

## **Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

### **Wednesday, 18 November 2015, County Hall, Worcester -**

### **10.00 am**

		<b>Minutes</b>
<b>Present:</b>		Ms L R Duffy (Chairman), Mrs F M Oborski (Vice Chairman), Mr P Denham, Mrs J L M A Griffiths and Mr J W R Thomas
<b>Also attended:</b>		Mr J P Campion, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families  Simon White (Interim Director of Children's Services), Mark Sanders (Senior Finance Manager – Financial Planning & Reporting), Suzanne O'Leary (Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager) and Samantha Morris (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)
<b>Available Papers</b>		The members had before them:  A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated); B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 10 September 2015 (previously circulated).  (A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes).
<b>212</b>	<b>Apologies and Welcome</b>	Apologies were received from Bob Banks, Ian Hopwood and Charmian Richardson.
<b>213</b>	<b>Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip</b>	None.
<b>214</b>	<b>Public Participation</b>	Karen Parker, Parent Representative of Worcester Deaf Children's Society (WDCS) addressed the Panel about the Outsourcing of Learning & Achievement Services.  Ms Parker had a profoundly deaf son who needed assistive technology to support his education but still felt that the educational experience wasn't the same as his peers. She read out the following Statement on behalf of WDCS:  "For anyone who is not aware of the

WDCS group we are a charitable organisation who endeavour to support and represent hearing impaired children and young people in the Worcestershire area. We are affiliated to the National Deaf Children's Society who are a charity supporting this group nationally.

Both WDCS and NDCS have, over the past 6 months, made efforts to become involved in the process to outsource Learning and Achievement Services in Worcestershire.

We understand that Worcestershire County Council (WCC) have a statutory duty to consult with "children with SEN or disabilities, and their parents and young people with SEN or disabilities when reviewing local SEN and social care provision" as stated in S11 Children and Families Act and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (circulated at the meeting) and were keen to be involved in the consultation process, since the outsourcing of this vital public service to a private company is quite clearly a significant review of SEN provision.

Although requests have been made, to both WCC and Babcock International, to have some form of consultation on this matter, to date neither have made any effort to contact WDCS nor NDCS to arrange for a meeting.

Since the 1st of October when Babcock became the service provider, the only source of information that has been available has been via the media, and as I am sure the Panel will appreciate, this has not instilled any degree of confidence in the relationship between WCC and Babcock International and how this will affect the vulnerable children who rely on the services in question.

We would like to request that some form of review is undertaken to discover why so little respect has been given to significant stakeholders who are affected by this process. At the very least we would expect groups such as WDCS and NDCS to have been involved in some sort of consultation exercise

Finally I would like to request that WCC and Babcock make every effort to involve our group and any other relevant children/parent groups who may be affected by the outsourcing of services, in the consultation process which ends on the 6th December 2015".

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families advised that nothing had changed in terms of delivery of the service but if there were proposed service changes, the County Council would carry out a consultation.

**215 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 10 September 2015 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**216 Corporate Strategy Planning and 2016/17 Budget: Children's Services**

As part of the Council's process for consultation on the 2016/17 budget, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families and the Interim Director of Children's Services were invited to the meeting to discuss the budget challenges facing services in 2016/17 and how these were being addressed.

The Council needed to ensure that it could continue to deliver services within a tight financial settlement and find solutions to deliver the necessary savings. The Council were continuing to work to do things differently through the FutureFit programme, with a combination of efficiencies and savings proposals.

On 19 November 2015 the Cabinet considered the development of the Corporate Plan, FutureFit, and the next Medium Term Financial Plan 2016/17 to 2019/20, alongside savings proposals which have emerged from Corporate Strategy Planning 2015.

Children's Services had responsibilities to all children in Worcestershire; including making sure all children had access to a place in a good school. They had a particular responsibility towards children who were vulnerable for any reason, to ensure they could make the most of the opportunities they had and were responsible for keeping safe the small number of children who were at risk of significant harm and may need to take some of those children into care.

