



Adapting to a new world:
supporting the youngest children and their families through the pandemic



Safe and happy childhood

Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has had an immeasurable impact on the lives of the youngest children and their families. When lockdown was announced in March 2020, Action for Children faced the challenge of continuing to provide early years support in unprecedented conditions. A key element of our response was digital: both the shift to digital provision of traditionally face-to-face services and the expansion of our existing digital services.

This briefing explores how we underwent that shift: the challenges we faced, the opportunities that opened up, and, most importantly, the impact on children and families. It offers an insight into the advantages and limitations of more digital-focused models of service delivery. It also charts the experiences of a specific local area in rapidly pivoting its approach to the delivery of early years services.

The briefing details the expansion and development of our online parenting support service, Parent Talk. The key enablers of successful digital work, as well as the obstacles that must be considered and overcome, are also explored. Importantly, this document demonstrates the need to centralise outcomes for children and families as part of any future decisions about early years service delivery.



Part one:

the shift to the digital provision of face-to-face services

Action for Children services across the country

As soon as the first lockdown was announced, our frontline staff across the country worked rapidly to pivot their services to online delivery. Many of these services were those we deliver in children's centres for 0 to 5-year-olds and their parents, including:

- Parenting programmes.
- Parent support groups.
- Interactive play sessions.
- Parent and baby groups.
- Toddler sessions.
- Stay and Play.
- Separated parents' groups.
- Antenatal groups.

In areas like Cumbria, for instance, we delivered baby massage virtually. In Sandwell and other areas, the Solihull parenting programme shifted to digital delivery. In Newcastle, we traditionally hold an annual conference on the 1,001 critical days, in collaboration with the local authority and Children North East. In 2020, we delivered it virtually, and still had over 180 attendees.

Practitioners supplemented service delivery with resources and activities uploaded to social media platforms.

Our frontline staff supported families who didn't have the IT knowledge necessary to access our services, or who were resistant to using new methods of communication. Overall, our staff estimate that from March to June 2020, we engaged digitally with over 95% of the families we work with. Where digital contact wasn't possible due to a lack of access or families' preference, our staff kept in touch via telephone.

Enablers of the shift to digital

For staff: Our current position

Before the pandemic, our Technology Team made the strategic decision to develop our infrastructure. This was so that staff could work anywhere, as our children's services across the UK needed to be increasingly agile in their approach. In addition, to achieve the Cyber Essentials Plus accreditation (which is a requirement for any organisation processing personally identifiable data for a local authority), we needed to update the devices that we use. This involved replacing a proportion of staff computers and mobile phones. Once the pandemic hit, therefore, we already had the foundations in place to shift to homeworking within a week. The necessary 'back-end' systems, including cybersecurity plans and processes for securely saving files, were already in place.

We were already using a software package that included a videoconferencing platform, so we were set up for video calls. As Action for Children is a UK-wide charity, we had the systems and knowledge in place to hold meetings, interviews and sessions remotely. Our Technology Team already ran online training covering subjects such as information security, and produced a regular newsletter to communicate digital news with staff. Teams and services have 'Digital Champions' to link them in with the central Technology Team.

Many staff members already worked from home some or all of the time. This meant there was a Homeworkers' Network in place, which has expanded to support staff wellbeing during the pandemic. The Network holds regular meetings, providing peer-to-peer support for colleagues, sharing tips for managing wellbeing, and tackling any feelings of isolation.

Work of the Technology Team

In response to the pandemic, our Technology Team undertook a number of initiatives to support staff to work from home. They hosted technical drop-in sessions, ranging from help to use software, to deep dives into subjects such as phishing. The first of these sessions had over 250 attendees. So far, approximately 1,700 staff have attended one of the sessions.

The Team also created various resources, including a guide for frontline staff on delivering group sessions online. The guide was developed in collaboration with frontline practitioners and covers planning, setting up and running sessions, plus tips for delivery.

Our frontline staff have also organised Digital Development Days for colleagues across the country. These sessions shared good practice and advice for delivering services virtually.

Our current digital position and the dedication of our Technology Team enabled us to quickly launch online services for families. Without the Coronavirus Emergency Fund, however, many families wouldn't have received support. The Fund was, therefore, a vital enabler of our digital work during the first lockdown, allowing us to help families into a position where they could access services and education.

