Covid-19 Response

Executive Summary

North Tyneside Council
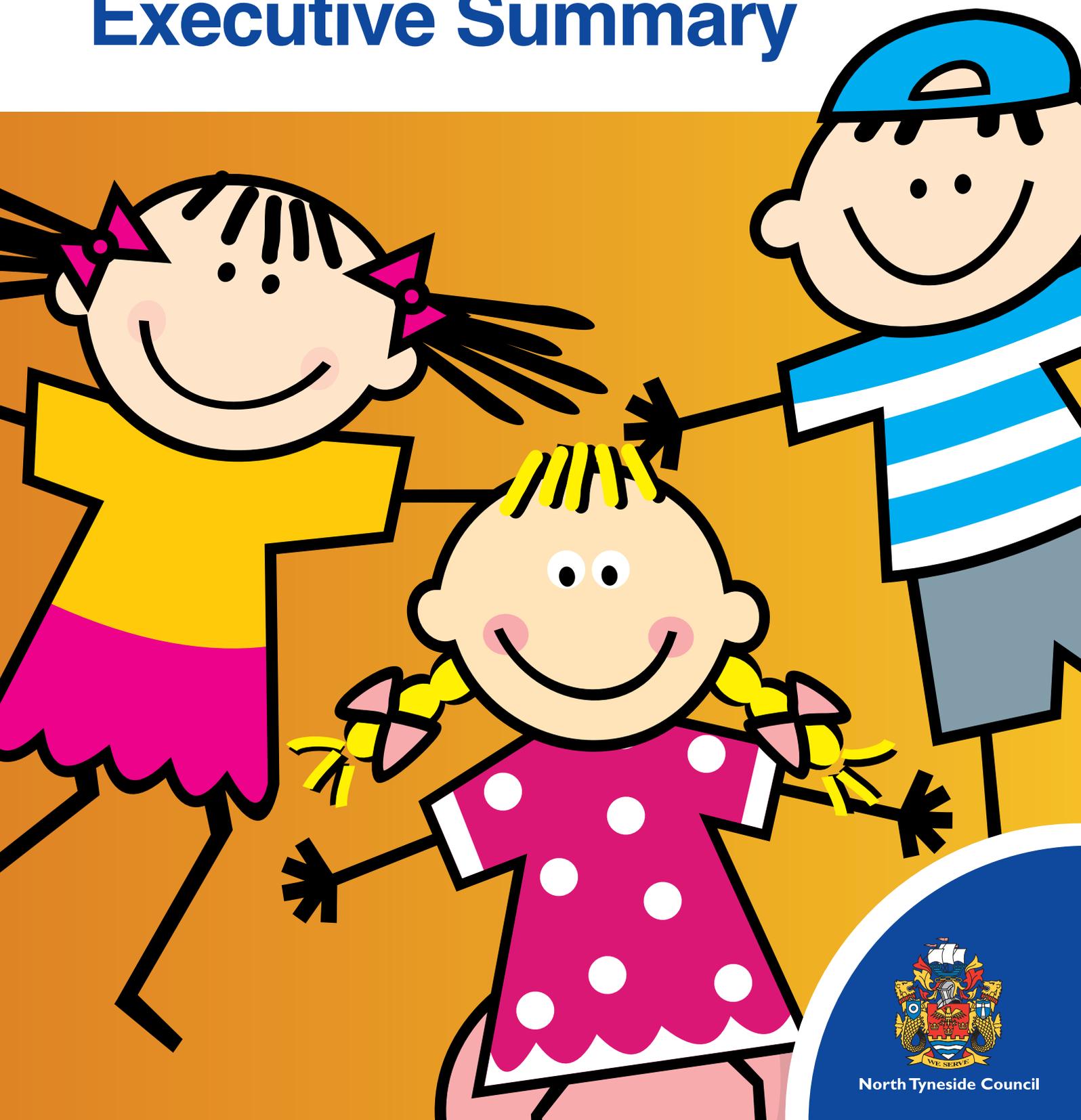
What helps and hinders practitioners build safety through naturally connected networks during a pandemic when professional contact is limited?

Under the conditions of COVID-19, direct professional involvement with families and children in statutory social care services has been significantly reduced. This led to local authorities having to think about how they can work with, and support, children, young people and their families in different ways.

There are many ways in which this has been approached. An increasing number of practice models and approaches focus on identifying and utilising naturally connected support networks. In North Tyneside we are passionately committed to the Signs of Safety model of practice and are on a continued journey with its implementation, including embedding the use of networks.

