

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Friday, 17 July 2020, Online only - 10.00 am

Minutes

Present:

Mrs F M Oborski (Chairman), Mr S J Mackay (Vice Chairman), Ms P Agar, Mr T Baker-Price, Mr B Clayton, Mr P M McDonald, Ms T L Onslow and Mrs J A Potter

Also attended:

Mr A C Roberts, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families
Jane Stanley, Worcestershire Healthwatch

Dr Catherine Driscoll, Chief Executive of Worcestershire Children First

Tina Russell, Director of Children's Social Care & Safeguarding, WCF

Sarah Wilkins, Director of Education and Early Help, WCF

James MacDonald, Practice Manager, Supporting Families First, WCF

Chris Bird, Senior Finance Business Partner, WCF

Samantha Morris, Scrutiny Co-ordinator and

Alyson Grice, Overview and Scrutiny Officer

435 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman congratulated Councillor Potter on her appointment as Chairman of the Adult Care and Well Being Overview and Scrutiny Panel, which had been confirmed at the meeting of full Council on 16 July. Also, Councillor Mackay had been appointed Vice Chairman of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel on this date and the Chairman welcomed him to his new role.

Apologies were received from Ms R L Dent, Mr M J Hart (Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills) and Mr B Allbut (Church Representative).

436 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

437 Public Participation

None.

438 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 16 June 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

439 COVID-19 Update

The Director of Children's Services/Chief Executive of Worcestershire Children First (WCF) and the Director of Education and Early Help, WCF updated the Panel on developments relating to the wider reopening of Worcestershire schools and settings from 1 June 2020 and work to support schools in planning for September 2020.

By way of introduction, the Chief Executive of WCF reminded Members that the COVID-19 pandemic was not an easy situation and had had a real impact on children. However, she believed the Council could be proud of staff who had risen to the challenge. Schools were now preparing for a full reopening in September.

The Director of Education and Early Help agreed that the Council could be proud of the efforts made by staff throughout the lockdown period, both those working at home and those in schools. She went on to highlight the following points:

- The wider reopening of schools had started on 1 June in primaries and 15 June in secondaries. In terms of attendance, schools had seen a strong start.
- Overall, there had been a remarkable response to the pandemic which had brought the whole school system together. The Education Incident Planning Group had met over 40 times and would continue to meet throughout the school holidays on a weekly basis. This group included phase leads and key partners.
- The SEND task group, the alternative provision task group and the early years task group would also continue to meet weekly throughout the summer holidays.
- From September, schools would move from the COVID response phase into an education strategy phase. WCF had produced an information bulletin for schools on a frequent basis and to date had produced 62 issues.
- Feedback from schools suggested that the return to school had been a relief for children and staff.
- It was confirmed that places had been found for all children whose early years setting had not

reopened following lockdown.

- An addendum to the risk assessment tool had been circulated to schools and completed responses were now being received.
- WCF had worked with schools to provide additional storage where this was required in order to reconfigure classrooms in line with the government's social distancing guidance and 61 schools had taken up this offer.
- The school improvement team had developed a 'recovery curriculum' with the aim of supporting schools to create a safe, healthy, celebratory space when children returned to school.
- Ofsted had informed schools that it would resume visits in the autumn. These would last for one day, with one day's notice and would not be inspections. Visits would be to schools previously judged to be inadequate and others.
- The Director was proud to say that all laptops and other IT equipment to support remote learning had been delivered to maintained schools by the end of the summer term.
- Members were reminded that the Learning and Achievement Service was now part of Worcestershire Children First. This included the Educational Psychology Service which had recently offered training in trauma support to all schools. 170 delegates had attended the training, which highlighted the caring nature of staff in Worcestershire schools.

Panel Members were given the opportunity to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- It was agreed that the local County Councillor would be informed if an early years setting in their division closed.
- In relation to the distribution of IT equipment to schools, an update on the situation in academies was requested. It was understood that academies had ordered IT equipment direct from the Department for Education.
- A Member of the Panel congratulated the Director of Education and Early Help and her team on their excellent response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools within her division had been pleased with the support they had received from WCF.
- A second Member suggested that, although Worcestershire had done better than some other areas of the country, some schools may not have

been ambitious enough. She referred Members to her own experience where her child had received no contact from their teacher and, although work was sent home, parents were expected to support this work. She suggested that more use could have been made of technology and expressed concern that the same would happen if there were to be a second lockdown. There was a need to acknowledge that parents could not replace the role of teachers. The Chairman expressed further concern about those children whose parents had not even tried to support their children's education while at home.

