

## Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel

### Tuesday, 16 June 2020, Online only - 10.00 am

#### Present:

#### Minutes

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

#### Also attended:

Mr A C Roberts, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families  
Mr M J Hart, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills  
Jane Stanley, Worcestershire Healthwatch

Dr Catherine Driscoll (Chief Executive of Worcestershire Children First)  
Tina Russell (Director of Children's Social Care & Safeguarding Services, WCF)  
Sarah Wilkins (Director, Education and Early Help, Education & Early Help, WCF)  
Gabrielle Stacey (Assistant Director for SEND and Vulnerable Learners, WCF)  
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 14 February 2020 (previously circulated).

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

#### 427 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone and confirmed the arrangements for the Panel's first remote meeting.

No apologies had been received.

#### 428 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

#### 429 Public Participation

None.

**430 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 14 February 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

**431 Update on Children's Services in Response to Covid-19**

The Panel received an update on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on services for Children and Families.

By way of introduction, the Director of Children's Services/Chief Executive of Worcestershire Children First (WCF) informed the Panel that events since March 2020 and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had been a challenge to the way the Council met the needs of children in Worcestershire. She wished to place on record her thanks to all staff who had retained their complete focus on the needs of children and families. Staff had adapted well to new ways of working and morale and availability remained good.

Children's Social Care and Safeguarding

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

- Although lockdown started on 23 March, awareness of the developing situation had been a factor earlier in the month and it was clear that the service would need to develop different delivery methods. Once lockdown was announced, staff were asked to hold back on any community visits until a clear protocol was developed for the way forward. The service remained responsive and reactive and the development of a protocol gave staff confidence that senior managers were taking a grip of the situation and planning for future work. High importance visits continued during this time.
- The initial emergency COVID-19 protocol was launched on 1 April and set out key principles to guide the service in how to deliver social care whilst recognising the government's position in relation to managing the spread of infection in both service users and staff.
- Although community visits were restricted, staff undertook keeping in touch (KIT) calls through a variety of methods such as by telephone or online.
- Agreement was reached with the County Council that WCF's normal Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) would be put on hold as it would not be

appropriate to measure performance against normal service delivery. Forty COVID-19 KPIs were developed and were monitored on a weekly basis.

- In relation to the Family Front Door, after an initial reduction in the number of contacts, levels soon returned to normal averages. There was, however, a change in the type and source of referrals, including a reduction in the number of referrals from schools as they were closed to most pupils. Staff continued to work closely with schools in relation to children who were already known to the service and other children who schools were concerned about.
- Although contacts relating to domestic abuse had risen, it was noted that this figure had gone up year on year for the past 3 to 4 years as recognition and reporting mechanisms had improved. Analysis of the police's coding system suggested that only a small number of these reports were specifically related to the COVID-19 lockdown. An audit was now being undertaken to assess whether these cases related to new families, families previously known to the system but with no concerns for more than a year or known families.
- Strategy discussions had continued with good partnership engagement from the police, health and schools.
- Child protection review conferences had been stopped as it was judged that professionals would not have sufficient information to be able to make safe decisions about whether to step a child down from child protection. Looked after child reviews had continued.
- Clear guidance had been developed for KIT calls, including what issues to discuss, how freely children were talking and did a child need a home visit. There had been good engagement from families, although some had reported receiving multiple phone calls from, for example, social care, health visitors and school, and it was important to recognise the experience of families.
- The number of visits to families had reduced with visits to looked after children reducing the most as they were, on the whole, with professional carers and their safety was clear. These children had not been prioritised unless there was a risk of placement breakdown or another concern.
- Although the number of child protection children receiving visits within statutory timescales had

dropped from 98% in February to 74% in April, it was suggested that this was still a high figure given the circumstances.