During the ensuing discussion, the following main points were made:

- There was a £5.8m children's placement overspend relating to the increase of looked after children (LAC) from 685 to 717 – this was an enormous pressure for Children's Services.
- In transforming the Service, it was important to apply more challenge to ensure better outcomes for children and young people.
- Demand Management would be a massive challenge for the Directorate and early help and support were a big part of this transformation.
- The four main strands of work for the Directorate were:
  - Fixing the front door and ensuring children had their needs met appropriately by all services, not just social care. Social Worker caseloads were still too high; it was only when these caseloads were at the right level that quality would improve.
  - Securing permanency for children in care as quickly as possible was a vital issue for the Service, which would significantly reduce the overspend in this area.
  - Developing and retaining the Children's Services workforce – currently 85% of Social Work staff were permanent, which was very good, the challenge was now to develop and retain the staff to reduce the necessity for large numbers of newly qualified social work staff.
  - Continuous improvement in the consistency of social work practice through the back to basics programme – improvements had been made in this area but was still not good enough.
- It was suggested that there were a number of cases in Worcestershire inappropriately referred to social care demonstrated by:

- the higher than the national average of cases closed after assessment or not needing an assessment, suggesting that signposting to early help would have been more appropriate.
  - The low number of cases referred to early help before entering the social care system; and
  - The low number of step up and step downs.
- It was important that if a child needed an assessment, it was carried out without unnecessary delay, which if more assessments than necessary were being requested could result in a child being at risk.
- Planning for permanency needed to be quicker. It was important that every child benefitted from a stable family life, but for some this wasn't possible. Nevertheless, it was vital to ensure permanency to the situation was timely eg if it was envisaged that fostering was likely to be long term then special guardianship should be sought.
- Increasing the number of special guardianships would reduce the reliance on Independent Foster Agencies (IFAs) and increase the need for in-house foster carers.
- The aim was have more in-house foster carers with an improved package of support and training and fewer IFAs.
- Freeing up children for adoption also needed to be quicker.
- For a small number of teenagers were they could not or would not buy into a family situation, the small family type children's homes were considered, when other options had been exhausted, to be better than the larger more institutionalised homes.
- There was an aspiration to reduce the number of out of County placements for the hard to place children.
- In response to the concern about whether the re-commissioning of early help services would result in the loss of services targeted at local need, the Panel were assured that the diversity of the districts would be catered for and services would retain a local flavour. The current method of delivering early help services wasn't achieving the desired outcomes and needed to change; the Service would be targeted at demand management.

**217 Worcestershire  
Children's  
Safeguarding  
Peer Review**

- The demand for early help had changed since it was originally commissioned and more focus was needed on the children on the edge of care. Services also needed to be more joined up with partners.
- It was confirmed that that the £5.8m budget pressure in the Service would be supported and that further information would be available in December regarding the future on-going support.

The Panel was asked to consider the draft report on its scrutiny of the Directorate of Children's Services' response to the findings of the Children's Safeguarding Peer Review.

In November 2014, Worcestershire County Council – as part of its desire to be a learning organisation – invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to help facilitate a Peer Review on its approach to safeguarding children. The Peer Review took place in April 2015. The County Council had previously invited the LGA to conduct a safeguarding peer review in October 2011.

At its meeting on 25 June 2015, the Panel considered the outcomes of the Peer Review and was informed that the LGA team had identified the following four priorities:

- A 'back to basics' Safeguarding Improvement Plan
- Resolving the future direction for the 'Front Door'
- Implementing a detailed financial recovery plan
- Review and defining the role of Early Help

Panel Members agreed to undertake further scrutiny work to consider the Directorate's response to these priorities. These meetings took place between July and September 2015.

The Panel reiterated the concerns at paragraph 21 of the Report:

- There was some doubt as to whether partners (in particular schools) would have the capacity and resources to do more. Given reduced resources, schools may increasingly focus on their core educational role, given the potentially serious consequences of not doing well in Ofsted Inspections.
- The Health Visitor and the School Nursing Service should be properly wrapped into early intervention work, as they were the safety net for many

families.

There was some concern that changing the focus of early help to those on the edge of care could potentially reduce support available for those needing a lower level of support.

Members also expressed concern about delays in accessing support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Although the Panel had considered CAMHS previously, it was suggested that as the Service was in the process of being re-commissioned, it would be timely to carry out some further scrutiny.

The Panel supported the Report and agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board should consider it at its meeting on 2 December, after which it will be sent to the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families in order to inform future work.

The Chairman of the Panel advised that following the Panel discussion in June on Worcestershire Safeguarding Children's Board (WSCB) Annual Report for 2014/15, where the Independent Chairman of the WSCB advised that the overall judgement of the WSCB was that they couldn't be assured of the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements in respect of children in the child protection system, she had made arrangements to meet with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families, the Chief Executive, the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director of Children's Services and Heads of Service to discuss her concerns.

The meeting ended at 11.00 am

Chairman .....