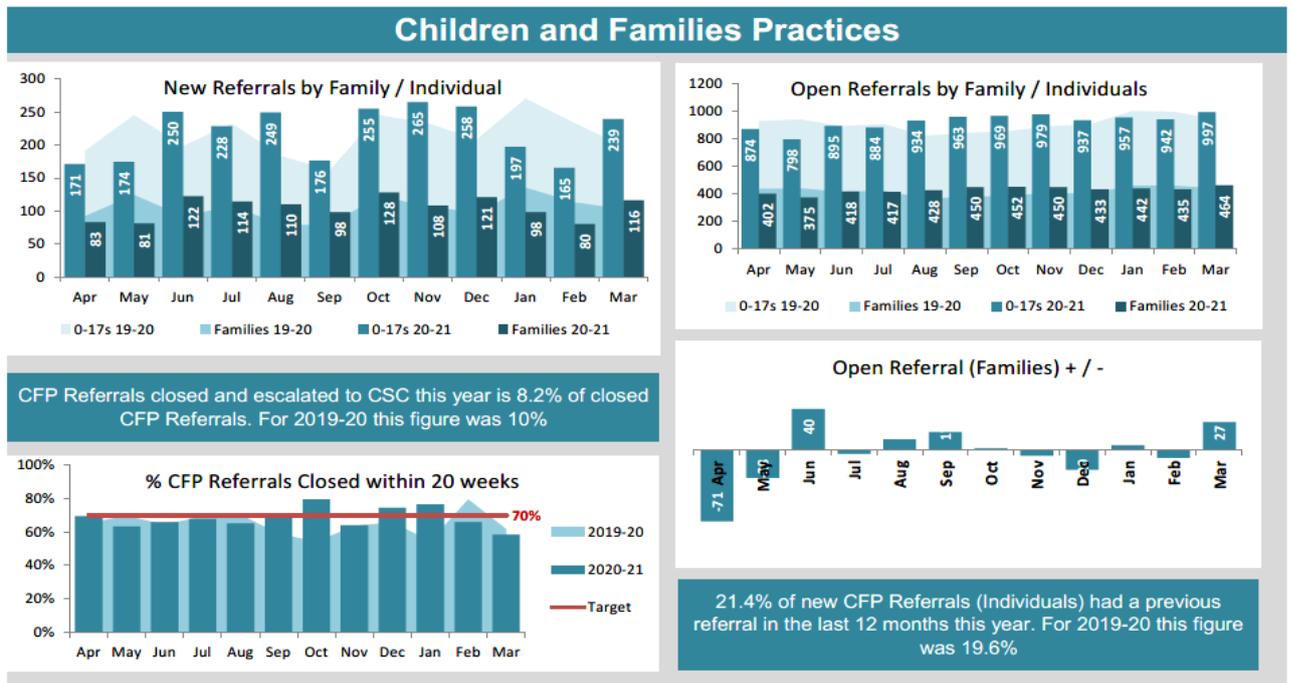
The resilience of our workforce remained strong throughout and the willingness of staff within Children’s Services to be deployed to a range of roles across the Council, often on short notice enables the service to help strengthen the wider Council’s response to Covid, be that through FoodBank Xtra, supporting Testing arrangements or other wider challenges. We now have all our Children’s Services colleagues back within the service but have needed to undertake a range of change management arrangements to ensure that going forward we are well placed to respond to the increasing demands we are seeing across some services.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)