For families we work with:

The Coronavirus Emergency Fund

Because we were able to start working from home quickly at the start of the first lockdown, we were able to set up our Coronavirus Emergency Fund very quickly, too. This enabled us to support families with digital access.

The Coronavirus Emergency Fund was established in March 2020, in response to frontline staff reporting families' concerns about having enough money to stay afloat during the pandemic. Public donations funded the Coronavirus Emergency Fund, which provided one-off grants of up to £250 (or higher in special circumstances) to UK children, young people and families supported by our services. These families were struggling to afford daily essentials such as food, utility bills, clothing, and baby supplies (including nappies). Frontline staff completed a grant application form, specifying the child, young person or family's needs, and explained how a grant could help to alleviate those needs. Later, staff followed

up to assess the impact of the grant. By the end of July 2020, we had spent approximately £500,000 on emergency essentials for over 10,000 children and young people living in more than 4,800 families.

As well as supporting families with food and household bills, the Fund also helped families to access digital support services. Approximately 8% of the Fund was spent on technology or devices for home learning, such as laptops and tablets. Our frontline staff identified families who didn't have the necessary devices or internet connection to access educational resources for their children, or to access our services online. Staff could then apply to the Fund to provide devices and WiFi packages for these families.





Challenges of the shift to digital

Challenges often arose from our work with other agencies. For instance, during multi-agency work, it was sometimes difficult for staff to comply with different organisations' digital policies as well as our own. It was, at times, difficult to invite external colleagues, or families we work with, to online meetings hosted on the software platform we use. This occasionally posed data protection challenges, too.

Our Technology Team responded by producing guidance on these issues, including on safe ways to invite people to meetings without sharing their information.

Advantages of digital provision of services

Many staff felt that delivering services digitally gave more flexibility. This is because sessions

could fit around the daily lives of both families and practitioners. Several Action for Children services started offering evening and weekend sessions. Some services reported a better level of engagement with digital delivery, for instance improved attendance at parenting groups due to the shift to evening delivery, and the increased presence of fathers at such groups. Other services reported lower cancellation and drop-out rates. Many staff felt that later delivery times (such as early evening) were more conducive to family life. It's worth noting that, during lockdown, families also had fewer distractions and therefore more time to commit to services. Some practitioners also felt that the pressure of the pandemic had given families more incentive to engage with or seek support.

Some families preferred to engage with services digitally, as they found this less intrusive. Staff

reported that digital delivery had improved engagement with some parents with anxiety and other mental health conditions, who had previously been reluctant to engage in person. Practitioners felt that virtual delivery may have seemed less intimidating for parents or children who preferred not to be in the same room as others for sessions. Virtual delivery also enabled a mix of families from different backgrounds and geographic areas to attend together.

Staff reported that, in many cases, providing services virtually rather than in person allowed them to reach more children and families in a shorter period of time. In many areas of the country, digital delivery meant improved access for families in very rural locations. Staff in Northern Ireland and Scotland felt this particularly strongly. Virtual services also removed the need for travel time and any transport issues, which worked well for practitioners as well as parents. Accessing support from home often meant that families didn't have to deal with childcare issues either.

Limitations of digital provision of services

Digital exclusion

Low income is a key barrier to families accessing services virtually. In 2019, the ONS **reported** that 7% of households in Great Britain didn't have access to the internet.

This issue has become particularly prominent since the pandemic. In May 2020, **a survey** by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that better-off students had access to more resources for home learning. In June 2020, a Child Poverty Action Group **report** found that 40% of low-income families were missing at least one essential resource to support their children's learning. One-third of the families who were most worried about money had to buy a laptop, tablet or other device. Families who were worried about money were more likely to say

they found it difficult to continue their children's education at home.

As mentioned above, Action for Children's Coronavirus Emergency Fund was a key enabler for our digital provision of services. It allowed practitioners to apply for funding for devices and internet access for families who needed them. However, we were only able to support families already known to our services. There will be many families throughout the country without the necessary resources to access digital education and services. Our staff also reported that many families could only access digital support with a smartphone, which will have limited the user's ability to fully engage with some services.