- In response the Director of Education and Early Help informed the Panel that the management of remote learning was a key concern for schools and this would be a focus for the autumn term. She agreed that there had been a mixed picture in schools to date. All schools had been given e-safety guidance but not all had felt equipped to put this into practice. She confirmed that remote learning would be a part of the blend of learning in the autumn and would be looked at as part of Ofsted visits.
- Another Panel Member expressed his congratulations to the Director and her team for their response. He went on to ask whether the Director was confident that WCF had given as much guidance as possible to schools to support them in preparing for reopening fully in September. In response, the Director informed Members that schools had been given support as guidance was issued by the DfE. The Incident Planning Group would continue to meet throughout the summer and further guidance would be issued as key issues emerged. Further government guidance was expected on home to school transport and catch up funding. WCF would continue to work on guidance although officers did not want to continually bombard schools. Two weeks before the start of the autumn term would be a key phase in communication with schools.
- In terms of attendance figures, it was suggested that the return so far appeared to be slow and steady, as fears were slowly being allayed. It was hoped that confidence would be higher by September. The Recovery Curriculum was very impressive and would be very valuable to schools. The Director was confident that it was a comprehensive document.

- In relation to parental confidence, it was important to be clear about the expectations for a full return to school in September. It was not yet known whether there would be a national campaign on this, but it was confirmed that there would be a Worcestershire response. 'Back to school' would also target vulnerable children, something that would require a whole system response.
- It was suggested that confidence levels would be worse if there was a second spike in COVID cases in September. The Director agreed and reiterated the need for clear communications to ensure parents were confident that schools were safe.
- Concern was expressed about the potential long-term impact on the early years sector. As restrictions eased, it would be difficult for some people to return to work if early years provision was not in place. In response to a question about whether there were any plans to improve sufficiency, Members were reminded that the Early Years Task Group would continue to meet weekly. Childcare would continue to operate over the summer and, although it was acknowledged that the sector was fragile, Worcestershire had a history of responding well to sufficiency issues. WCF was working with settings and providing sustainability grants if needed (funded from WCC COVID-19 grants).
- Although, there was no specific sufficiency project planned, this was part of WCF's usual business. Officers were in touch with the sector and ensured that settings were aware that they could contact WCF for support. However, it was recognised that there may be further issues in the longer term. In response to a question about what would happen if other local settings were not able to offer places to children when a setting closed, the Director informed the Panel that this situation had not previously arisen, as the local market had always responded. Opportunities would be explored through the existing sector and through engagement with schools.
- It was noted that all 202 nursery, first, middle and primary schools in Worcestershire were now open. A question was asked about how many pupils in Worcestershire schools had tested positive for COVID-19 and what action had been taken. Members were reminded that all schools had access to the standard operating procedure and, although there had been suspected cases,

these had tested negative. The Director agreed to consult with Public Health colleagues and provide up to date figures on the number of students who had tested positive after having returned to school.

- A question was asked about how long a setting should be closed when a child attending tested positive. This was with reference to a specific nursery in the county. Members were reminded that schools and settings were operating a bubble system whereby, if a child tested positive, their bubble would be closed and they would need to self-isolate for 14 days. It was suggested that this might not necessarily mean that the whole facility had to close for 14 days. Any closures would be for the minimum amount of time to ensure children were not affected unnecessarily. The Director agreed to give Cllr McDonald further information on the response to an outbreak in a specific nursery in his division following the meeting.
- The importance of getting accurate information to parents and carers on what should happen if a child had symptoms or tested positive was noted. In response to a question about how this would happen during the school holidays, it was confirmed that families would receive advice from the public health track and trace system. It was acknowledged that from September, if a child was required to self-isolate, this would present a real challenge for working parents. A Member noted that the procedure for what would happen if there was an outbreak of COVID-19 at a school was already available and she had received a copy via her child's school.
- Although advice given to schools had been excellent, it was down to schools to decide whether to take it up. Some teachers had been very successful in creating remote lessons and it was suggested that these could be shared across the maintained sector. The Director agreed that sharing good practice was key and confirmed that WCF was encouraging schools to do this.
- Travel to school remained a huge issue, in particular for children with SEND and it was suggested that social distancing regulations were likely to lead to an increase in costs.