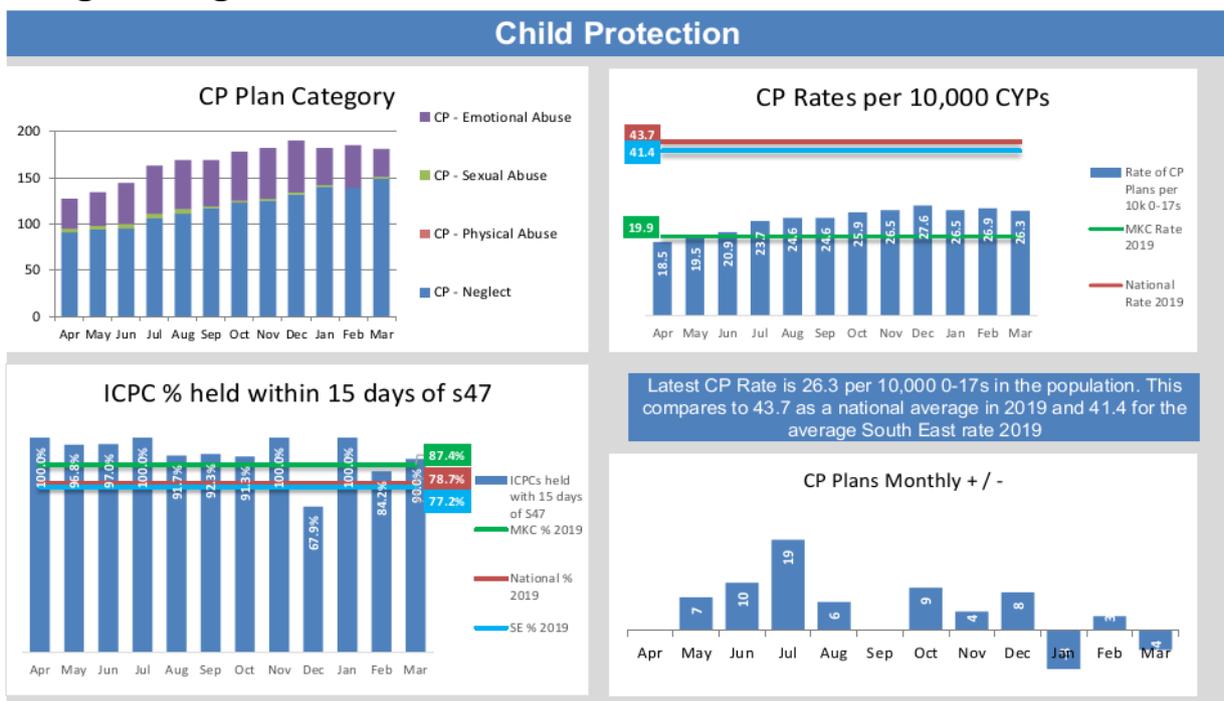
The pattern in relation to referrals into MASH largely reflects previous years, but the significant incidents in relation to Domestic Abuse incidents has appeared to be more serious in their nature, and since April 2021, we have seen an increase in re-referrals to MASH as schools have seen children return and health professionals are seeing more children either in surgeries or in hospital settings.

Children and Family Practices



CFP Teams have managed an increasing caseload over the year as they found it more challenging to continue involvement and step-down families to either Children’s Centres, community support or to ensure regular health monitoring, due to the disruption of those services during Covid. However, CFP’s retained a good throughflow in their interventions and continued to effectively mitigate the demand on Children’s social care teams. However, the number of open referrals within CFP’s in April 2021 rose to 1,025, a significant rise from April 2020 of 874.

Safeguarding



Managing Child Protection and safeguarding arrangements through Covid offered some of the most significant challenges.