Unequal access

Digital provision of services carries a risk of unequal access. This is due to digital exclusion, as outlined above, as well as other factors. Vulnerable children may be less likely to access support virtually, whether due to digital exclusion or lack of promotion or engagement by parents and/or carers. For example, it can be more difficult to engage younger children through digital methods. Activities focused on development for young children are often reliant on things like eye contact, direct speech and the manipulation of objects, which are harder to implement in digital delivery. For some children with disabilities or learning needs, digital provision of services may not be as effective. For families with English as a second language, online tools may be less suitable than face-to-face communication.

It's also important to remember that some families prefer not to use digital methods of support. When it's safe to do so, there must always be an option for face-to-face support for families.

Impact on practitioners

Delivering services during evenings and weekends can be beneficial for families and staff in terms of flexibility, as outlined. However, in some cases this increased flexibility can make it difficult to establish boundaries between practitioners and families, sometimes putting pressure on practitioners to feel like they should always be available.

Impact on delivery of services

While there have been many unexpected successes to digital provision of services, there have also been limitations in terms of service delivery. For instance, practitioners sometimes find it difficult to effectively assess families' needs over a video call. For services supporting older children, digital delivery means that practitioners are often unable to engage with children alone, whether due to parents overseeing a session or the child not having a space of their own in the home.

Some practitioners have also reported the difficulty of building initial relationships with families when delivery is limited to digital. Often, face-to-face contact is essential for building trust and a rapport, and the necessary foundations for effective engagement. This can particularly be the case for the early years, as parents who might normally attend a children's centre for an open access service may be less keen to engage with, or unable to access, a digital equivalent.

Safeguarding

The general consensus of Action for Children staff and managers was that face-to-face contact with children and families offers the best opportunity to form safeguarding judgements. They felt that communicating with families solely through digital methods meant that they could potentially miss important signs, including body language, children's responses to others in the household,

interactions between children and their care giver, and the general condition of the home. Non-accidental injuries, such as bruises, may be less easy to spot over a screen, too. This is particularly pertinent in families with babies, who are unable to speak up or communicate digitally.

Staff also reported that some parents and children found it difficult to find a private space in the home to speak openly with our practitioners. This could mean that vulnerable adults or children are less able to disclose risks or harm. Because digital provision is a relatively new phenomenon, guidance on spotting safeguarding issues when working with families online is not yet readily available.



Case study: an English county council

This case study focuses on an English county council where Action for Children is the provider of early childhood and family services. We work with the local authority to deliver the targeted offer. We also support the community offer and digital offer as part of this service.

There was already a digital element to the offer before coronavirus hit, but other elements of provision also underwent a substantial shift towards digital during the pandemic.

Before the pandemic

This county council recently moved from over 50 buildings to 15 'bases', and the funding for early childhood services halved. What was previously described as a children's centre service became an early childhood and family service.

The reduction in funding and physical sites meant that staff were already more mobile and agile in their working, with good digital access and knowledge in place. Action for Children staff worked jointly with the local Healthy Child Programme provider, libraries, and the community directory. Events and services took place in community venues to ensure they were accessible for families.

Coronavirus

When the impact of the pandemic was first felt, our staff were immediately concerned at the effect on the youngest children. Due to the redeployment of health visitors and the suspension of face-to-face visits during the first lockdown, families were not receiving the same level of support through the health visiting service. Services such as weighing babies were inaccessible, and in general families were having far less contact with professionals. Our staff worried that babies were missing out on seeing their parents interact with other adults, and on interacting with people themselves. However,

they acknowledged that an advantage could be parents having more time to spend with their babies during lockdown.

Delivery of resources

During the first lockdown, early childhood and family service staff delivered activity packs and food parcels to over 450 families across the area, using around £40,000 from the service's Family Support Fund to help families financially impacted by the crisis. Families with children aged 0-5 in the area also received over £9,000 from our Coronavirus Emergency Fund.

Contacting new parents

The early childhood and family service, along with partners including the local Healthy Child Programme, regularly contacted parents with new babies during the first lockdown to ensure they had the support they needed.

The shift to digital

Use of social media

In April 2020, the Facebook pages for Action for Children's early childhood and family service in the area began to share video clips for children and parents to watch together. The videos – created by family support workers – helped children to learn through play, and to develop their skills inside and outside the home. The videos have also been uploaded to YouTube.