The Chairman welcomed the update and noted, in summary, that:

- Officers would ensure that local Members were

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informed of any early years setting closing within their division.

- An update would be provided on the provision of IT equipment to academies.
- Figures on the number of students who had tested positive for COVID-19 after having returned to school were requested.
- Further information would be provided to Cllr McDonald on the response to an outbreak in a specific nursery in his division.
- A further update would be provided in September to include information on:
 - Arrangements for home to school transport
 - Advice regarding the use of face coverings in and around schools
 - Progress in online learning
 - Handling of outbreaks in schools and other settings.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families, the Director of Social Care and Safeguarding, and the Supporting Families First Practice Manager had been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on Supporting Families First, including the impact of COVID-19 on the service.

By way of introduction, the Director of Social Care and Safeguarding made the following main points:

- Supporting Families First was a new team which had gone live on 20 January 2020.
- Social workers would always act to protect a child but they also aimed to support and challenge parents to undertake their parenting responsibilities by managing risk and reducing tension, and therefore reducing the need for a child to be taken into care.
- The management of risk was a multi-agency responsibility involving schools, the police and health partners, with significant work undertaken to ensure management of partners' anxiety around support for children.
- The team had continued to work throughout lockdown. Although lockdown began on 23 March, COVID-19 had been around earlier than this and the team had responded accordingly.

The Supporting Families First Practice Manager summarised the presentation slides which had been included in the Agenda. He made the following main points:

- The team operated in a multi-disciplinary system aiming to wrap a plan around families. The team worked with young people aged 10 to 18 years of age, although 3 younger children were also supported as part of sibling groups.
- Supporting Families First worked predominantly on a Child in Need basis or where young people were subject to a Child Protection Plan.
- The aim was for each family Member to develop practical skills through a cognitive behavioural approach which was a good way to help families gain understanding of the context of behaviours.
- The service consisted of 3 multi-disciplinary pods working in the North East, North West and the South of the County. Staff had lots of experience and on the whole were internal appointees. Each team consisted of:
 - an Advanced Social Work Practitioner,
 - a Clinical Lead and three Emotional Health and Well-Being Practitioners,
 - Outreach Workers, who were the main link with the family,
 - Substance Misuse Workers, who were able to break down barriers with other services,
 - Youth Mentors with strong links with schools, and
 - A Money Mentor who was able to work with families who were at risk of losing their homes providing debt management advice and practical support.
- The Service was currently working with 54 children, 71% aged 10 to 15, 25% aged over 16 and 3 children below the age of 10 who were part of sibling groups.
- The Worcestershire Web Star was an assessment tool which had been developed with the aim of bringing together different disciplines, using Worcestershire Children First's values of Happy, Healthy and Safe. The Web Star involved families at the earliest stage and families had responded positively. Following assessment, a plan on a page was developed which was transparent for families and made sense to social workers. This would be re-evaluated over time.
- The Web Star was now live and a programme of training was underway.
- The impact of COVID-19 on service delivery had affected the Team's ability to close cases and end involvement with families. The Service was now able to move forward on this.

- An evaluation of the service in period 1 (a 12-week period) found that 71% of families had reported an improvement in their family circumstances. For those that reported a deterioration, the team was able to identify reasons for this.
- Initially, families were overly positive in the first phase and it had taken time for them to reflect on the true reality.
- In conclusion, it was noted that a key priority of the Service was for children to grow up with their family wherever possible. In the first quarter, only one child had become looked after, which was a 98% success rate of keeping families together. More detailed data would be available following evaluation of the second quarter.

