

# Cross-Departmental Actions for Vulnerable Children and Young People during the Covid-19 Pandemic Period

## Introduction

This plan has been developed in response to the challenges and risks facing children, young people and their families due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the associated public health restrictions and the prolonged period of lockdown. The plan is intended to reflect a series of activities that will be or have been undertaken across government to meet the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families during this time.

## Who are vulnerable children?

For the purposes of this plan, a vulnerable child or young person is:

- A child who has an assigned social worker because he or she is a child in need, in need of protection (or on the child protection register) or is a looked after child. A child in need includes young carers, children with disabilities, and children living in families where there is domestic abuse, substance abuse, and / or mental health difficulties.
- A child who is receiving support from, or has been referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
- A child who has a statement of special educational needs, a child who is accessing EOTAS, or a child who normally accesses Education Nurture Units.
- A child who is 'on-the-edge' of receiving support from children's social services.
- A child who is in need, including in need of protection, but whose need is not known to statutory services.
- A child who is not known to statutory or voluntary and community support services but who is vulnerable because their family is under increased pressure due to Covid-19 related circumstances.
- A young person who was previously a looked after child, whether or not they are receiving support from statutory services.
- A child who has been placed for adoption.
- Asylum seeking and refugee children and children whose parents have no recourse to public funds.

## **Aim of the plan**

The aim of this plan is to **promote the safety and well-being of children and young people** during the Covid-19 pandemic period:

1. within the home environment; and
2. within the wider community;

and to:

3. **strengthen system capacity** to respond to current challenges and risks; and
4. **rebuild services.**

## **Monitoring and Reporting of Plan**

It is intended that available facts, statistics and evidence will be used to identify emerging issues and keep the Plan under review.

## 1. Promoting safety and well-being in the home environment

RISK/CHALLENGE	ACTIONS	LEAD
1.1 Increased risk of harm in the home.	<p><u>Maximise opportunities for vulnerable children to spend time safely out of the home environment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Identification of vulnerable children who would benefit by attending school during lockdown by professionals – including social workers, health visitors; school nurses; teachers, AHPs, PSNI, youth workers.</li> <li>ii. Attendance of vulnerable children in school, including pre-school, settings, where appropriate during lockdown.</li> <li>iii. Provision of childcare places to vulnerable children.</li> <li>iv. Access to outdoor space for exercise e.g. local council parks, forest and country parks.</li> </ul>	HSCTs/EA/ PSNI/  DE  DoH/DE/HSCTs DfC/Local Govt./DAERA
	<p><u>Signposting sources of advice and support</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>v. Promotion/advertising of helplines               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Childline</li> <li>b. NSPCC helpline – promoted across UK jurisdictions</li> <li>c. Domestic and Sexual Abuse helpline – promoted by ‘see the signs’ campaign re-launched (across TV, radio and social media for 5 weeks in April and May).</li> <li>d. Education Authority Child Protection Service Helpline promoted through supplementary guidance to schools</li> <li>e. COVID-19 Mental Health Response plan includes action to signpost children and young people to helplines including Lifeline and the Samaritans and to online resources.</li> </ul> </li> <li>vi. New guidance on how to access support for those experiencing domestic abuse</li> <li>vii. Signposting to services by Family Support Hubs</li> <li>viii. Safeguarding information for parents and professionals available in SBNI App</li> <li>ix. Signpost to resources on online harms e.g. on internet and on-line safety, sexting, cyberbullying and reporting abuse through Policing and Community Safety Partnerships.</li> </ul>	DoH/DoJ/ PSNI/EA          DoJ/DoH HSCB SBNI DoJ

