

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

### **Tuesday, 8 September 2020, Online only - 2.00 pm**

#### **Minutes**

#### **Present:**

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

#### **Also attended:**

Mr M J Hart, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills  
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)  
Phil Rook (Director of Resources)  
Tina Russell (Director of Children's Social Care & Safeguarding)  
Sarah Wilkins (Director of Education and Early Help),  
Samantha Morris (Scrutiny Co-ordinator) and  
Alyson Grice (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

#### **Available Papers**

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 July 2020 (previously circulated).

(A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes.)

#### **443 Apologies and Welcome**

Apologies were received from Mr P M McDonald.

#### **444 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip**

None.

#### **445 Public Participation**

None.

#### **446 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 July 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

## Meeting

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### COVID-19 Education Update

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills and the Director of Education and Early Help, Worcestershire Children First (WCF) updated the Panel on work to prepare and support education settings and schools in the autumn term.

By way of introduction, the Director of Education and Early Help made the following main points:

- All schools in the County had returned as planned at the start of term. All except seven schools had returned in the previous week with the remaining seven having returned this week. There remained one outstanding site issue (at Lea Street in Kidderminster) which the Local Member and the Cabinet Member were aware of.
- Some schools had opted to stagger the return with different year groups returning on different days. At the start of the academic year, a time of school transition, this approach was not unusual but had been used by more schools this year, allowing headteachers to manage the logistics of the return of pupils in a Covid secure way.
- With reference to attendance, Members were advised that schools were required to provide a daily return to the DfE. All but 30 schools in the County had made the return and WCF officers were following up the remaining 30. As of the previous day, of those schools making the return to the DfE, just over 87% of pupils were attending school, representing a strong start when compared regionally and nationally.
- The Panel was reminded that the IT device programme had been delivered successfully over the summer. Going forward, if a local Covid 19 outbreak meant that further devices were required to facilitate remote learning, these would be distributed direct from the DfE.
- With reference to the handling of outbreaks in schools and other settings, Members were advised that work had been carried out in conjunction with public health colleagues and a robust Outbreak Control Plan (OCP) had been published. Specifically, Standard Operating Procedures for schools and early years settings had been issued. Schools had reported receiving a lot of contact from parents with concerns about symptoms and the Local Outbreak Response Team (LORT) desk had seen an increase in

contact from schools seeking advice.

- Although nationally, the government did not recommend the use of face coverings in education settings, schools had the discretion to require face coverings for pupils in Year 7 and above if space was tight in communal areas.
- Overall, the home to school transport provision had run relatively smoothly since the return. WCF received a daily report from transport colleagues and providers were beginning to report issues with students not sticking to the agreed seating plan. In response, additional staff were being brought in to help with the coordination of this. Officers were also in touch with West Midlands Trains to monitor the situation as Further Education Colleges returned in the coming weeks.
- The County Council had been allocated approximately £85k as part of the government's Wellbeing for Education Return, which provided funding and resources to train and support education settings to respond to the wellbeing and mental health needs of pupils and students. The extra funding was welcomed and would build on the work of the Education Psychology Team to provide additional training for schools and ongoing supervisory support.
- All schools were expected to have a policy for remote learning and school improvement officers would be monitoring the quality of schools' remote learning. The expectation outlined in the wellbeing and recovery curriculum was that schools would quickly assess students' learning gaps and then address these (through remote learning if necessary). It was important to recognise that remote learning was far more than simply activities on screen and the School Improvement Team was producing guidance which would be shared with all schools (academies and maintained).
- Members were informed that a catch-up premium would be available to schools of £80 per pupil from reception to Year 11 and £240 per pupil for special schools and alternative provision. This would be received in three tranches across the year.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills was very pleased to report that all 243 schools had returned for the autumn term. Officers had worked with schools (both mainstream and academies) to ensure that all issues were ironed out. He had been keen to get

all children back to school (subject to safety measures being taken) and expressed his thanks to the Director and her team. He would be monitoring how schools responded to having to close bubbles when outbreaks occurred, emphasising that in his opinion this would be 'when' and not 'if' outbreaks happened.