The purpose of this research was not to advocate for Signs of Safety, nor any particular model of practice, but rather to explore how and whether finding and involving networks in building safety had a demonstrable impact on our ability to keep children safe during the lockdown. We wanted to explore this further and see whether there were lessons for the sector.

We are very grateful to Eileen Munro, Marie Devine, and Andrew Turnell, for advising on, and carrying out the primary research with the participant local authorities. We are particularly grateful to the three authorities that agreed to be involved in the research; we know all too well the operational challenges that children's services face on a daily basis, not least during a global pandemic, so we are very appreciative that authorities saw the value of the research and were able to release staff to be involved.

Just as in North Tyneside, many authorities will have taken stock of how they adapted, what worked well, what didn't work so well, and what practice they want to retain. Each authority has its own unique set of circumstances – the place, demography, wider organisation, and partnerships. Therefore, each authority will wish to understand their own situation, how they can learn, improve and develop the way in which they work and, ultimately, how they best support, create safety, and improve outcomes for children and young people.

There are a wide range of reports that have been written about the way in which local authorities have responded to the impact of COVID-19, and there will be many more to be written. We did not set out to, nor do we intend to, replicate those reports and the key learning derived.

However, we do hope that this research will unearth some common themes and opportunities that local authorities can incorporate into their recovery and transition planning from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Further, whilst we set out to understand how children's services practitioners involved networks around a child to build safety, what can clearly be seen from the report is that this was only achievable through a combination of wider organisational and leadership determinants. Therefore, this report is not solely aimed at social work professionals but also at wider local authority leaders who can influence and shape the environment which allows social work to flourish.

We also want to stress that the findings are not only of relevance to authorities that use the Signs of Safety model of practice. We hope that every authority can identify with the findings and can see opportunities in the recommendations made.

Key findings from a local authority perspective

In this section, we have attempted to summarise the key themes and learning from the perspective of a local authority – we have thought about what we have taken from the study and the key learning that we will seek to capitalise on.

## Organisational Readiness and Response

There was strong and consistent feedback from practitioners that they felt best able to do their crucial job when their organisation ensured they had the right ICT kit to work remotely, and the right software and supporting technology to interact with colleagues and customers. Some authorities were already well placed for this when the pandemic struck; others had to act and invest quickly. We are confident that, more than one year on from the lockdown commencing, most (if not all) authorities have taken the necessary steps in this regard. The learning, therefore, is that authorities should always ensure they are horizon scanning and planning ahead to invest in the right technology, not waiting for a crisis to force them into action. Where strong foundations of good quality social work practice are in place, this will enable local authorities to quickly adapt to new ways of working.

Formal and Informal Support

Staff reported feeling particularly well supported when significant effort was made by leaders, managers and colleagues to support them, and each other, during the pandemic. This included less 'formal' support, such as weekly emails from senior leaders and virtual team 'coffee breaks', as well as more formal mechanisms, such as more frequent (but shorter) team meetings and continued effective supervision. This was true not only of frontline practitioners but managers at all levels. Whilst authorities have, rightly, focused on ensuring frontline staff have been effectively supported during this period, it is also clear that supervisors, team and senior managers (who often have a less defined 'team' structure around them) will have felt isolated during this period and, where they have benefited from the same level of support, this has been positive. A positive culture of feedback, encouragement and continual learning has been evidenced and perceived as valuable.
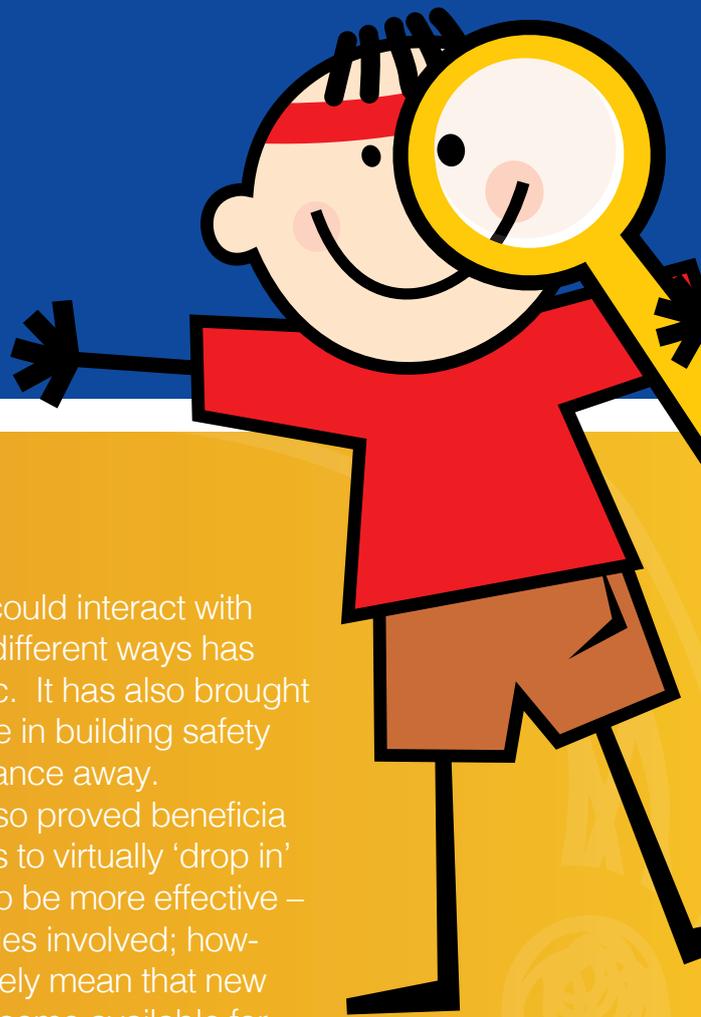
Use of Technology