RISK/CHALLENGE	ACTIONS	LEAD
	<p><u>Specific Supports:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Increased temporary accommodation places for victims of domestic abuse</li> <li>ii. Housing support services for families through continued provision of ‘Supporting People’ service.</li> <li>iii. Additional funding of £6000 for refuges for COVID-19 related provision.</li> </ul> <p><u>Reporting concerns</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Awareness-raising among general public about how to report safeguarding concerns</li> <li>ii. Awareness-raising among general public about how to report domestic violence concerns - PSNI relaunched ‘behind closed doors’ promotional social media campaign</li> <li>iii. Awareness-raising that Child Protection Services continue to operate in full across the COVID-19 response period.</li> </ul>	<p>DfC / NIHE DfC/NIHE</p> <p>DfC/NIHE</p> <p>EIS/DoH/DoJ/EAP SNI/HSCTs</p> <p>PSNI</p> <p>HSCTs/SBNI</p>
<p>1.2 Increased pressure on families due to lockdown and social distancing restrictions.</p>	<p><u>Signposting services and service provision for families</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Signposting/referring families to services by Family Support Hubs.</li> <li>ii. Provision of advice and support to citizens through Council mobilised Community Hubs</li> <li>iii. Signposting to practical help and assistance through the Covid-19 Community Helpline</li> <li>iv. Emotional support and signposting of services through the Stay Connected Helpline in Southern Health and Social Care Trust area.</li> <li>v. Advice and assistance to those with GP ‘shield letters’ being provided by shield teams in Health and Social Care Trusts.</li> <li>vi. Sure Start projects and other early years’ providers continuing to provide services remotely.</li> <li>vii. Up-to-date information of available support for families</li> <li>viii. Multi-Agency Support Hubs providing support to vulnerable people experiencing a range of issues in 10 Council areas.</li> </ul> <p><u>Access to resources/online services and information</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ix. Information on digital safeguarding provided to parents, children and young people through ‘Safer Schools’ app.</li> </ul>	<p>HSCB DfC/Local Government</p> <p>AdviceNI/DfC</p> <p>SHSCT</p> <p>HSCTs</p> <p>DE/HSCB <a href="#">CYPSP</a> / <a href="#">Familysupport.ni</a> / <a href="#">CommunityNI</a> / DoJ/PSNI</p> <p>DE</p>

RISK/CHALLENGE	ACTIONS	LEAD
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x. Support for vulnerable children (known to social services), including tailored home programmes, using a range of on-line resources.</li> <li>xi. Sure Start projects delivering play resources to vulnerable families' homes</li> </ul>	<p>DE</p> <p>HSCTs DE/HSCB</p>
	<p><u>Specific supports</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>xii. Additional payments (£100) provided to every foster carer for more educational and play resources.</li> <li>xiii. Provision of home based resources and games for families where there is domestic abuse through Women's Aid.</li> <li>xiv. Alternative arrangements put in place to facilitate contact between children and parents e.g. in cases where parents live in separate households or court orders are in place.</li> </ul>	<p>HSCTs</p> <p>DoH/HSCB</p> <p>HSCB/HSCTs</p>
<p>1.3 Reduced service provision and/or interaction with services results in children and young people being less visible.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Professionals to maintain contact with children and families at risk and in need of support– including social workers, teachers, AHPs, PSNI, youth workers, health visitors, family nurses, school nurses, Education Authority's Independent Counselling Service, Education Welfare Service and Intercultural Service, Young Carers Service</li> <li>ii. Children's services continue to investigate and respond to child protection concerns and services/agencies continue to work collaboratively, sharing information/concerns appropriately.</li> <li>iii. Public messaging asking public to be vigilant and advising how to refer to statutory agencies.</li> <li>iv. Ability for young people to connect with youth worker via 'Youth Online' – a platform where young people can access 'Stay Connected' service.</li> <li>v. Work with voluntary organisations such as VOYPIC, Extern and MACS, to establish appropriate arrangements to facilitate ongoing engagement and contact with children and young people in care and care leavers.</li> </ul>	<p>HSCTs/EA/PSNI/Action for Children</p> <p>HSCB/HSCTs</p> <p>EIS,SBNI, DoH, DE, DoJ EA</p> <p>HSCB</p>