- With all staff on lockdown and working from home, there had been an opportunity to focus on ensuring that chronologies and case studies were in place, part of the service's business plan for improvement. Figures had improved significantly from before the COVID period and there had been further improvement since publication of the agenda report.
- There had been no significant increase in the number of children coming into care.
- The importance of supporting staff through the pandemic was noted. A staff health check had been undertaken with responses received from over 400 social care staff. Findings were that staff felt informed and had good access to their managers and to peer support. Multi agency meetings and protocols were working well.
- The Phase 2 protocol had been launched on 1 June. This recognised the need to resume more safeguarding services and increase workflow, as no cases had been closed since lockdown and approximately 100 children in need cases had been held at the family front door. Phase 2 also saw an increase in direct work with children who were at key points in their care plans and needed the next decision to be taken.
- Phase 2 would be looked at again in mid-July with the aim of moving to Phase 3 and complete recovery in Phase 4.
- It was expected that the service would continue with some of the new ways of working, such as virtual meetings with partners as they saved travelling time. The concern now was to prepare the service for the new normal.

The Chairman of the Panel raised concerns about the recent closure of Greenhill Lodge, a children's home in Worcester. The Director of Children's Social Care and Safeguarding agreed to circulate a briefing to Panel Members in order to clarify the situation. It was confirmed that all children had been successfully moved to alternative care and, if Members had any questions once they had read the briefing, they should contact the Director direct. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families apologised to the Chairman of the Panel for not informing her of the closure of the home before it appeared in the local press.

With reference to COVID-19, the Cabinet Member went on to remind Members of concerns expressed at a national level about the dangers of isolation for children and young people by, for example, The Lancet, the Children's Commissioner and the NSPCC. He was confident that the data presented was sound, although he felt that the full emotional and safeguarding impacts of the pandemic were still to be seen and suggested that the consequences for children's mental health may take 3 to 7 years to put right.

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

- A Member of the Panel complimented the County Council and WCF on their adaptability in response to an unprecedented situation. She went on to ask about levels of staff absence as a result of staff shielding or being taken ill with COVID or another illness, or due to staff having childcare responsibilities. She also asked whether there was any feel for the number of children who may need support but were not yet known about.
- In relation to safeguarding staff, absences had been minimal and those who were required to self-isolate were still able to work from home. The service had seen three staff hospitalised but all had recovered well and staff availability remained high. The Chief Executive of WCF added that overall staff absence levels were very low at 8%.
- With reference to new referrals, it was suggested that the biggest impact would be on children's mental health covering, for example, anxiety about going back to school, missing friendships and young people's general ability to make sense of the world. It was suggested that those children who may need help would become known to schools as more year groups returned. Schools would also become aware of those children who would not be returning due to the expected rise in the number of parents choosing to home educate.
- Since lockdown, two very high-risk situations had been referred to the service, both of which involved children and young people who were previously unknown. However, there was some reassurance in the rise in community referrals through the family front door. Services to support emotional well-being would be crucial and work was ongoing to publicise how these services could be accessed.
- In response to a question about respite care,

Members were informed that, although community short breaks had been stopped in March, a crisis home support service had been developed and had been accessed by nine service users. The majority of families had shielded in order to protect their children's health. Overnight short breaks had continued although there had been a reduction in the number of families using the service. The short breaks service was currently developing a summer scheme offer.

- A question was asked about the impact of the pandemic on placement breakdown. Members were informed that placement stability had been good and the number of children missing from home and care had significantly decreased. Staff had also noted that some families had been able to move on from their problems when faced with the threat of something bigger in their lives. Although some family challenges from lockdown were starting to emerge, the service was not expecting a sudden sharp rise in referrals.
- With reference to care proceedings, Members were reminded that it may take months to reach a point where children were removed from a family and, during this time, parents would have the chance to work with social workers to change. Where there was an immediate plan to remove a child there and then, these proceedings have continued. However, if it was judged that there was an opportunity to work with the family, proceedings had not been initiated as the risk was not as high. These families would meet the criteria for a priority visit.
- In response to a question about the positive learning from the different ways of working that may be incorporated into the future operating model as part of phase 4 Recovery, Members were informed that online meetings between families and professionals might be retained as this had been better for some parents. Video calls to offer interventions as part of targeted family support had also been successful and KIT calls had proved to be a good way of initiating proactive conversations. Managers would also be talking to staff about what had worked well, with many staff having enjoyed working at home. However, it was important to note that direct working would continue to have a role.
- It was noted that the number of welfare return interviews completed had reduced since lockdown. The Panel was informed that these

had been done virtually and it had proved harder to engage young people. Also, a number of children had been reported missing as a result of failing to adhere to lockdown restrictions and families were reluctant to engage once the child had returned home.