The Director of Children's Social Care informed Members that attendance data for vulnerable children who were subject to a social work plan was being closely monitored. Before the summer holidays, 48% of children on a child protection plan, 33% of those assessed as children in need and 32% of children looked after were attending school. Early September data showed that attendance was a little below the pre-holiday figures, but the message to parents was that attendance was very important and there was a clear expectation that children should attend school.

The Director went on to brief the Panel on the Back to School project which supported those families who had entrenched challenges. These children were not good school attenders pre-covid, had had little contact with school through lockdown and over the summer, and were now not returning to school. A bespoke package of support would be provided from September to December.

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

- A Member welcomed the reported attendance figure of 87% and asked whether this included pupils with SEN. By way of clarification, Members were reminded that this referred to attendance in schools which had made a return to the DfE. The attendance of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) was being closely monitored.
- In response to a question about whether pupils would receive online support if they were unable to attend school, Members were reminded that if pupils were required to self-isolate, headteachers would have a remote learning plan in place.
- Although the figures for the number of pupils involved in the Back to School project were not available, the Panel was informed that the approach had been not to exclude any children but to work with any pupils that schools believed may have issues with coming back to school because they were already struggling. It was agreed that the Panel would receive an update on the project at a later date.

- It was agreed that communication to parents on what to do if a child experienced cold-like symptoms would be key.
- It was confirmed that the revision of the Outbreak Control Plan would be looked at by the local outbreak control group. Members were informed that an education specific outbreak scenario planning exercise would be held on 18 September.
- Concern was expressed that, although the report referred to children having access to high quality remote learning, it did not reference remote lessons and teachers actually teaching remotely. It was important that schools reflected on their lockdown experience and were able to demonstrate that they had listened to children and parents. Further guidance was being produced by WCF. The Chairman of the Panel added that, as Covid was something that we would have to live with, it was important that we had a system whereby all schools were able to deliver online teaching.
- A Panel Member asked whether parents were able to insist on their child wearing a face covering in class. In response, the Director of Education and Early Help reminded the Panel that government guidance stated that, although face coverings may be worn by pupils in Year 7 and above in some circumstances, they need not be worn in a classroom setting. The use of face coverings in a classroom setting was not helpful as it inhibited communication and students tended to touch the masks creating a further need for hand sanitising.
- With reference to the use of bubbles, schools and early years settings were learning from experience, testing different scenarios and sharing relevant learning.
- In response to a Member's question about remote provision for pupils with SEND and how this would be monitored, the Panel was informed that the SEN Planning Group had continued to meet every week. Arrangements would also be monitored through the school improvement process and via Ofsted visits. Mandatory training would be in place for schools which were causing concern.
- Concern was expressed that some schools may not have the capabilities in place to develop effective strategies for remote learning. It was suggested that it would be helpful to develop a central resource centre where schools could send

in lessons they had developed to be shared with other schools. In response, Members were reassured that monitoring of schools' responses to remote learning would continue throughout this term. Schools were also able to access peer to peer support and the recovery curriculum included resources coordinated in one place. A briefing for headteachers was being held on 1 October to share good practice.

- A Member reported that a number of parents had raised with her the difficulty of dropping children at school when there were staggered or delayed starts. The Director replied that she would expect schools to recognise these challenges and respond flexibly. She agreed to follow up on the specific cases following the meeting.
- It was recognised that it may be a challenge to teach large groups online as it could be difficult to capture all of the faces and facilitate interaction with a class of 30. The Director recognised that schools faced challenges with online learning including the issue of having some pupils in school and some at home and emphasised that remote learning was broader than simply online learning.
- In relation to face coverings, it was suggested that schools may be able to colour code areas of the school where masks must be worn. It was important that students and schools had clarity on this issue. The Director informed the Panel that young people were very understanding of the approach being taken and schools were not reporting issues. Schools were managing their physical space in many different ways.
- It was confirmed that all schools had access to the public health guidance on preventative measures and the risk assessment process asked all of the key questions in relation to prevention, health and safety, and management of staff and pupils. Schools were expected to follow the guidance, but it was acknowledged that many would need to take different approaches depending on local circumstances. Community communication about the three key symptoms of Covid would be important to enhance parents' understanding.
- In relation to Wellbeing for Education Return, it was noted that the money available from the government was not ring-fenced. The Director confirmed that the grant had been allocated to her team and she would ensure that it was used for this purpose.