Members of the Panel were given an opportunity to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- It was confirmed that prior to the new team being set up, this work was done in normal social work teams. Supporting Families First was working with the 'top end' families where care was imminent. The Team had additional dedicated capacity and specialisms. It was based on the Hertfordshire model whereby all teams had a multi-agency way of working across safeguarding teams.
- It was acknowledged that it was not possible to prevent every child coming into care. The aim was to start this work at an early stage so that families did not reach crisis point.
- In response to a question about how this work linked to Troubled Families, Members were informed that Troubled Families was a wider programme working at a much earlier stage.
- It was confirmed that Supporting Families First was fully engaged with CLIMB (West Mercia Police's Diversionary Network).
- Members were informed that the Service was flexible about the length of time it would need to work with a family. The initial aim was approximately 12 to 16 weeks and this was used as a guide to enable management of work-flow, as it was helpful to families and staff. However, a case would be kept open if a crisis remained.
- It was acknowledged that when families were asked to score their progress against a scale of 1 to 10, an increase of only one might look low. However, for some families this would be

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significant and would represent the feeling that they had made some progress. Even small numbers were an indication that something was getting better and could be very impactful.

- The emotional health and well-being needs of parents could be significant and the team had increased the number of staff able to undertake this specialist work. In relation to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), the thresholds for accessing the service remained a challenge. It was important to recognise the difference between a mental health issue and an emotional and behavioural issue.
- It was confirmed that when young people were over 18, the Service would link to adult services if an individual had a learning disability or a mental health issue. The vulnerability of some young people over 18 who did not meet the criteria for help from adult services was acknowledged. The Get Safe initiative (Worcestershire's multi-agency support and protection programme for children and young people at risk of criminal exploitation) included young people up to the age of 21 or 22. However, it was acknowledged that there was a gap in service provision and partners were trying to fill that gap within the available resources.
- It was confirmed that this work had previously been referred to as edge of care.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families emphasised the immense change that the setting up of Supporting Families First represented. The work was not new but it did carry risks. He felt that, strategically, this was the most significant step in Children's Services in the last four years. The potential rewards of the project could not be overstated and it was important to be brave and support the Service. He wished to congratulate the Team on a superb initiative and was proud to be associated with the Service.

The Panel agreed that it would wish to receive a further update in due course.

The Panel was updated on performance information relating to Quarter 4 (January to March 2020) and the draft Financial Outturn 2019/20.

During the discussion, the following main points were made:

Education

- For future presentations to the Panel, the Director of Education and Early Help would ensure the analysis and graphs appeared on the same page.
- An analysis of those schools that had received an Ofsted inspection or monitoring visit showed that four Local Authority maintained schools had moved from 'requires improvement' to 'good' during the period.
- Ofsted would resume visits to schools in the autumn and would visit all schools previously judged to be 'inadequate'.
- It was confirmed that any school placed in special measures would be required to consider moving to academy status.
- There were currently 675 children in the County who were electively home educated, which was a reduction on recent months. There were also 9 children who were 'under enquiry' to become home educated. In the main, these were positive contacts from parents who felt their children had thrived at home. It was important that officers were clear with parents what was required to home educate a child pointing out that appropriate work would not be supplied by teachers to support this.
- There were currently 62 children registered as missing education. 'Missing Monday' meetings were continuing.
- The completion rate for Personal Education Plans was 100% through the COVID period and the Virtual School had continued to operate.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

- There had been continued improvement in relation to timescales for assessment of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) with 100% completed within timescales during the COVID period. There had been very positive feedback from the Department for Education on this.

In response to a question about why a school would move from 'outstanding' to having 'serious weaknesses', Members were reminded that, previously, outstanding schools had not had to be re-inspected. The new inspection framework had found some schools wanting in relation to leadership and management. Under the School Improvement Programme, WCF had contact with all maintained schools and had identified some that may need intervention. WCF officers were aware of the

issues and they were now being addressed.