- In response to a question about the capacity of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to cope with the expected rise in referrals, Members were reminded that this service was provided by the Worcestershire Health and Care Trust (WHCT). The Cabinet Member for Children and Families was due to meet with WHCT colleagues later that week.
- It was confirmed that a number of young people had left care during the lockdown. This had happened in a planned way, with the young person having turned 18 and moved into semi-independent living accommodation. WCF was working with housing services to support them. In a couple of cases, young people had been due to gradually move back to parental care, spending a few days with foster carers and a few with their family. However, lockdown restrictions had meant that this type of gradual move was not possible and had been put on hold. The Director confirmed that this related to a very small number of cases.

#### Education and Home to School Transport

The Director of Education and Early Help highlighted the following points:

- Although schools and settings were closed to the majority of pupils from 20 March, many sites remained open to the children of keyworkers and vulnerable children (those with a social worker or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)).
- From 1 June, children in early years, reception, year 1 and year 6 had started a gradual return to school. From 15 June government guidance allowed some face to face teaching for students in years 10 and 12.
- The most up to date figures available showed that almost all of Worcestershire's first, primary and middle schools were open, with site issues for the remaining few being addressed. All high schools were also open.
- The government guidance had not recognised the three-tier nature of parts of the Worcestershire school system. However, the Worcestershire

Association of Middle School Heads had agreed to follow the guidance and welcome year 6 pupils back into schools even though this was not a transition year for their schools.

- In order to keep schools and partners informed, the service produced an education bulletin 3 times per week with issue 50 being produced this week.
- The Worcestershire Education Incident Planning Group for COVID-19 met twice per week. This was a very successful multi-agency group which enabled whole system interpretation of changing (and sometimes seemingly contradictory) government guidance. The Group agreed a set of basic principles with the main focus on the safety of children and staff.
- The headteacher safeguarding group had met more frequently to address concerns about vulnerable children.
- WCF had produced a detailed risk assessment framework to support schools. The 2 metre social distancing rule had proved very challenging. Some schools had needed to remove furniture and equipment resulting in a storage issue which may also have impacted on the number of children they could allow back on site.
- Home to school transport had also been a major issue with some families choosing not to use transport provided. It was confirmed that children with SEND were able to access transport.

The Panel was given an opportunity to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- A Member expressed concern about children who were not in school and asked how many schools were supplying online work for their pupils. The Director explained that the need to support children who remained at home was a very important message in the government guidance. Support could be offered, for example, via the Oak Academy online classroom and resource hub or BBC Bitesize. Although all schools had provided access to work, it was acknowledged that there was a continuum of provision and level of contact. The School Improvement Team (which had become part of WCF from 1 June) was working with Local Authority (LA) maintained schools to offer advice, with a focus on the quality of teaching and learning. The service had received some contact from concerned parents and these issues had been addressed.

- With reference to the provision of IT devices, Members were reminded that the government had promised to provide a laptop for all children with a social worker and for disadvantaged year 10 students. The roll out was not yet complete. Some schools had also been providing devices to their pupils.
- WCF held weekly meetings with the DfE to discuss strategic issues and concerns about individual schools.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills wished to congratulate primary, first and middle schools on the work they had done to get pupils back to school. So far there had been varying degrees of attendance across the county and it would be interesting to see how many schools would open to additional years now that government guidance had changed.

