12 October 2020

Dear Lucy,

Thank you for your email and letter. I found my visit to SNAPS in February truly inspiring and I have had contact with some families since so I have heard some of the emotional and physical challenges they are facing.

I appreciate how difficult and stressful this time is for families with children with additional needs – the last six months has placed a terrible strain on those who too often already feel isolated and lacking in the support they need.

In Leeds our Children and Families service has worked hard to keep in contact with families, to reach out through partners and parent carer forums to those who may not previously have accessed services, and to adapt services to be in line with the restrictions of the pandemic. This means that some support is being provided virtually. A directory of all support services can be found [here](https://leedslocaloffer.org.uk/#!/directory) at the Leeds Local Offer website.

Where families have reported struggling due to ill health or a child being at home due to risks at school, increased individual support worker packages have been put in place. The occupational therapy team have continued supporting families and short breaks have continued to be provided, although unfortunately this has had to be reduced due to availability of space to social distance.

Additional short breaks have been offered wherever possible, as well as supporting requests for increased direct payment packages or provision of personal budgets for families to buy outdoor equipment so children can have a short break at home.

It is important that if a family in Leeds is feeling isolated and is registered with a school, that they contact the school who will coordinate the offers between Early Help/cluster and wider services. If a family home educates their child then the Elective Home Education team can offer some support in directing them to services.

I should be clear that the restrictions we face are imposed on local authorities by the government and are not restrictions of the council. As a local authority, Leeds City Council asked for some variation to the guidance as it has been introduced. Due to the impact of isolation, particularly on families of children with additional needs, and more widely to support good mental health as winter approaches; we asked for restrictions that would enable households to meet in public spaces. We also argued for a more compassionate approach to care home visiting. Unfortunately, communication from the government has been such that we, also, often get very little notice of restrictions that are coming in, which may support families to prepare. For example, when Leeds went into restrictions at the end of September, we did not know until 11am on that Friday that restrictions were coming in at midnight that night.

To clarify the government guidance around support bubbles and childcare bubbles; single adults and single parent families can form a support bubble with another household of any size. This means a family with more than one adult can form a support bubble with a single adult or single parent household.

In addition to this, any family can also form a childcare support bubble with another household for the provision of "informal childcare" for children under 14, but this has to be consistent. This means grandparents, friends and family members can support a family of a child with additional needs, though it has to be the same one household. People can form one support bubble and one childcare support bubble.

You can read more about the guidance on local restrictions, including support bubbles on the Leeds City Council website, [here](https://www.leeds.gov.uk/coronavirus/local-rules).

I should reiterate that this policy is formed by national government, not the council, and it could be that SNAPS, or individual families, may wish to lobby the Leeds MPs on this matter. I will also discuss the concerns you have raised with our council leader, Cllr Judith Blake, so that she can pursue this through her national role as Chair of the Local Government Association’s Children and Young People Board.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me, I hope that you’ve found this reply useful. Please do get in touch if I can be of any further assistance to you or the families you support.

Warm regards,

Fiona

**Cllr Fiona Venner**

**Executive Member for Children and Families**