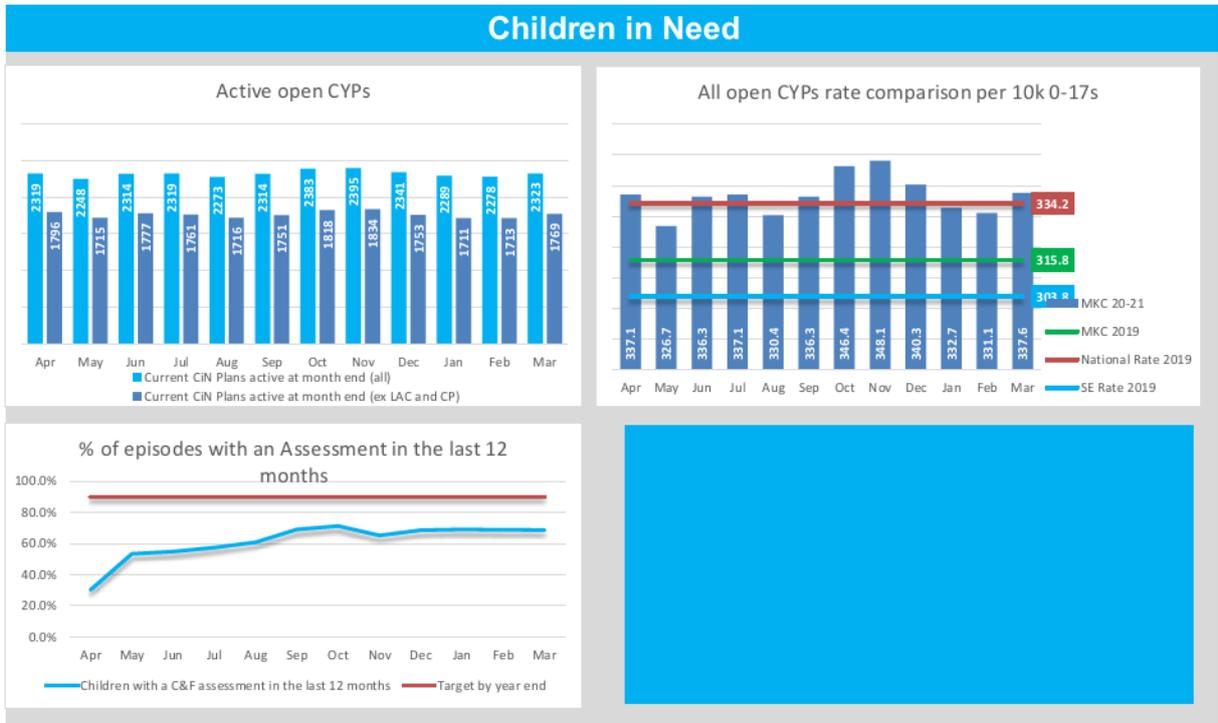
It proved difficult to step down children and families from a Child Protection Plan due to the limited support being able to be offered from other agencies should the plan be concluded, due to their focus on the pandemic.

It was helpful however, for conferences to be able to be held virtually, alongside some court hearings, but this was sometimes limited in being able to be fully assured that true change was taking place and the risks to be involved children were appropriately addressed.

In April 2020, there were 127 child protection plans and in March 2021, 181. This evidences the significant increase in the number of children recognised to be considered suffering harm or at risk of harm.

This has remained, however, well below the National Average and our statistical average, and since other services have returned to a level of normality, May 2021 is showing 163 children subject to a CP Plan.