The Facebook pages also provide information for families on how to contact our services, and how

to access other support in the area. There's also an accompanying app, which provides updates on services and available activities.

Open access offer

An online programme listing the various activities open to families is also available, including both Action for Children services and those provided by the local authority in settings such as libraries.

Example service: virtual baby days

Before the pandemic, 'baby days' were delivered as part of the local open access offer. These would normally be delivered over six weeks in one of the service's bases, or a community venue. The days were aimed at new parents, and focused on areas such as child safety and development.

From May 2020, the days were delivered virtually using video conferencing tools. The events were promoted on our Facebook pages, and parents could register online. Advanced registration meant that practitioners knew how many attendees to expect, and could plan accordingly. In contrast, when the days were held in person, practitioners were often unsure how many parents would come along.

Feedback on the virtual days showed that 99% of attendees would recommend the service to others. Parents also said that the events provided welcome contact and support at a time when they felt increasingly isolated.

During the period where lockdown restrictions were eased over summer 2020, we held outdoor baby days, with gazebos and activities.

Example service: cookalong

This was not part of the offer before coronavirus, but became part of the virtual open access service offer. It was introduced in response to staff concerns about children's nourishment during the pandemic. Participating families are sent food parcels containing the ingredients for a virtual cookalong of simple family recipes.

Targeted offer

As with the open access offer, there is an online timetable of targeted programmes available virtually for families.

Example service: Solihull Approach parenting course

A working group was formed to look at how the course could be delivered in a manner that reflected face-to-face delivery, and to put together a presentation and course format that worked via videoconferencing.

Staff ensured that all families taking part fully understood the IT process, and completed a risk assessment to confirm they were in a safe environment to start the course. Practitioners delivering the course made follow up calls with the families between the sessions to ensure they understood what was covered.

Following the success of a pilot course, virtual training is now being delivered in different areas across the local authority. The courses run both during the day and in the early evening, offering flexibility for parents (for instance, a couple can do the course when their children are in bed).

The creators of the Solihull Approach are currently seeking feedback on its digital delivery.

Example service: Separated Parents Information Programme (SPIP)

Parents are referred to this course via the courts, and it is compulsory to attend. It takes the form of one four-hour session. Our staff had to seek permission from the creators of the programme to delivery it digitally.

Feedback from the digital delivery of this course has been that families often find it easier to attend virtually, as it requires less travel time and/or time off work. The course is now being delivered in the evenings, which was not the case before the pandemic. Some practitioners have reported that attendance at the virtual courses has actually been better than face-to-face.

Example service: baby massage

Practitioners were able to deliver this service virtually, and felt that it worked well with small numbers of attendees. Staff received good feedback from parents on the virtual delivery. The International Association of Infant Massage was consulted about delivering the programme digitally, and provided guidance.

Services that work better in person

There were other programmes within the targeted offer that practitioners considered or trialled running online, before deciding that they were better suited to face-to-face delivery. Our staff felt that it was often the case that programmes relating to issues such as domestic abuse or mental health were best delivered in person.

Circle of Security was trialled virtually, but practitioners felt that it was more difficult to spot any signs that the programme was having a negative impact on attendees' mental health than if it was delivered in person.

Staff also fed back that the numbers of attendees for virtual courses generally need to be smaller than face-to-face services, as there are extra tasks for practitioners, such as managing the chat box.

Quotes from families

“Due to lockdown beginning when our baby was four weeks old, we didn't manage to get to any groups which left us without any 'mum friends' at all. I felt very isolated. Through baby massage, I have met three wonderful women who I can share conversations with. It has been a real life-changer for me personally.”

“At a time where there has been no face-to-face contact with family services it has been a massive help connecting to people in a virtual way and learning new activities and what services and help is out there. As a first-time mum, my journey into motherhood has been really isolating at times as [my child] was born two weeks before we went into lockdown. I have really appreciated the help and support over the past six weeks.”



Enablers of the shift to digital

Staff identified several key factors that enabled a successful shift to digital provision.