Members were invited to ask further questions and the following main points were raised:

- A Member welcomed the government's ambition to get all children back to school and asked whether schools had shown similar ambition by, for example, holding lessons outside the classroom, setting up Nightingale classrooms in community settings or holding online lessons. It was pointed out that some community buildings such as church halls had been closed by government regulations in relation to social distancing.
- The Director confirmed that the use of outside environments was part of the current guidance and could play a significant part in delivery for many schools but was, of course, weather dependent. The guidance on Nightingale classrooms had changed the previous day and still required some clarification.
- In the previous week there had been just over 12% of children back in schools. For the primary phase, where schools had capacity and could implement preventative measures, they were able to open more widely. However, they should not use community buildings that had been closed due to COVID-19. Some schools were looking at the possibilities and the system was keen to bring more children back.
- With reference to online lessons, some schools were well equipped to take this forward but the provision of IT equipment was key. Work was

underway to support schools in this.

- In relation to home to school transport, concern was expressed about the payment of drivers. It was agreed that the Director of Education and Early Help would provide a response to specific concerns outside of the meeting.
- In response to a question about staffing capacity, it was acknowledged that there had been some issues in particular where staff were shielding. WCF would work with individual schools on risk assessments to support staff back to work. HR advice was that staff who were classed as critically vulnerable should work from home or could come into school if suitable preventative measures were in place.
- A Member of the Panel congratulated the service on reaching its target for completed risk assessments. He went on to ask about the difference in the health and safety duty between maintained and academy schools. For maintained schools the Local Authority was the employer which brought an enhanced level of accountability. For an academy, the employer would be the managing Trust. In reality, the same risk assessment tool had been shared with all schools and there had been a high level of take up from academies with some choosing to ask WCF for feedback on their completed assessment.
- It was confirmed that, as of the previous week, just over 12% of pupils had returned to school. This figure started off higher and dropped off as the week went on. It was slightly higher than the national average.
- With reference to the need for additional cleaning in schools, public health colleagues had developed guidance on extra requirements as part of the risk assessment. It was important to note that schools were used to operating infection control systems and should already have had appropriate measures in place. Each risk assessment would be checked to ensure any additional cleaning requirements were included and that the school had capacity to do this. Initially there had been an issue in relation to provision of supplies but WCF had supported schools to overcome this.
- The Chief Executive of WCF confirmed that the 12% figure referred to the percentage of the total number of pupils who would have been in school in normal times, rather than 12% of the particular year groups specified in government guidance. It

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Delivery Model  
for Medical  
Education  
Provision**

was confirmed that the figure for these year groups was between 30% and 70% depending on the school. The Director agreed to circulate further figures after the meeting. The co-opted Church of England representative confirmed that, for the previous week in church schools, 50% of the specified year groups had attended.

- He went on to thank WCF for the superb risk assessment document that had been shared with schools and for checking the documents completed by academies.
- Further concern was expressed about the number of safeguarding issues rising as children returned to school and disclosed incidents that had happened during lockdown. It was suggested that the potential rise in social and emotional issues could take five years to recover from and schools may need to implement a 'recovery curriculum'. Schools may also see an increase in the number of pupils on free school meals as the number of redundancies rose.

The Financial Impact

The Chief Executive of WCF confirmed that the government had provided extra resource to meet additional needs as a result of the pandemic. So far there had been little increased direct financial impact for children's services. However, this related to the response phase and the expectation was that there would be a further impact in the months ahead. In particular, there may be an impact on home to school transport and work was now underway to compare the experiences of other county councils.

The Chairman thanked officers and Cabinet Members for attending the meeting and the Panel agreed to commend the update to the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills and the Director of Education and Early Help updated the Panel on the review of the delivery model for medical education provision ahead of the discussion at Cabinet on 25 June 2020.

The Cabinet Member reminded the Panel that in January a full timetable for the review of the service had been agreed at Cabinet. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, he could now confirm that the revised delivery model would no longer be ready for implementation in

**433 Update on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Improvement Journey**

September 2020. In order to move forward, full consultation with all relevant stakeholders would be necessary and some of this work would need to be done face to face. A revised timetable for the review would be agreed on 25 June. He informed Members that he had visited the Lea Street site in Kidderminster and hoped to visit the facilities in Redditch and Worcester soon.