RISK/CHALLENGE	ACTIONS	LEAD
<p>1.4 Families facing financial hardship and/or in food poverty</p>	<p><u>Additional supports available</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Additional payments for families normally eligible for free school meals via the ‘COVID-19 Free School Meals direct payment scheme’ (£2.70/child per day for each day of term the schools are closed).</li> <li>ii. Family Support Hubs harnessing support of local businesses e.g. food vouchers.</li> <li>iii. Sure Start working with local community partners to deliver food parcels to vulnerable families.</li> <li>iv. Immediate child/family needs being addressed through Children in Need budget.</li> <li>v. Provision of 5-day food boxes providing breakfast and lunch via ‘Eat Well Live Well Scheme’</li> <li>vi. Food poverty initiatives and links with food banks established with particular focus on Roma and Traveller need.</li> <li>vii. Additional financial support for short-term living expenses where a person, or any member of their immediate family, is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate via the ‘Discretionary Support COVID-19 short term living expenses grant’ (Annual Income Threshold raised to £20,405 on 21 April 2020).</li> <li>viii. An agreement is in place with the Housing Executive and Housing Associations that any social housing tenant facing rent difficulties due to the COVID-19 emergency will not be evicted</li> <li>ix. Continued housing support, including for families and young people, through the ‘Supporting People service’ provision.</li> <li>x. Support a more sustainable approach to help those who need help to access food, including: Additional investment of up to £875k provided to Fareshare, a national network of charitable food redistributors, to deliver an increased supply of food to community food providers; extension of the pilot programme with Social Supermarkets to allow consideration for a full programme to be rolled out; and the development of a supporting business case with the aim of having the appropriate network established by October 2020. In the longer term DfC will factor in the findings from this emergency programme into the development of the</li> </ul>	<p>DE</p> <p>HSCB DE/HSCB</p> <p>HSCB</p> <p>EA/DfC</p> <p>DE</p> <p>DfC/Local Govt. / HSCTs</p> <p>DfC</p> <p>DfC/NIHE/Housing Associations DfC/NIHE</p> <p>DfC</p>

RISK/CHALLENGE	ACTIONS	LEAD
	<p>overarching Anti-Poverty Strategy to include a clear set of actions on food poverty.insecurity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>xi. Housing for families with no recourse to public funds.</li> <li>xii. Initiatives to support vulnerable consumers’ connectivity promoted <a href="#">online</a>.</li> </ul>	<p>NIHE/DfC/DoH DfE</p>
<p>1.5 Children facing educational disadvantage due to school closures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Support and guidance for schools, pupils and their parents/carers during period of school closure through “Continuity of Learning Project”.</li> <li>ii. Home learning <a href="#">online resources</a> to support families during the COVID-19 crisis.</li> <li>iii. Loan of digital devices to support children and young people with home learning.</li> <li>iv. Provision of computers and associated IT equipment to children in foster care to support home schooling through Fostering Network.</li> <li>v. Assistance being provided to children in foster care and their carers to participate in structured education-related activity and uptake of home tuition which is being provided through the Fostering Attainment and Achievement Service.</li> <li>vi. Support for supervising social workers, residential social workers and others with learning, and understanding the impact of trauma and attachment on learning and development of looked-after children through EA helpline.</li> <li>vii. Provision of specialist advice and support to schools, parents/guardians and vulnerable children in relation to positive behaviour management strategies and emotional health and wellbeing during COVID-19.</li> <li>viii. Post Primary EOTAS provision is open to young people for direct delivery in centre, or via remote learning support. The service is maintaining regular contact with pupils known to the service.</li> <li>ix. Exceptional teaching support being offered online and contact maintained with families by phone.</li> <li>x. Libraries’ IT facilities to be utilised to assist in providing space and facilities for children to do school work.</li> </ul>	<p>DE</p> <p>DE DE</p> <p>DoH/DE/HSCB</p> <p>HSCB/Fostering Network/ EA</p> <p>EA</p> <p>EA</p> <p>EA</p> <p>EA</p> <p>DfC</p>
<p>1.6 Children/families unable to access services due to reduced service provision</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Children and young people services continuing to be provided, where possible, including by alternative means or with additional measures in place to facilitate public health restrictions.</li> </ul>	<p>HSCTs/ EA/ PSNI/ YJA/</p>