**448 Performance and In-Year Budget Monitoring**

- In the summer, schools had been given access to the psychology service and to training on bereavement support and understanding trauma. It would be important to understand which schools had taken up the training and which had not (and why this might be). Local supervision groups (referred to in paragraph 39 of the report) would be clusters of schools working together to hold regular surgery-type meetings to look at how schools were managing emotional well-being. These groups would be led by a qualified professional and would be developed in liaison with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service colleagues. The aim was that this would link to the mental health in schools programme that would be put in place in coming months.

The Panel was updated on performance information relating to Quarter 1 (April to June 2020) and financial information for period 3.

Budget Monitoring

The Director of Resources (WCF) made the following main points:

- With reference to the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), at the end of June there was a forecast overspend of approximately £300k. Members were reminded that the High Needs overspend at the end of 2019/20 had been £7.9m with a total deficit of £6.2m to be carried forward against future DSG income. In 2020/21 the Council had received additional funding of £8.7m for Higher Needs. This would keep pace with spending but would not address the historical deficit.
- For Higher Needs, the Government had already announced a budget for 2021/22 with indicative funding. The County Council's share of this would be £7.8m, which would help keep pace with demand but would not address the current deficit. The Council's situation was in line with most other local authorities. The budget was in a better position than last year, but pressures remained.
- In relation to the children and families budgets that had remained in the County Council there were no issues to report.
- WCF budgets had now taken account of the transfer of services from Babcock with the inclusion of an additional £5.1m. The area of greatest focus was on looked after children.

Placement numbers had been relatively stable over the last 12 to 18 months but covid-19 had put pressure on this demand led budget. The latest forecast was for a £1.5m overspend. This forecast also took into account the pay award that had recently been agreed.

- Home to school transport was currently forecasting to budget. An additional grant of £503k to support the return to school in the autumn term had been announced in August.
- It was acknowledged that it would be a challenging year for the council and for local government as a whole, but the current forecast overspend was not as sharp as some other councils and could be seen as part of a national trend.
- It was confirmed that the Council had had to continue to pay home to school transport providers throughout the pandemic, as advised by the government.

The financial information was received and noted.

### Social Care

The Director of Children's Social Care and Safeguarding made the following main points:

- On average throughout 2019/20 the Family Front Door had received about 1000 contacts per month. This figure remained consistent at the start of lockdown and throughout April and May but had now started to rise and in June there had been 1582 contacts. This level of contacts was sustained throughout June and July with a slight drop in August. This rise had also been seen in other local authorities and would need to be monitored carefully.
- Officers were yet to see the impact of lockdown related 'hidden harm' that was predicted as children had only just returned to school and the figures were currently missing a big proportion of the school referrals that would normally be seen. Members were reminded that school referrals were often most likely to convert to needing a social work assessment and intervention.
- Although there had been a rise in the number of contacts through the Family Front Door, there had been a drop in the number of referrals meeting the threshold for a social work assessment. In relation to this rise in referrals, where a social

work assessment had been undertaken, a high proportion resulted in a decision that there was no need for a further social work intervention.