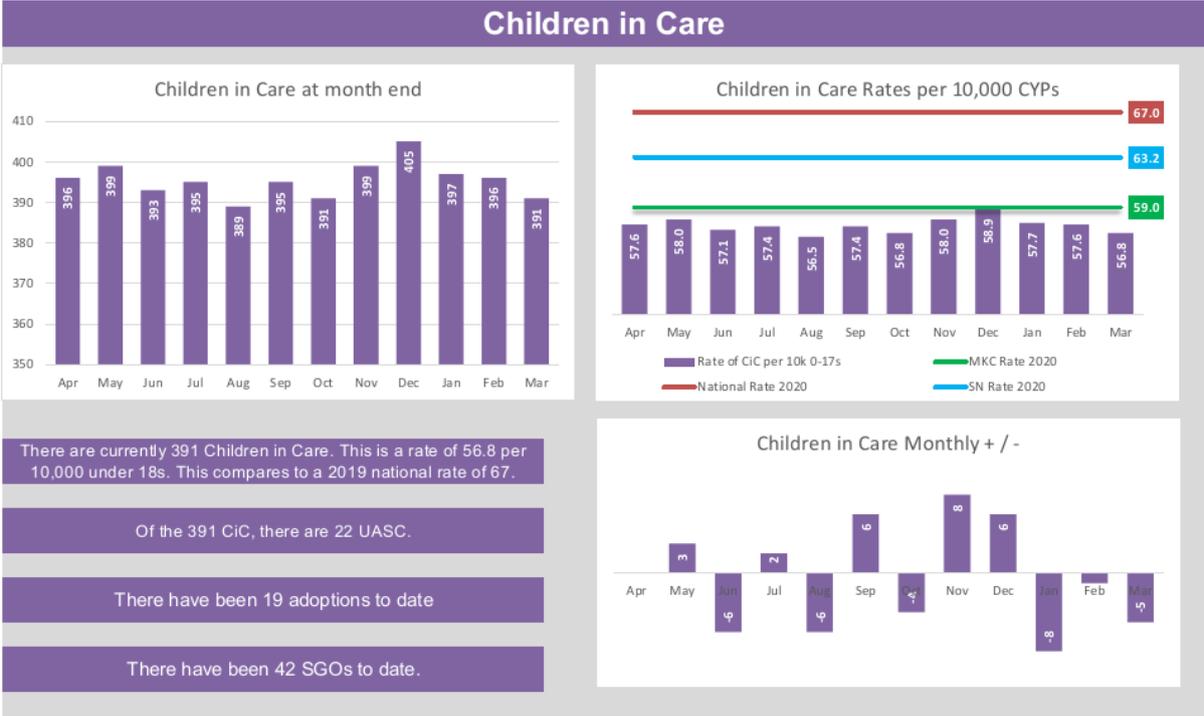
Children in Need



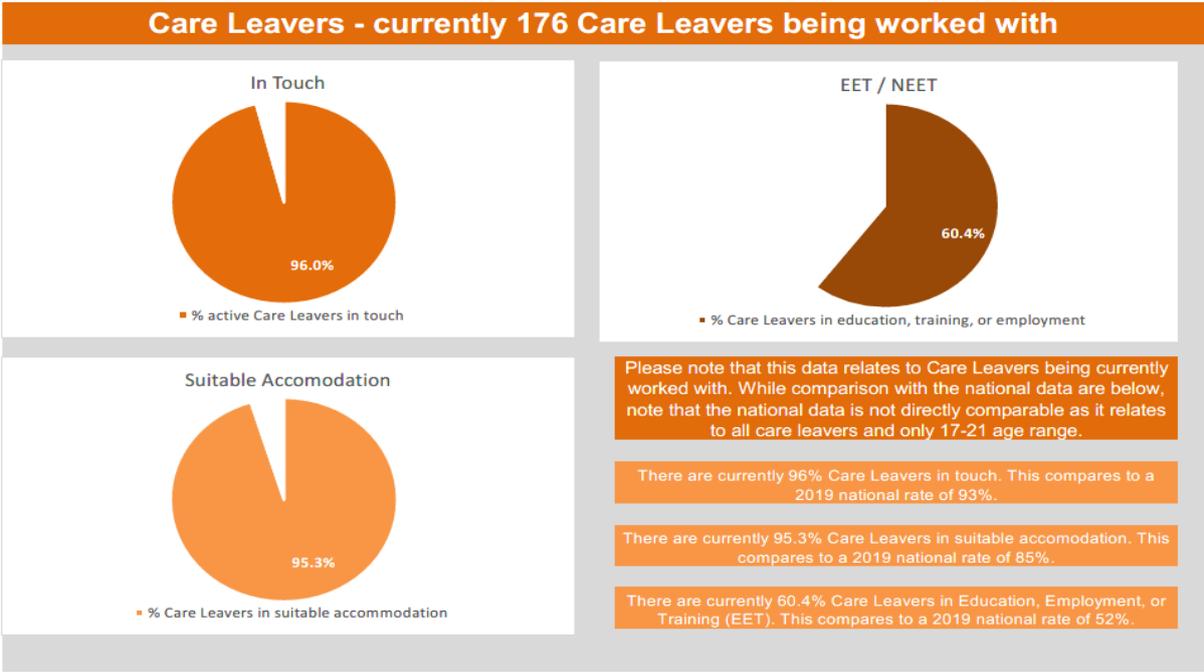
The number of open cases for those children assessed as Children in Need, as defined by Section 17 (Children Act 1989), saw a rise in the autumn of 2020 but has remained relatively stable throughout the year. We found it difficult due to Covid restrictions

