

# Using the Local Offer to respond to Covid-19 - Learning from Wirral

## #1 of the Responding to Covid-19 Series

***Based on a session delivered by Sally Tittle, SEND Participation and Engagement Lead, Wirral Council***

Wirral's Local Offer Team is a small team of two who have been working hard to use the Local Offer to respond effectively to Covid-19, link services and teams together across the area and engage with SEND young people and their families.

Once lockdown began, strategic planning quickly identified key themes:

1. Keeping in touch
2. Connecting
3. Engaging
4. Anticipating
5. Informing and

Wirral's Local Offer response was then developed out of these 6 core themes. The response has had a number of key components:

### Fortnightly SEND snapshot

- They quickly put together a fortnightly SEND snapshot to provide an update on what was happening locally. This includes information on any changes to provision, what is and isn't able to happen during the pandemic response, and available services.
- The SEND snapshot includes a named person from each service with contact information to promote transparency and joined-up working.
- The SEND snapshot initially had 13 contributors but now there are more than 40 people from across the local authority, health, VCS, social care, education and other services who contribute information to the newsletters.
- Before the Covid-19 pandemic there had been limited engagement between the Local Offer and health teams, however over 20 of the 42 snapshot contributors now come from health colleagues. This health 'buy-in' was seen as a particular benefit of the snapshot work, with health colleagues providing rich content for the newsletters and the Local Offer website. This in turn, provides a robust platform post pandemic with strong new multi-agency relationships formed.



- Overall, multi-agency working was felt to be “thriving more than ever, with increased engagement across teams”



- The snapshots were seen as having reduced feelings of uncertainty and hopelessness from local SENCOs who wanted to support families but were unsure of the impact on SEND support and what was currently available. As part of the Local Offer Covid-response, on-line training across a range of topics was sourced to help SENCOs upskill themselves and be better placed to support/respond to families during the crisis. Some of this training counted as part of their continuing professional development.
- The snapshot was very well received by professionals and based on that feedback and in direct response to a request from Parent/Carers, the team have now developed a version of the newsletter for Parent/Carers and young people. This second SEND snapshot focuses on useful information for Wirral SEND families and signposts them to any adjustment to services and the plethora of peer led Parent/Carer support via webinars, surveys and social media.
- The SEND snapshot has also led to a reduction in “back and forth email traffic from SEND colleagues” as many now feel more informed, updated and supported. The snapshots also allow professionals who may be furloughed, shielding or redeployed to stay in the loop and progress their knowledge.

## Online updates through website, blog and social media engagement

- The website was also updated to include a new section ‘Covid-19 support’ which is one click away from the main menu and updated daily. The team ensure this daily content is quality-assured and avoids jargon, acronyms and duplication. This helps professionals to navigate through the high volumes of information they are receiving and helps families easily access good quality, relevant information that meets particular needs, such as easy read materials.
- Poppy, the Local Offer Trainee, has also produced a twice-weekly blog to facilitate ongoing two-way communication with parents, families and young people through a more informal medium.
- They also spend 30 minutes every day adding new content to the Local Offer’s Facebook and Twitter accounts as an additional way of reaching parents and young people. Given the team’s limited resources, there are challenges with marketing the social media accounts but the team are committed to providing and signposting support through social media channels and have been rewarded with a 30% increase in engagement
- They have adopted some creative methods of engaging with partners, including a weekly
- ‘partnership award’ to an organisation or individual who has proactively supported the Local Offer work. The award is personalised and posted on social media each Friday. This ‘award’ has been very well received by partners from across the

VCS and other teams and they will continue with the idea post-Covid to increase partnership working.

## Increased communication with Parent /Carers

- Engagement with Parent/Carers and families has also increased. This has included attending virtual coffee mornings led by Parent/Carers that they previously would not have attended. This has built stronger relationships and increased networks, to the extent that several Parent/Carers have since become 'Local Offer champions' and offered to spread the word about the Local Offer in person and on social media. This was seen as one of the key achievements by the Local Offer team who were delighted to have developed this key strand of engagement. Widening their reach has also increased the diversity of the SEND families the Local Offer team are engaging with.
- A dedicated email address for the Local Offer has been set up to make it easier for them to get in contact both during and after Covid. This was important as many parents are particularly anxious at the moment, including re-entry to school. This dedicated email address has facilitated greater engagement with parents, and enabled the Local Offer team to respond quickly to their concerns including by putting them in contact with health colleagues, opening up communication channels with schools and putting further support in place.
- It has been useful to hear first-hand how families are coping with the pandemic and what their needs are as this enables the team to be proactive and act quickly. The relationships that have formed during this time will be useful post-Covid and, where resource permits, the team plan on continuing this level of engagement.



## Prioritising and investing in youth voice and coproduction

- The Local Offer trainee is themselves a young person with SEND and they have been employed as a full-time SEND Youth Engagement officer based in the Local Offer team, which ensures there is a constant strand of youth voice throughout the Local Offer and a dedicated member of staff to prioritise engagement and co-production. Engaging with young people, both pre and during Covid-19 has been

invested in and prioritised by the Local Offer team in Wirral.

- As soon as the Covid-19 crisis hit, the Local Offer and wider youth engagement teams met to plan how to continue to engage with and support young people with SEND in Wirral.
- From the first week of lockdown, the team have held weekly online SEND youth voice meetings. Continuing the youth voice group was a priority to ensure that relationships were maintained, young people still felt connected with their friends and experienced continuity in the professionals they were engaged with. It was also felt to be more important than ever for young people's voice to be amplified and influence the work of the Local Offer and wider SEND service.
- Virtual meetings have allowed them to reach not only the well-established group of young people but also to tap into a pool of young people who previously would either not be able to access or would not want to join in-person group sessions. This has again increased diversity.
- The team had already established a good foundation of collaborative work and genuine engagement with young people prior to Covid-19 which enabled many of the further developments progressed during the pandemic response. Engagement with young people has therefore been increased rather than scaled back during this time.

**To summarise, Sally Tittle identified a number of key messages:**

- **Listen** to young people, to families and to professionals about what they need during this time
- **Don't be judgemental** and don't make assumptions
- **Be creative and committed** - you can still achieve a lot with limited resources and constraints
- **Don't wait for a solution to come to you** – go out and find solutions
- **Communicate little and often**, this breaks down barriers and formality and builds rapport. Professionals, families and young people have all appreciated being kept in the loop during this time
- **Prioritise coproduction** – do not put this off because of the impact of the pandemic but invest now to lay solid foundations for the future. Link people together, identify the gaps and then the 'bridge builders'.

To find out more, please visit their website <https://localofferwirral.org/> and twitter page [@lowirral](https://twitter.com/lowirral)