RISK/CHALLENGE	ACTIONS	LEAD
<p>and/or social distancing requirements</p>	<p>ii. Public awareness raising relating to accessing medical help for children and young people - GP / Acute Paediatric services.</p> <p><u>Specific Supports</u></p> <p>iii. Health visits continuing for new births and support for vulnerable families.</p> <p>iv. HSCTs Health Visiting helplines in operation.</p> <p>v. Allied Health Professionals have provided resource packs including home treatment programmes to parents/carers.</p> <p>vi. Digital solutions, including apps and page tracker, are being utilised where possible to ensure allied health professional therapy advice and online guidance is available for families</p> <p>vii. New ante-natal and post-natal online programmes to support new mothers.</p> <p>viii. New Northern Ireland Maternity website <a href="https://www.ni-maternity.com">https://www.ni-maternity.com</a></p> <p>ix. Joint Health &amp; Education multi-disciplinary panels operating in each Health and Social Care Trust area, engaging with Special School principals where appropriate, to deliver integrated provision for children with complex needs. Includes joint strategic oversight arrangements.</p> <p>x. COVID-19 Mental Health Response Plan. Under the plan: a team will be established within the emergency response structure to focus on the needs of children and young people during the pandemic; transitions from CAMHS to adult mental health services will be suspended to facilitate continuity of care, enable risks to be safely managed and ease bed pressures on mental health services; and the use of technology in CAMHS appointments and communications with children and young people will be promoted.</p> <p>xi. CAMHS online resource for ideas, including for children and parents, to help manage mental health during COVID-19.</p> <p>xii. Prioritisation and delivery of 3 key programmes of grant funding (Neighbourhood Renewal, Areas at Risk and Small Pockets of Deprivation) with over 300 projects receiving 6 months' advance funding to continue to deliver vital services, including the continuation of youth projects, counselling, mentoring and educational support adapted to meet social distancing requirements.</p> <p>xiii. Payments of core grant to 67 voluntary and community sector organisations rolled over for the first quarter of 2020/21, monitoring relaxations applied and organisations empowered to focus their efforts on COVID-19 responses.</p>	<p>HSCTs/ Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health HSCTs HSCTs HSCTs</p> <p>HSCTs</p> <p>PHA PHA DE/DoH</p> <p>HSC/DE/EA</p> <p>DoH</p> <p>DoH</p> <p>DfC</p> <p>DOH</p> <p>HSCTs</p>



RISK/CHALLENGE	ACTIONS	LEAD
	<p>xiv. Looked after and Adopted Children Therapeutic Services are providing weekly contacts and support to providers of supported accommodation in respect of young people presenting with particular mental health or wellbeing concerns</p> <p>xv. Voluntary and community organisations and providers of floating support have enhanced their outreach support to care leavers living in supported accommodation and those living independently in the community.</p> <p>xvi. Young Carers Service continuing virtually where possible including assessment, reviews, one to one sessions and group work with young carers and their families. ‘Garden gate’ visits undertaken to support the most vulnerable young people self-isolating due to their vulnerable needs or the needs of persons they are caring for.</p> <p>xvii. Online delivery (since the beginning of COVID-19) of the Peace4Youth Programme which is aimed at young people aged 14 – 24 who are disadvantaged, excluded or marginalised, have deep social and emotional needs and are at risk of becoming involved in anti-social behaviour, violence or paramilitary activity. Participants will develop capabilities in personal development, good relations and citizenship, enhancing their employability and improving their life chances. The programme runs for 6-9 months for 3 or 4 days per week and is delivered by a range of youth organisations and further education colleges. SEUPB are working with the projects to support them to meet the programme requirements. DfE continue to provide incentive payments to eligible participants on the programme, funded by the Executive Office’s Shared Future Fund.</p>	<p>HSCB</p> <p>HSCB / Action for Children</p> <p>DfE</p>

## 2. Promoting safety and well-being in the wider community

<b>RISK/ CHALLENGE</b>	<b>ACTIONS / POSSIBLE ACTIONS</b>	<b>LEAD</b>
2.1 Increased risk of exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Continued operation of missing children arrangements between police and social services where a risk of significant harm is identified.</li> <li>ii. Professionals maintaining contact with children at risk – including social workers, teachers, AHPs, Community Children’s Nursing/Health Visitors, PSNI, youth workers.</li> <li>iii. Working through public health restrictions to continue to ensure appropriate sharing of information/concerns between statutory agencies.</li> <li>iv. Work with community and voluntary organisations to enhance outreach support to children and young care leavers.</li> <li>v. A range of activities to address the risk of increased exploitation of vulnerable children and young people under the auspices of the Tackling Paramilitarism, Organised Crime and Criminality Programme are being undertaken.</li> </ul>	DOH/ PSNI/ DE/ DfC/ HSCTs/ YJA/DOJ  DoJ/ EA/ PSNI/ YJA/TEO/ DfC
2.2 Increased exposure to risk of online harm due to children spending more time online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Raise public awareness on risks of online harms</li> <li>ii. Signposting families to existing resources on online harms e.g. on internet and on-line safety, sexting, cyberbullying and reporting abuse through policing and community safety partnerships.</li> <li>iii. Promoting the use of the Safer Schools App for awareness of on-line safety messages for staff, children and young people and their parents</li> <li>iv. Referral programme under the YJA/PSNI ‘Sexting Pilot’ continues to operate.</li> </ul>	DOH / DOJ / DE/ PSNI / YJA / EA  DE/EA  YJA/PSNI