One important consideration was existing access to digital equipment. All Action for Children team members had laptops and smartphones before the pandemic. Staff had also been ‘digitally mobilised’ due to the reduction from over 50 buildings to 15 bases. Staff felt that, because multi-agency children’s centre services had previously been brought under Action for Children as a single provider, we had the equipment to react quickly to the first lockdown.

Digital knowledge was another enabler. Some staff felt confident with digital tasks such as editing videos, for example. This was supported by teams’ willingness to learn and diversify their skills. Staff did suggest that specific training on digital approaches would have been beneficial,

particularly covering issues such as safeguarding.

An essential enabler was our Coronavirus Emergency Fund. It helped staff to provide devices to families in the area, so they were able to access virtual programmes.

Another key factor was the local authority commissioners’ support for a digital approach. This approval was needed for Action for Children to quickly progress with our digital plans in the area.

Work with other agencies

Throughout the first lockdown, our staff had weekly conversations with early years providers and health visitors. We maintained a close relationship with the local speech and language therapy provider. We also worked closely with local libraries, for instance promoting each other’s activities on programme lists.

Challenges

Families' digital access was a key challenge. As mentioned, the Coronavirus Emergency Fund enabled us to provide devices for families – without this, many would've been unable to access support. Some families, for example, were sharing devices. Our staff are currently considering whether it's possible to provide a tablet to a family attending a parenting course, and then if they complete the course, allowing them to keep it.

Internet access was also a challenge. Many rural areas have a bad internet connection, which meant that we had to undertake doorstep visits and offer other methods of support. Some families also lacked the skills to use technology to access services. Our staff tried to keep in touch with these families over the phone or in other ways.

Staff wellbeing was another area we needed to be aware of during the shift to digital working. Regular meetings over video call, and frequent online supervisions, helped to improve staff's sense of social interaction. There was some concern that

staff would be expected to undertake evening and weekend work when it might not suit them. However, these situations were closely monitored by managers, and many staff reported that they preferred the flexibility to work some evenings instead of daytimes.

Identifying any problems facing families was also noted as a limitation of digital working. To ensure appropriate safeguarding measures are in place, a manager is always contactable at evenings or weekends. Staff stressed that they are able to pick up so much more when they actually go into families' homes, for instance early signs of domestic abuse. Despite the success of the virtual baby days, practitioners don't necessarily see children during these online events. In one-to-one support sessions, practitioners often found reasons to ask parents to show their children or their house on screen – but this was more difficult to achieve during group sessions for privacy reasons. Consequently, staff in the area are keen to offer a blend of digital and face-to-face provision going forwards.

Plan for the future

Our team are currently working with local commissioners to agree the future of the local digital offer, beyond the immediate pandemic response. Staff are aiming for a 'responsive and resilient service', which goes beyond buildings, so digital provision will play a key role.

Staff felt more prepared in the run-up to the November 2020 lockdown, having gained so much knowledge from the first. In the future beyond the pandemic, or with restrictions eased again, our staff plan to take forward a blended offer, which will consist of roughly 80% face-to-face provision and 20% virtual. The aim will be for a central team to pick up at triage the families that are happy to progress with a digital offer. The digital offer can then be delivered across the entire local authority, rather than being limited to certain areas.

Our staff are working to create a team whose specific role will be to deliver the virtual offer. This team will consist of a manager, practitioners, and information/signposting officers.



Part two: Parent Talk

What is Parent Talk?

Parent Talk is a digital service provided by Action for Children. Before the pandemic, we already had online platforms in place, in response to a general reduction in universal service provision. These included a confidential, live one-to-one chat with practitioners and information, advice and guidance websites. These services were co-designed with parents to replicate the sort of support they might be offered in settings such as children's centres.

The pandemic led to a significant increase in parents looking for support online. In response, we rapidly scaled up the live chat function, from three practitioners to 29, to meet increasing demand. We also secured funding for the expansion of this one-to-one support, as well as localised offers to local authorities who were unable to support families through the usual methods. The various online platforms that existed previously have now been combined into Parent Talk, which also provides coronavirus-specific information and guidance.

Any parent can access Parent Talk – they don't need to be a current Action for Children service user. The platform uses search ads to target parents who are looking for advice on a parenting issue.

The one-to-one chat is delivered by parenting coaches. These trained and experienced family support workers have the breadth of knowledge to support parents with a wide range of issues. The coaches all have experience of working face-to-face with families.

