

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Thursday, 15 October 2020, Online only - 2.00 pm

Minutes

Present:

Mrs F M Oborski (Chairman), Mr S J Mackay (Vice Chairman), Ms P Agar, Mr T Baker-Price, Mr B Clayton, Ms R L Dent, 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
Dr Catherine Driscoll (Chief Executive of Worcestershire Children First),
Sarah Wilkins (Director of Education and Early Help),
Phil Rook (Director of Resources),
Judy Mayo (Group Manager, Targetted Family Support),
Daniela Carson (Group Manager),
Louise Butler (Business Officer, Transformation Team),
Bethany Wilkinson (Commissioning Officer),
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 8 September 2020 (previously circulated).

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

450 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Mr B Allbut, Mr M J Hart (Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills), Ms T Russell (Director of Children's Social Care and Safeguarding, Worcestershire Children First) and Ms J Stanley (Healthwatch).

451 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

452 Public Participation

None.

453 Confirmation of the Minutes of

With reference to the minutes of the previous meeting, a question was asked about the number of schools in the County now sending attendance data to the Department

the Previous Meeting

454 COVID-19 October Education Update

for Education (DfE). It was confirmed that this would be covered under item 5.

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 8 September 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

The Director of Education and Early Help updated the Panel on developments relating to the re-opening of schools and settings for the autumn term and the handling of COVID-19 cases in schools and settings.

By way of introduction, she made the following main points:

- Members were reminded that all except one school site had re-opened at the beginning of September. The one outstanding site issue (at Lea Street, Kidderminster) had now been resolved allowing the Medical Education Service to return. Outreach provision for the Beacon Pupil Referral Unit would also return to the site by the end of October half term at the latest.
- A risk assessment checklist had been shared with Academies to support their own self-assessment. This had been developed by specialist teams and would share learning from the development of infection prevention control in schools to date. Academies would also be invited to attend a webinar and a series of surgery events with County Council colleagues working in Public Health, Health and Safety and Human Resources. These events would aim to give a specialist overview of the situation and share good practice and learning from outbreak case examples.
- The internal officer group continued to meet three times per week and maintained a constant circle of learning. For example, in response to concerns from some schools about parents gathering at drop off time, a pilot of posters and wraps outside schools was being run to enhance communications.
- With reference to attendance rates, Members were reminded that schools were required to make a daily return to the DfE. Over 90% of schools in the County were now making this return. The attendance rate in Worcestershire schools as of the previous day was 90.2%, compared with a national rate of 89.1%. The County's rates had been consistently above national rates since the beginning of term.

- Over 80% of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) were now back in school. Schools would be asked to let Worcestershire Children First (WCF) know if they had children with EHCPs who had not yet returned. With reference to special schools, the Panel was informed that some parents of children with very complex needs were reluctant to send their children back to school and officers continued to work with these families. Over 90% of children with social workers had now returned to school.
- The Education Incident Planning Group, which included representatives from across school phases and types, continued to meet regularly, as it had since the beginning of the pandemic.
- Members were reminded that the Local Outbreak Response Team (LORT) was the first point of contact for any educational setting experiencing a suspected COVID outbreak. The LORT had experienced an increased volume of enquiries from the first week of September and additional resource had been provided to meet demand.
- As of the day of the meeting, there were 47 educational settings affected by COVID activity. This covered 2273 people (both staff and students) and was linked to 72 positive cases in education provision.
- Feedback from Public Health colleagues was that the University of Worcester had reported relatively few cases and no outbreaks. There was effective communication between the University and the LORT, and the University also supported contact tracing activity and self-isolation. Since the beginning of September, there had been less than 20 positive cases at the University. The Chairman pointed out that this was very good when compared to other universities in the West Midlands.
- Officers from WCF had also been involved in District Council incident management meetings. A report giving data for COVID activity in educational settings broken down by district was currently being prepared. However, Members were informed that, in terms of settings currently affected, most were in Bromsgrove, followed by Worcester City, Wychavon, Malvern Hills, Wyre Forest and Redditch in that order. Fewer than 15 settings were currently affected in Bromsgrove. If a setting was affected, they would receive a liaison call from WCF to assist them with the practicalities involved. Feedback from schools

was that this had been very helpful.

- Remote learning was in place for those children who needed to self-isolate and schools continued to develop and share good practice.
- Members were reminded that, where a student was required to self-isolate, the DfE was now assisting with the provision of laptops and other devices where necessary. However, the programme was proving challenging and to date, the Director was not aware of any school in Worcestershire which had been able to access an additional device. She confirmed that she would seek further clarification from the DfE on this.
- The Panel was reminded that students were now required to wear a face covering on all school transport and this was working effectively.

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

- Members wished to congratulate officers and colleagues working in schools on the excellent way they had responded to the issues raised by the return to school.
- It was confirmed that 29 schools had attended the first webinar on effective remote learning and other schools would be engaged in different ways. Members were reminded that WCF's training offer was also available to academies either free at the point of delivery or on a bought-in basis, depending on the activity. Feedback from academies about the support and information offered was very positive.
- In response to a question about whether schools could be confident that students had the necessary equipment at home to allow them to continue learning while self-isolating, Members were reminded that part of the liaison call to schools would be to assess a school's capability to provide remote learning. Schools would need to think of individual children and understand that one approach would not fit all families. It was acknowledged that the ability of some children to access remote learning was a concern, particularly for more vulnerable children. A Member noted that it was important not to assume that all families had internet access.
- Councillor Agar raised specific issues in relation to dedicated school transport and the impact of COVID on drivers and escorts. It was agreed that the Director of Education and Early Help would

follow up these issues outside of the meeting. The importance of continuity of transport staff was noted and it was acknowledged that this might be more difficult in the current COVID situation. Communication with parents was key.