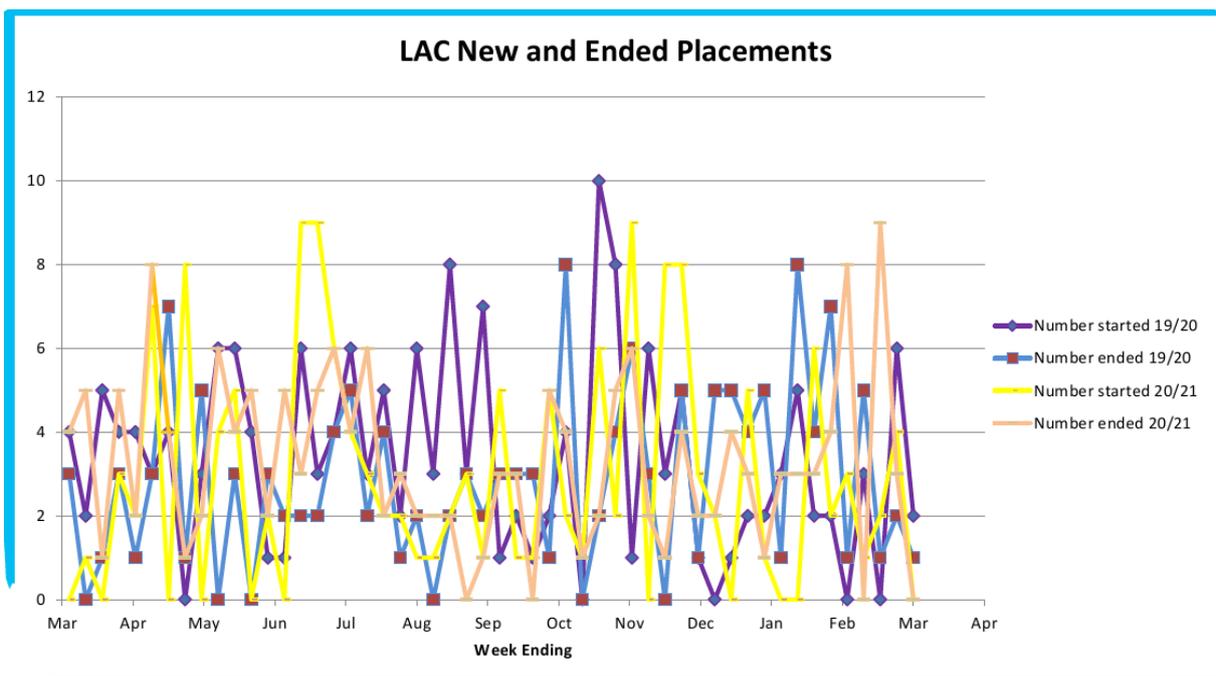
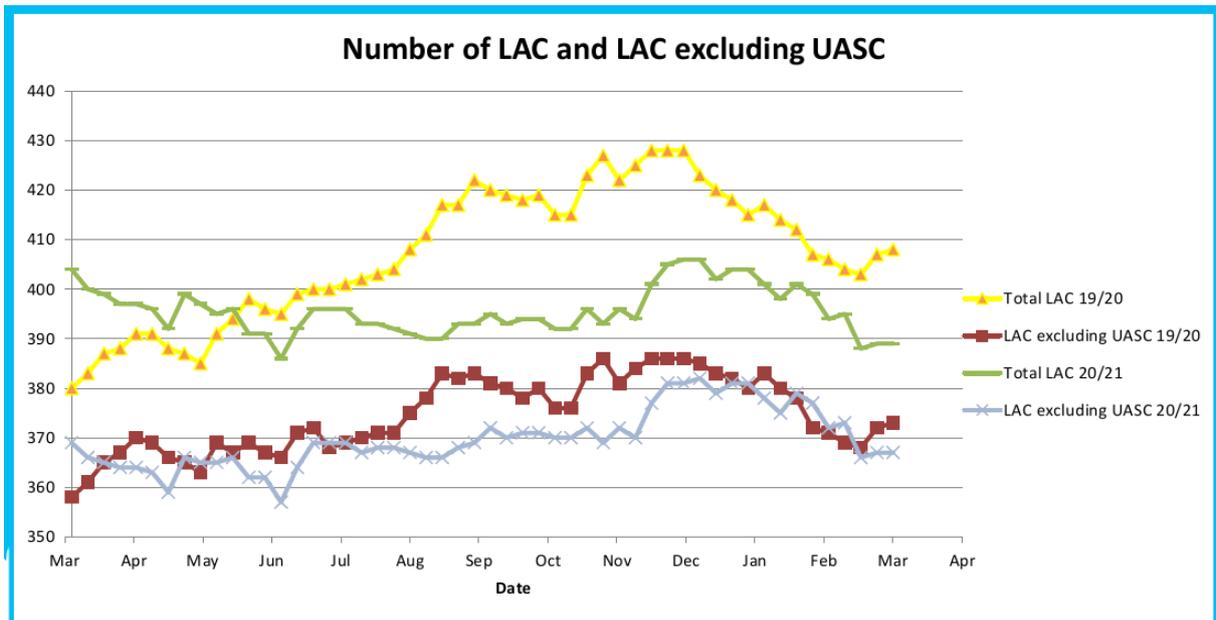
and service demand, to progress assessments in the normal timescales to the statutory elements of an assessment that are usually expected, but we ensured through our weekly management RAG rating processes closely monitored the level of risk and need across our caseloads and took a view as to whether visits were able to take place virtually, outside of the home, e.g. through windows at the end of driveways, etc., or a visit into the home was required.