The platform is designed to complement 'on the ground' services. It can stand alone as an online service in response to specific searches, but it can also be promoted before and after face-to-face interventions, to provide wraparound support for families.

Key figures: use

From March to September 2020:

- 240,000 parents used Parent Talk: a 430% increase on the same period last year.
- There were 5,400 one-to-one conversations: a 300% increase on the same period last year.
- 24% of parents who used the platform were looking for support with children aged 0-2.

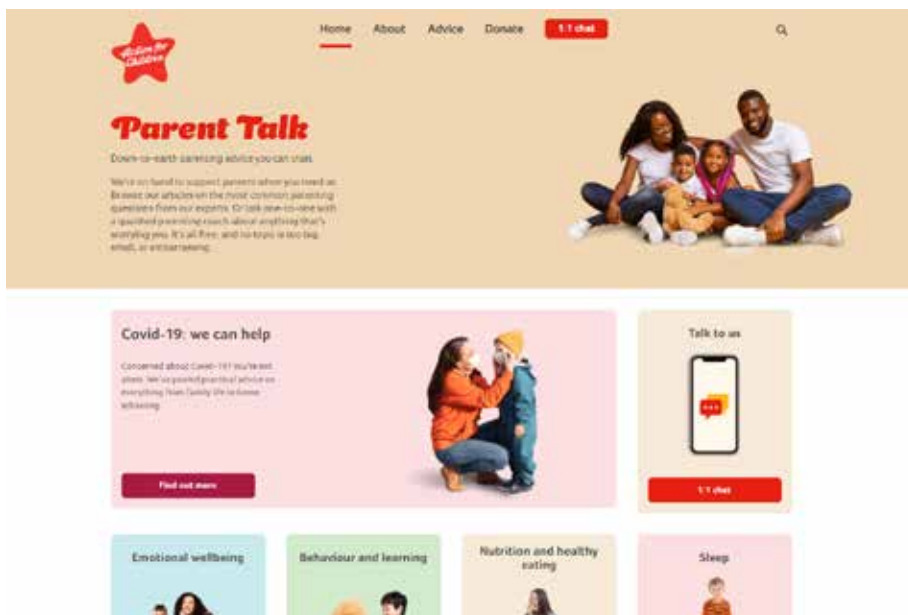
Since the start of the pandemic:

- There has been a 400% increase in requests for support for pre-birth topics.
- There has been a 200% increase in requests for support for 0-2 topics.

Key figures: topics

From March to September 2020, the most featured topics for one-to-one conversations were:

- Emotional wellbeing (child): 30% of conversations.
- Boundaries and routines: 21% of conversations.
- Contact arrangements: 19% of conversations.
- Parent wellbeing: 18% of conversations.
- Parental conflict: 15% of conversations.



Parents' views

Parents using the service told us that they valued the ability to access support when they needed it – for instance, outside of usual office hours, and without having to wait for an appointment. They felt it was convenient to speak to a practitioner without having to travel anywhere, or to organise childcare.

Some feedback from parents who have been supported by the service:

- “Great advice, loads of links for where I can get help from, reassuring and so friendly, so glad I reached out!”
- “I can’t believe the response being so quick and giving me some hope that someone is there to listen to me thank u.”
- “Great help and support, providing further information to a single dad, I would recommend any dad to get help here, many thanks.”
- “[The practitioner] was so calm and really took time to listen to me rambling on – she helped me to make some sense of my thoughts and gave me some pointers for further help/next steps. Her advice helped me to realise that I can do this – I have lost my confidence recently but I feel like I’m ready to take a deep breath and keep going now (which I was very much *not* feeling beforehand!) I so appreciated the time she took to talk things through with me and also the fact that she left the door open, so to speak, if ever I need guidance in the future. Having someone who knows what they’re talking about to discuss the situation with has really helped.”

Our parenting coaches also reported speaking to more fathers on Parent Talk than they ever did when working in face-to-face family support. Between March and November 2020, of the 25% of conversations where the gender of parent was disclosed, 40% were with men. In the same time period, around 35% of people who used the site were male.