### 3. Strengthen system capacity to respond to current risks

RISK / CHALLENGE	ACTIONS / POSSIBLE ACTIONS	LEAD
3.1 Availability of adequate information in a timely manner to inform decision-making in response to COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Collection of information daily relating to children in schools.</li> <li>ii. Children’s social services dashboard updated weekly and published online</li> <li>iii. Gathering and using intelligence from a range of sources, including advice lines and hub referral trends, to identify any emerging issues and inform strategy and decision making.</li> <li>iv. Parentline survey to capture the voice of vulnerable families.</li> <li>v. Parenting Surveys on childcare requirements during the pandemic.</li> <li>iv. Increased frequency of interagency collaboration on domestic abuse to ensure joined up approach to prevent harm and provide support.</li> </ul>	<p>DE DoH</p> <p>DoH/DfC TEO DoH/DfC CiNI / DOH</p> <p>DoJ / DOH / DfC</p>
3.2 Provide guidance to parents, families, professionals and the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Guidance issued to children’s homes, foster care, supported lodgings and supported accommodation.</li> <li>ii. Guidance on continuity of safe childcare provision for keyworkers and vulnerable children during the pandemic produced for parents, day care settings and childminders.</li> <li>iii. Joint Ministerial (with Justice) statement published on 29 April advising separated parents on how to maintain contact with children during the pandemic, and supplementary guidance uploaded to NIDirect.</li> <li>iv. Guidance relating to adoption.</li> <li>v. Guidance on child protection medical assessments during COVID-19 developed for GPs by community paediatricians/PSNI.</li> <li>vi. A range of guidance for parents and schools to build capacity and enhance an understanding of the needs of looked-after children during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic.</li> </ul>	<p>DoH</p> <p>DoH</p> <p>DoH/DoJ</p> <p>DoH HSCTs/PSNI</p> <p>EA</p>
3.3 Consider legislative changes required to facilitate changes to service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Temporary modification of statutory duties – Children’s Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modification of Children’s Social Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.</li> </ul>	<p>DoH</p>

<b>RISK / CHALLENGE</b>	<b>ACTIONS / POSSIBLE ACTIONS</b>	<b>LEAD</b>
3.4 Reduced workforce capacity due to illness/self-isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Essential services maintained on a priority basis, in accordance with needs and risk assessments.</li> <li>ii. Appropriate levels of management oversight, supervision and support to staff.</li> <li>iii. Redeployment of staff as needed.</li> <li>iv. Surge Plan and associated Action Card in place within Children's social services and subject to ongoing review.</li> <li>v. Temporary changes to pre-employment vetting to make it quicker for new staff and returning staff to be put in post. Guidance published online and legislation amended.</li> <li>vi. Additional staff being recruited e.g. via the HSC Workforce appeal and other recruitment drives.</li> <li>vii. Access to PPE and testing.</li> </ul>	<p>All</p> <p>All</p> <p>DoH / HSCB</p> <p>DoH</p> <p>DoH</p>
3.5 Protection measures for staff delivering face-to-face services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Staff using alternative methods for service delivery e.g. phone calls, video conferencing, where appropriate;</li> <li>ii. Advice on social distancing measures;</li> <li>iii. Provision of PPE and access to testing, where appropriate</li> </ul>	<p>All</p> <p>PHA HSCTs</p>

#### 4. Rebuild services

<b>RISK / CHALLENGE</b>	<b>ACTIONS / POSSIBLE ACTIONS</b>	<b>LEAD</b>
4.1 Service delivery during covid-19 rebuild period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Develop and implement service-specific rebuild plans, in line with the Executive's 5 Step Plan.</li> </ul>	DoH, DfC, DoJ, DE

## Glossary

AHP	Allied Health Professionals
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
EA	Education Authority
EOTAS	Education Other Than At School
HSCB	Health and Social Care Board
HSCT	Health and Social Care Trusts
PHA	Public Health Agency
PPE	Personal Protection Equipment
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
SEUPB	Special European Union Programmes Body
SBNI	Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland
VOYPIC	Voice of Young People in Care
YJA	Youth Justice Agency