The increased use of technology so that practitioners could interact with children, young people, their families and networks in different ways has clearly been a positive of practice during the pandemic. It has also brought an ability to broaden networks and involve more people in building safety around a child, particularly those that live a further distance away.
The more informal nature of using different tools has also proved beneficia in terms of engagement, with the ability for practitioners to virtually 'drop in' for an update more easily. Some tools were reported to be more effective – or more commonly used - than others from the authorities involved; however, the rapid development of new applications will likely mean that new tools with different functionality and applicability will become available for consideration in practice. Authorities should understand what works best, keep an eye on what is out there, and support staff to apply these in practice. Technology was equally as valuable for family and network members to keep in contact with each other – strengthening network

Back to Basics

Whilst the use of technology has clearly presented a wider range of opportunities for practitioners to engage with children, young people, families and networks, the pandemic restrictions also forced practitioners to revert to 'old school' practice. Examples of this included sending children pens and paper, and asking them to draw or write how they were feeling and returning this. The learning from this is that the method and approach of engagement should best fit the individual child and their circumstances – there is not a one size fits all approach, and the practitioner should rely on their training, instinct and judgement to determine this.

Recommendations

One of our main objectives from carrying out this research was to develop recommendations that local authorities could incorporate into their recovery planning and continuous improvement plans.

Drawing on the findings from the research, our own direct experience of working through the pandemic, and learning from our sector-led improvement activity, we have set out the following recommendations for local authorities to consider.

1. **Resist the temptation to uniformly revert to practice pre-pandemic, and encourage practitioners to find the best methods to achieve practice goals**

1.1 Retain not only the risk-assessed approach to visits but also a value judgement regarding other methods for working with children, young people, families and networks

1.2 Continue the use of more informal, digital tools (for example, messaging applications) to complement face-to-face methods of keeping in touch with children, young people, families and networks

1.3 Encourage networks to utilise informal, digital tools to keep in touch with thechild/young person

1.4 Don't aim to default to digital at all costs; it is not the panacea and there can be as much good practice available through 'analogue' means

1.5 Create a library of 'creative' practice that has been adopted by practitioners during the pandemic and regularly share this across the workforce to maximise its coverage and impact

2. Support practitioners to do their job and create the best virtual or hybrid working environment

2.1 Where this hasn't been done already, equip all frontline practitioners with a tablet and a smartphone immediately

2.2 Agree the digital tools and software that the organisation / department will use, and support all staff understand the full functionality, applicability, and benefits of these in practice

2.3 Incorporate virtual working and virtual practice into workforce development programmes, integrated with existing practice training

2.4 Where organisations expect to continue with homeworking or a hybrid model for the medium-to-long-term, create or encourage informal virtual mechanisms for teams to regularly keep in touch

2.5 Agree and communicate a clear organisational commitment to flexible working, removing a perceived expectation that staff should be 'at work' at fixed times

2.6 Introduce more regular but shorter team meetings

3. Enable and provide clear leadership and management to support practice, and particularly involvement of networks

3.1 As with practitioners, create regular and informal support mechanisms across management teams

3.2 Create or enhance a shared understanding of the role and benefits of network involvement across leadership teams, and communicate a clear commitment to this

3.3 Train key partnership leads and decision-makers in the respective social work practice model, and particularly use of networks, and develop a bank of real-life examples of where the use of networks have effectively managed risk

3.4 Work with partners to share good practice and learning from virtual working more generally, to encourage usage and increase uptake

3.5 Increase, or maintain the increased, regular communications and dialogue between leaders and practitioners to celebrate good practice, understand challenges, and secure continued commitment and continuous drive.

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