Members received a presentation on the Back to School project which highlighted the following main points:

- It was important to recognise that the return to school might be difficult for some children, especially those who had had pre-existing attendance issues. Concerns for these children had led to the setting up of the Back to School project.
- During lockdown, schools had remained open for the children of key workers and vulnerable children with a social work plan. It was acknowledged that there had been lots of unknowns at this time and vulnerable children had been encouraged to attend with a message of reassurance.
- It was noted that non-attendance at school would not on its own be a reason to undertake a level 4 social work assessment. However, schools were keen to have children return and to have conversations with them about their lived experience and the impact of COVID on their family, in relation to poverty, bereavement and stress. The project was about support and intervention, and helping families access the right service at the right time.
- Members were informed about the scope of the project and the criteria for inclusion. It was noted that meeting parental needs would only have a positive impact on the children.
- Looked after children were not included in the project because they would already have had an allocated social worker. Any children who were not accepted on to the project would be signposted to alternative support. In the past week, the criteria of having to have less than 70% attendance prior to COVID had been removed so that all children who had not returned to school since September could be supported, whatever their prior attendance record.
- To date the project had received 54 referrals, 44 of which had been accepted onto the project. For those who had not been accepted, an Education Welfare Officer had been in contact with schools to discuss other support available.

455 Provision of Overnight Unit Based Short Breaks for Children with Disabilities

- The referral form used by schools was simple to complete and, if accepted, would result in allocation to an officer very quickly. Officers would then discuss with families what the barriers to attendance were, using the Signs of Safety model to identify what was going well but also what were the concerns within the family. A plan would then be drawn up, involving the family and the school.
- As part of evaluation, the project included a comprehensive tracking system to identify what had worked and what had been less successful. The ultimate aim was to get all children a full education, but there was also a need to be realistic and take this in steps.
- Those working within the project had learned a great deal from having a complete focus and this learning would be shared with colleagues. It was important for the gains to be sustainable which meant looking at underlying issues, not simply a short-term return to school.

Following the presentation, a Member asked whether there was any involvement with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for children and families with complex and entrenched issues. In response, the Panel was told that, as part of the project, the Starting Well service was delivering 12 weeks of online learning sessions for children and parents. This also included the Reach for Wellbeing service which was part of CAMHS.

The Chairman thanked the Director of Education and Early Help and the Group Manager, Targeted Family Support for their report and presentation.

The Director of Education and Early Help updated the Panel on developments relating to transition planning for overnight unit-based short breaks for children with disabilities and the impact of COVID-19.

Members were informed that COVID-19 had had an impact at a critical time in the transition process including an effect on the planned building works at Osborne Court. However, it was confirmed that those children who had previously accessed respite at Ludlow Road had now moved to either Osborne Court or Providence Road, although this had happened in a different way due to COVID.

This had been a challenging time for those families with a

child with SEND and there were still two families who were choosing not to access respite at this time. During lockdown, when families were not able to access respite, social workers and schools had kept in regular touch with families to offer support. With reference to Osborne Court, building work had now been completed and Ofsted's pre-registration visit had taken place. Staff had been recruited and were being trained.

Community short breaks had been suspended in March 2020 in line with government restrictions. To address this, social workers had kept in touch with families and assessed whether they needed any further support in the home. During the summer, providers had been able to run activity sessions for day respite and 146 children had been able to access these.

Although transition arrangements had been affected by COVID, the re-organisation plan had continued and new transport arrangements were now in place.

Members were informed that there had been some COVID activity at Moule Close in Kidderminster (another of the Council's overnight short breaks units) and one member of staff was now self-isolating. Consequently, no overnight short breaks would take place there for two weeks and social workers were in touch with all families.

The Chairman of the Panel expressed her thanks to all staff who she felt were going over and above to provide an extremely good service in Worcestershire during the time of COVID.

In response to a Member's question, it was agreed that updates on any COVID activity in residential children's homes and overnight short breaks units would be included in the internal Gold Command report which was circulated to Members each week. The Director of Children's Services confirmed that WCF had very good operating protocols for dealing with COVID outbreaks in residential children's homes and overnight short breaks units.

It was agreed that Members' positive feedback and thanks would be shared with all staff, including members of the Education Incident Planning Group.

In response to a question from the Chairman, it was confirmed that WCF received reports in relation to COVID activity from all provision including independent schools and children's homes. It was important to ensure

456 Work Programme 2020/21

that all sectors were aware of advice in relation to preventative measures and outbreak response.

The Chairman thanked the Director of Education and Early Help for her report and reiterated the Panel's thanks to all staff who had gone above and beyond in responding to the pandemic.

The Panel reviewed its 2020/21 work programme. It was noted that a number of items for future work would be recommended to a new Panel to be taken forward following the County Council elections in May 2021.

The meeting ended at 3.06 pm

Chairman