- The Director was pleased to report that, although the workload had risen significantly for staff in the Family Front Door, 94% of assessments had still been completed within timescales.
- Further staff were being brought in to work with the Family Front Door, but it was important that any agency staff were good quality. The service was under pressure, but senior officers were doing what they could to manage workflow and support staff.
- Members were reminded that work was ongoing with West Mercia Police to further refine the application of thresholds, work that had started pre-covid. Although it would be important to see the evidence in Q2 data, the Director reported that productive meetings had recently been held with the police and she wished to emphasise their extremely positive response to the challenge.
- The number of looked after children had remained relatively stable even though, for a variety of reasons, the number of children leaving care had seen a significant drop. In Q1 2020/21 31 children had left care compared with 70 children in the same quarter last year. The team had now resumed care planning work for children due to leave care and this was now picking up momentum.
- The Panel was informed that, for three years, year on year the service had seen a reduction in the number of children coming into care. The number was now lower than the England average and one of the lowest for local authorities in the region. The service was safely supporting and challenging families to undertake their parental responsibilities to care for their own children and was effectively keeping children out of care whilst at the same time safeguarding those who needed it.
- External placements remained a challenge with a number of factors impacting on this. Demand was difficult to predict, and placements could be very expensive.
- A Panel Member highlighted the fact that outcomes for children who came into care were very poor and could last a lifetime. It was, therefore, a massive achievement to have reduced the number of children being taken into care.
- In relation to child protection, figures had risen

sharply. This was the result of child protection plans not being removed during the period March to August. This was a safeguarding decision as it was not felt appropriate to remove a plan at a time when social workers were not able to access households and see children face to face. In Q1 70 children had been removed from child protection plans, compared with 146 in the same quarter last year. Review child protection conferences had now resumed so the figure would start to reduce. However, at the same time the 'hidden harm' agenda may result in a rise in the number of children needing child protection. Decisions would be taken on a child by child basis.

- Similarly, children in need cases had not been closed at a time when children were not attending school. Work had been started in August to update these cases and this would continue throughout September as children returned to school.
- There had been a significant reduction in the number of children who were going missing from care and from home when compared to last year and it was suggested that this was in the main as a result of lockdown.
- Members were informed that when asked for feedback staff had provided a positive response. Although caseloads had risen, staff felt supported and welcomed the high degree of management permanency. Caseloads for the Family Front Door were a major area of concern and this was being monitored closely.
- The Chairman reported that where she had raised concerns in relation to particular cases, the response from social work management had been superb.

### Education

The Director of Education and Early Help made the following main points:

- Members were reminded that Ofsted inspections were currently paused. Although visits were taking place throughout the autumn term, these would not affect judgements. 87% of maintained schools were currently judged to be good or outstanding. The figure for academies was 80% giving an overall figure of 84% which was below the English national average.

**449 Work Programme 2020/21**

- It was interesting to note that in Worcestershire, historically attendance was normally slightly below the national average. It was therefore important to monitor this at the start of an academic year which had particular challenges. It was agreed that Members would be provided with data showing Ofsted performance by district council area.
- At the start of the new academic year there was a clear focus on children missing education and ensuring that they were able to return to school.
- Between July and September, 61 notifications for elective home education had been received, compared with 53 for the same period last year. Since the start of term up to the previous day, 18 further notifications had been received, compared with 12 for the same period in the previous year. The Panel was informed that other local authorities had seen a greater rise in the number of notifications. Officers were clear with parents enquiring about home education that school would not continue to support them with resources if they elected to home educate.
- Figures for the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) were always very high in September as information was gathered on young people's destinations.
- In response to a question about whether there was any pattern in the types of families who chose to home educate, Members were informed that there was a particular prevalence within the gypsy, roma and traveller community. It was confirmed that, other than that, there were no standout common features.
- It was agreed that the Panel would be provided with figures for the number of electively home educated children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) who were on the autistic spectrum.
- The number of EHCPs completed in a timely manner continued to be at virtually 100% which was the result of ongoing work with families and other agencies.

The Panel reviewed its 2020/21 work programme and noted that dates for Panel meetings in 2021 had not yet been confirmed.

The following changes to scrutiny champions were also noted. Councillor Mackay would now act as scrutiny champion for education and Councillor Oborski would be scrutiny champion for looked after children.

Members were asked to let the scrutiny team know if they had any suggestions for items to be added to the work programme.

The meeting ended at 3.53 pm

Chairman .....