Children in Care



Care Leavers





The net number of Children in Care remained relatively stable throughout the year but this belied an increase in the numbers of children we needed to accommodate for short periods due to family pressures and concerns. The Annual Report for our Looked After Children and Care leavers has been presented at the Council’s Corporate Parenting Panel so will not be repeated here, but over the year we did see an increasing number of teenagers needing to be accommodated for periods of time, and due to Covid restrictions and the challenges faced by our Placement services we needed to undertake an increased number of placements with Independent Fostering Agencies outside of Milton Keynes.

Our 16-25 service continues to manage the challenge found by a number of our young people over lockdown, and although during the period of Covid saw the service needing to manage some high risk behaviours, overall, the demand has been managed well in relation to both suitable accommodation and those Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET) challenges, despite us recognising the challenge this presents.

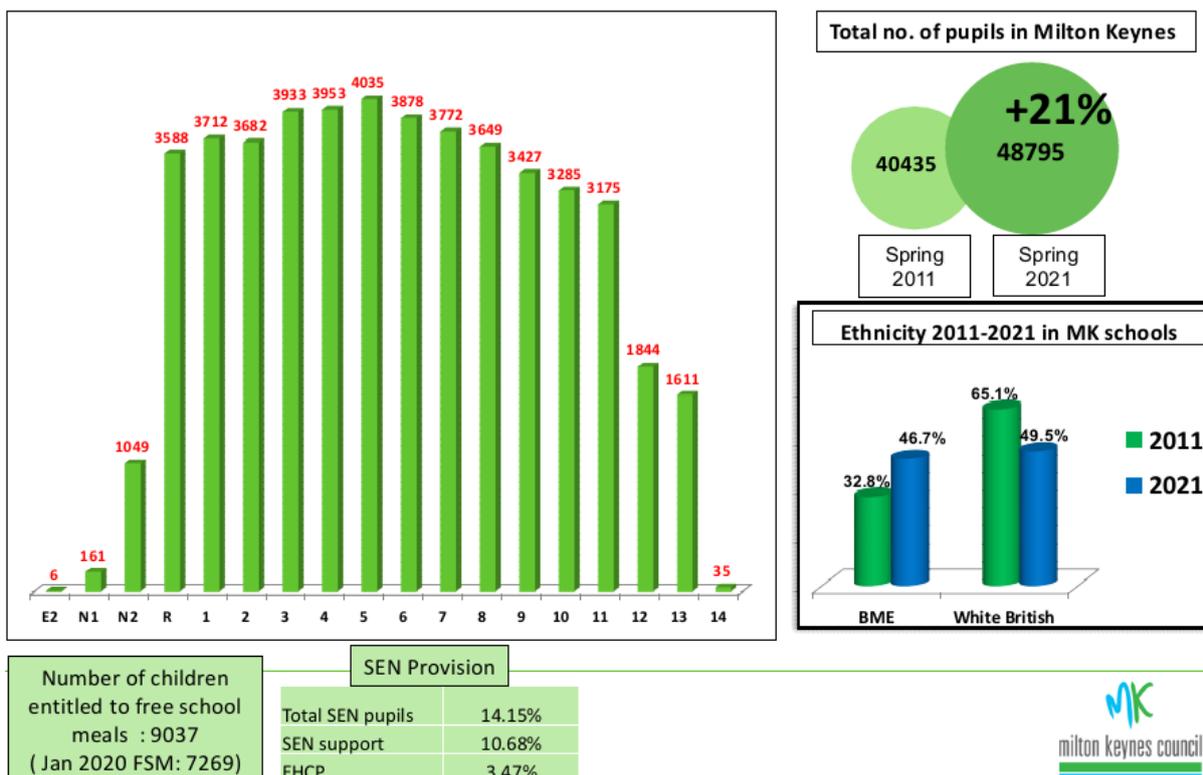
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

The demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) has increased over the year. In April 2020 there were 407 children with an EHCP which was 23% of the total number of children of children open to Children’s Social Care. In March 2021 this had risen to 437, 24.7% of the total children open to Children’s Social Care. The numbers have remained at this level since this time.

It is notable however, that although our Special Schools in Milton Keynes worked hard throughout the year and had many children attending on site throughout Covid, the level of need for some of their students, with many not being able to understand the impact Covid had, caused significant distress for some, which in turn impacted on their families and increased the challenge for the professional and services supporting them. We have however, continued to work with partners and PACA (Parents and Children Altogether) to ensure our Local Offer continues to evidence services and the supports available.

Due to the demand on our SEND services however we have been undertaking a significant service change to respond to the increasing demands we are now seeing on this service particularly since May 2021.

Schools and Education Settings



The Spring census shows the growth of pupils across our schools over the last 10 years and the pupil data which evidences the growing nature of the city and, as expected the greater demand there will be for our Education services and settings.

Over the last year, our schools consistently supported more children within school buildings than the national average, whilst progressing an accessible and comprehensive curriculum online. It is clear there was a mix in take up and progression over the last year for our children and significant work is taking place at both a national and local level to understand how we are best able to ensure the best education delivery to help our children reach their potential. It did however take significant capacity across all related services to ensure we responded in a timely way to the range of communications that came from central government and supported our schools to maintain as consistent a level of provision as possible. The response of our teachers and school staff in being able to deliver a blended level of learning through both virtual and in paper form further evidence the high commitment to the children in our city by the professional and educators involved.

Without the delivery of GCSE's and A' Levels results over the last year it is not possible to give the same comparative evidence as in previous years. We have however continued to work well in collaboration with our Headteachers, Governors and senior leaders across the education sector, and for a significant part of the last year there were weekly telephone calls with the DfE and the Regional School Commissioner (RSC) for the South East with the Director of Children's Services.

This was followed up by a regular communication to all education settings to ensure, where possible, there was up to date and consistent guidance to our settings. This included Early Years, schools, Post-16 settings and wider.

In our consideration of our learning from the pandemic with Heads, Senior Leaders and Governors, we are in discussion as to how we can ensure the good collaboration and information sharing continues as more regularised arrangements take place within schools, but it is recognised that Covid remains a challenge for our schools and students and a significant level of capacity remains in helping support arrangements in place.

Going forward we are also as a service contributing to the National discussions regarding 'Education Recovery', with Ofqual and Ofsted and regular discussions continue to take place with the DfE and the RSC.

Conclusion

The summary data from 2020-21 evidences that despite the pandemic and the inevitable demands this brought, performance across some of the key 'front facing' services has remained robust and able to evidence safe and consistent practice.

Volumes, however, have increased, and many Children's Services Departments have taken the view that the impact of Covid on Children and Young People wasn't going to be really impacting services until more 'normal' and regular arrangements were in place. This would

be when full return to schools had taken place and health services were able to return to usual community practices. At this point the true impact on children and families may start to be understood and how best as partners together we are able to support some of our most vulnerable children and families going forward.