Limitations of Parent Talk

The live chat function is designed to provide parents with a quick response when they need it. One downside to this design is that our parenting coaches cannot replicate the long-term relationships with parents they achieve through face-to-face support. They're also unable to provide unlimited ongoing support for parents who might need it (although parents are free to come back as many times as they like, and our coaches will know that the same parent has returned). The service cannot provide an assessment, plan, intervene or review function in the way other Action for Children services can. The team is working to build a higher-need online offer for parents who require ongoing support.

The one-to-one chat means that the information given to our parenting coaches is from one source only. Practitioners don't get wider input from other family members, or other agencies, as they might when conducting face-to-face work.

There is also the issue that some families may have limited or no access to the service, for reasons such as digital exclusion, low levels of digital literacy, low literacy levels, or not having English as a first language. Our Parent Talk Team are aware of these barriers, and overcoming them will be a key focus for 2021.

Safeguarding

One potential limitation of the service is that it does not provide practitioners with the opportunity to see or hear from children directly.

However, Parent Talk has a robust safeguarding process, and is regularly audited. The latest safeguarding audit reported: clear systems for the identification, recording and tracking of concerns; a routing in Action for Children's Safeguarding Framework, with line management from an experienced children's services manager; a skilled staff team committed to ongoing training; and confidence in reporting concerns to children's services and following up on these.

Impact of the pandemic on safeguarding concerns

Throughout the pandemic, Parent Talk practitioners have seen a rise in safeguarding cases, or cases where safeguarding concerns have been identified. They attribute this to the fact that many families have not been able to access face-to-face services, particularly universal and early intervention support.





Conclusions

The pandemic has provided a new perspective on digital provision. Some of our services are reviewing their delivery models to incorporate increased home-based working. Now that commissioners have seen the implementation of alternative, virtual ways of working, aspects of our services may be commissioned digitally in the future. Our Technology Team are constantly looking for new tools to improve digital delivery.

However, the overarching message from our staff is that digital provision should never replace face-to-face support. Instead, it can be an enhancement, delivered alongside direct contact approaches. In most instances, a local system of support should not be composed of digital services alone. Face-to-face contact remains vital, for reasons ranging from the identification of safeguarding concerns, to the need to build trusting and engaged relationships with families. It is important to avoid situations where digital services are commissioned in place of face-to-face services just because they are cheaper.

Our staff recognise the value of using technology to communicate with families, and feel that digital provision has an important role to play within the wider package of support we offer. Staff are keen to adopt a blended approach where possible, with different support options available depending on the needs of families and local areas.

Investment

Developing a wide-ranging offer of early years support for families won't be possible without sufficient funding. Our **research** has found that, even before the pandemic, spending on children's centres had fallen by 64% between 2010/11 and 2018/19. Use of **children's centres** fell by an estimated 18% between 2014/15 and 2017/18.

Local areas must receive sufficient resource from central government to invest in children's centres and family hubs. This is so they can provide sustainable, high-quality support for 0 to 5-year-olds, including universal and targeted offers. This is

more important than ever during and in the recovery from the pandemic, which has only placed extra pressures on families.

Digital access

As mentioned, many of the families we supported during the pandemic wouldn't have been able to access our services if we hadn't provided them with devices and internet packages through our Coronavirus Emergency Fund. Local efforts to shape digital offers will be meaningless if families are unable to access them. The government must ensure that all families have the necessary digital resources to access education and support from services.

Families' voices

Offering the families we support the chance to choose their preferred method of engagement is empowering, and clearly demonstrates the value of families' voices. The increase in flexibility offered by digital provision has improved accessibility in many cases. In the development of any local model of delivery, families' voices must be heard to ensure their preferences are incorporated into local plans.

Evaluation

It's important to robustly and consistently evaluate digital provision so that we better understand the impact of delivery style on outcomes for children. The impact of shifting from face-to-face to digital delivery for families must be thoroughly understood before permanent changes are made to service models. Our services aim to evaluate the digital

delivery of individual interventions, for instance using pre- and post-delivery questionnaires for parenting programmes. However, it's vital that the comparison of outcomes between digital and face-to-face service delivery is fully understood.

The pandemic has opened up a variety of new ways of working. It's essential that, going forwards, decisions about delivery are centred around the needs of families, above all other concerns.





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