Children's Social Care

- Members were reminded that, at the end of March 2020, monitoring of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) had changed with the development of 40 COVID-specific KPIs. The data contained in the report covered the period up to the end of March and was, therefore, now out of date. The report contained no additional analysis as the situation had now moved on.
- The Service had performed well against the COVID KPIs and also when measured against the national picture.
- An analysis of Q1 2020/2021 data for the Family Front Door (FFD) had revealed that demand for social care was starting to increase. Last year had seen an average of 800 referrals per week with, on average, 49% requiring social work assessments. In Q1 this was up to 1000 referrals per week with 1500 referrals received per week during June and early July.
- Referrals from schools usually made up 17% of those received. However, of the 1500 received per week in June, only 1% were from schools. Demand for the Family Front Door had rocketed, but the number of cases requiring a social work assessment had dropped to 20%. A significant percentage were not meeting the social work threshold. This was a reflection of referrers' attitude to the management of risk and need. It may feel safer to refer to the Family Front Door but the impact of this could be that the FFD was not able to properly identify those children who did need intervention. The Director of Children's Social Care and Safeguarding expressed concern that early indicators may suggest that progress on risk management with partners had potentially gone backwards.
- She went on to suggest that when schools returned in September there may be a further increase in demand as children and young people disclosed incidents which had occurred during lockdown.
- It would be important to ensure that support services were known and accessible to families and professionals.
- The number of Child Protection and Child in Need cases had risen as the service had not closed or stepped down any cases during lockdown as this

would not have been appropriate given the disruption to service delivery. There was now a need to restart the workflow within the system in order to manage new cases that would be coming in.

- The COVID-19 period had seen great commitment from staff and low levels of sickness absence. Staffing capacity remained good although caseloads had risen.
- It was confirmed that the increase in referrals related to referrals from the police and health services equally. The rate of conversion to social work assessment was currently approximately 30 to 32%. Turnover of staff in other agencies meant it had been hard to get consistency. Discussions with partners to improve the situation were ongoing. It was recognised that the increase in referrals came from a genuine desire to help families.
- It was agreed that for future reports:
 - Actual figures should be given for the number of children placed out of county as well as the percentage figure.
 - In relation to County Lines, figures should be disaggregated by district council area so any particular local problems could be identified.
- A Member reported that a SENCO at a local school had informed him that she had had no problems getting through to the Family Front Door during lockdown. It was confirmed that staff had been working at home and this had worked well.

Budget Monitoring 2019/20 Outturn

- The figures in the agenda pack were still draft as they had not yet been fully signed off by audit.
- There had been a £7.2m overspend on the Dedicated Schools Grant relating to the High Needs Block (in particular out of county placements and post-16 in-county provision). The overspend had been added to reserves in line with advice to all local authorities.
- In 2020/21 an additional £8.7m had been received towards High Needs. This would keep pace with spending but would not address the historical deficit.
- Former Children, Families and Communities (CFC) budgets which had been transferred to People and Finance (WCC) had shown a 4.2% overspend. Adult Learning had overspent by

£115k and work was ongoing to understand course activity.

- Education statutory showed an underspend position as income generated had exceeded costs.
- The overspend in relation to SENDIASS and Duke of Edinburgh was a result of exit costs when the Duke of Edinburgh service closed in September.
- Remaining CFC budgets in the County Council had overspent by 0.6% (£549k) in the main due to Home to School Transport and Placements and Provision.
- WCF budget figures were no longer draft as audit on these had now been completed and they showed a surplus of just under 1%, an underspend of £522k.
- In response to a question about Home to School Transport, Members were informed that the budget for 2020/21 had been set in line with expected demand with inflation estimates built in. The big risk in relation to this budget would be the impact of COVID-19. It was suggested that there would be some degree of lost income from the closure of schools at the start of the financial year and also in September due to parents not wanting to use school transport. WCF was talking to the Council about the impact of COVID-19.
- The Chief Executive of WCF reminded Members that WCC would receive its COVID grant in three tranches. WCC's Chief Financial Officer had identified potential pressures in relation to Home to School Transport and potential additional costs were estimated at between £3.3 and £6m on a £17m budget. It was hoped that this may come down in September once the detail of government guidance was known. Home to School Transport was a challenge for all County Councils and lobbying through organisations at an Officer and Member level continued.
- The Chairman reported that she was pleased with the excellent service the Panel received from WCF's finance team with Members receiving all of the information they had asked for. She asked for her thanks to be passed on to the team.

In conclusion, the Chairman asked the Chief Executive to pass on her thanks to all members of staff in Worcestershire Children First and let them know how grateful the Panel was for the work they did.

442 Work Programme Refresh 2020/21

The Panel reviewed its draft 2020/21 work programme and considered which items should be investigated as a priority.

Following a detailed discussion, the Panel agreed its 2020/21 work programme for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board on 22 July and noted that the scrutiny work programme would be agreed by Council on 10 September 2020.

The meeting ended at 12.32 pm

Chairman