The Director of Education and Early Help added that this was a holding position as COVID-19 had had a significant impact on WCF's ability to bring partners together and there was, therefore, a need to revise the timetable for the review. She confirmed that the Medical Education Team (MET) had continued to support pupils during the pandemic.

The Panel accepted the update report and agreed that it would wish to be updated as the revised delivery model was developed and before it returned to Cabinet.

The Cabinet Member (CMR) for Education and Skills, the Director of Education and Early Help and the Assistant Director for SEND and Vulnerable Learners updated the Panel on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) improvement journey, including performance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

By way of introduction, the CMR wished to record his thanks to all staff, both in WCF and in the health service, for the huge amount of work they had done on service improvement.

The Director of Education and Early Help went on to make the following points:

- The agenda included a set of slides that had been presented to the SEND Improvement Board. The Board had continued to meet virtually throughout the pandemic.
- On 9 March WCF had been notified by Ofsted/CQC of a re-inspection of the SEND local area provision. Services had begun to prepare for this re-inspection and this had proved to be a good exercise in planning. However, as the COVID-19 situation developed, the inspection was deferred to a later date.
- Throughout lockdown it had been business as usual for the SEND team and assessment and planning had continued.
- Changes in legislation effective from 1 May meant that instead of the duty to secure provision, the

service now had to be able to demonstrate reasonable endeavours to secure provision.

- It had been a significant challenge to improve assessment timescales. However, in March 2020 100% of Education, Health and Care (EHC) Needs Assessments had been completed within 20 weeks. For April the figure had been 96% completed on time.
- In response to the pandemic and in line with the DfE requirement, all schools were asked to carry out an individual risk assessment for each pupil with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). In Worcestershire this covered over 4000 pupils.
- Staff had managed very effectively from home despite heavy workloads.
- The lockdown period had seen an improvement in relationships with schools and other settings and moving forward the service would wish to continue the use of video calls.
- There had been fortnightly meetings with a DfE adviser and feedback had been very positive, in particular on the strength of preparation and the team's resilience. Feedback had suggested that the service was in a strong position. The DfE was no longer monitoring monthly data, a sign of confidence that this was being done effectively internally.
- The focus now would be on ensuring that those children with EHCPs who could go back to school were able to do so and supporting those who could not return due to health concerns.

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

- A Member of the Panel congratulated the service on the positive improvement in the timescales for assessment. He referred to a discussion at Adult Care and Well-being O&S Panel which had highlighted that adult services had found advantages in the use of video conferencing with some service users. The Assistant Director for SEND and Vulnerable Learners confirmed that the Service would look at what was best for each child. As a result of the relaxation of requirements, where face to face work was essential, the service had chosen to extend the timescale in order to do the work properly. There needed to be a balance between meeting the needs of service users and managing the workflow to avoid a backlog. Staff has been

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creative in their approach.

- A Member noted that 14 settings had not responded to the request for individual risk assessments and suggested that Councillors who were governors may be able to help. The Panel was informed that this had been the picture as of 21 May and it was a dynamic, changing position. It was confirmed that the up to date figure was that 12 settings had not responded and these were all independent, out of county settings which may be working with a large number of local authorities. Officers were working with the DfE to make contact.
- The Chairman expressed concern about children and young people from London boroughs who were housed locally and asked whether contact would be made with the originating authority in London. Members were reminded that the Director of Children’s Services had written to the Association of London Directors of Children’s Services expressing concern about this issue. Although the issue remained, there had been some improvement with better communication and better joined up working. The Director of Children’s Services added that there was a need to be clear about the legal basis on which the local authority was placing a family. If a local authority placed a looked after child out of area, there was a legal obligation to tell the ‘host’ authority. There was not the same legal obligation when families were housed out of borough and this was an ongoing frustration.

The Panel thanked the Cabinet Member and the officers for the report and requested a further update in six months.

The Panel reviewed the work programme and no comments were made.

Members agreed to keep the 17 July Panel meeting in the diary and requested a further update on the situation in relation to COVID-19 and in particular plans for opening schools in September and any summer catch up programmes.

The meeting ended at 12.23 pm

Chairman .....