

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Friday, 29 January 2021, Online - 10.00 am

Minutes

Present:

Mr T A L Wells (Chairman), Mr S J Mackay (Vice Chairman), Ms P Agar, Mr B Allbut, Mr T Baker-Price, Mr B Clayton, Mr P M McDonald, Mrs F M Oborski, 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, Worcestershire Children First),
Michael Hudson (Chief Financial Officer, Worcestershire County Council),
Phil Rook (Director of Resources, Worcestershire Children First),
Tina Russell (Director of Children's Social Care & Safeguarding, Worcestershire Children First),
Sarah Wilkins (Director of Education and Early Help, Worcestershire Children First),
Nikki Jones, School Improvement Lead, Worcestershire Children First),
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. Presentation handouts for Item 6 Covid-19 Education Update (circulated at the Meeting)
- C. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 13 November (previously circulated).

(Copies of documents A and B will be attached to the signed Minutes).

467 Apologies and Welcome

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

To accommodate officer availability, the Chairman agreed to alter the order of the agenda items. Item 6 (COVID-19 Education Update) would be considered before Item 5 (Performance, In-Year Budget Monitoring and 2021/22 Budget).

468	Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip	None.
469	Public Participation	None.
470	Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting	The Minutes of the Meeting held on 13 November 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.
471	COVID-19 January 2021 Education Update	<p>The Director of Education and Early Help and the Assistant Director, Education Quality and Improvement updated the Panel on developments relating to the national lockdown and implications for Worcestershire settings and schools and the handling of Covid-19 cases and mass testing in settings and schools.</p> <p>By way of introduction, the Director of Education and Early Help made the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members were reminded that, at the time of the Panel’s last update in November, schools were open to all children. DfE reporting figures for December showed an attendance rate of 89.5% in Worcestershire schools. • The national lockdown from 5 January meant that schools were providing on site education for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. This included all children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). • Since the lockdown, attendance rates were in the region of 15% across all Worcestershire schools, approximately 1% higher than national figures. • Members were informed that the County Council had committed a further £300k to provide additional IT devices for schools. • In relation to free school meals, it was confirmed that vouchers would be provided again during February half term and the Easter holidays. Schools were used to this system and had developed good methods of communication with parents. • Ofsted had carried out some virtual visits last term and monitoring inspections of schools most in need of support would be carried out during the spring term. External exams for the 2020/21 academic year had been suspended.

- Worcestershire Children First (WCF) and Public Health colleagues continued to work with schools on infection prevention control.
- Provision for testing in secondary schools was now in place (including in special schools) and testing of primary school staff was now starting.
- Home to school transport arrangements were working smoothly, albeit with reduced need.
- The health and wellbeing of the school community, both staff and pupils, remained a focus.
- Approximately 50% of eligible children were attending Early Years settings with more than 90% of settings remaining open. Early Years staff were being prioritised for community testing.

The Assistant Director, Education Quality and Improvement provided the Panel with a presentation on remote learning which aimed to supplement the agenda report with real life examples. The following main points were made:

- Members were reminded that, with reference to remote learning, no one size fits all and schools would adapt their provision to fit their circumstances.
- Examples of approaches taken by schools were outlined. Some secondary schools had chosen initially to deliver all lessons live via Teams following their normal timetable. However, some were now reviewing this approach, adding a 10 minute break between lessons to allow for movement, refreshment and preparation for the next lesson.
- Tutor time was felt to be essential as a way of talking to pupils outside of formal lessons.
- Some schools had chosen to offer pre-recorded lessons and this worked better for families where multiple children were accessing remote learning on one device.
- Live lessons were not so beneficial for younger children. Some schools had chosen to set work and follow this up with checks on progress. Physical resources may also be sent home to support engagement.
- In summary, there was a range of approaches across the county.
- Positive feedback from pupils included being able to see the day's work at the start of the day and an appreciation of 1 to 1 time with the teacher.

However, pupils also reported missing interaction with peers and teachers, feeling more pressure and a reluctance to ask for help, with teachers not always able to pick up on non-verbal clues when a pupil was struggling.

- Access to lessons was also reported as an issue for some pupils due to the use of inappropriate devices, the number of family members accessing the internet at the same time or the lack of an appropriate learning environment.
- Schools were also aware that some approaches to remote learning may lead to an increase in screen time and were looking at strategies to reduce this. There was also a need to educate some parents that remote learning was more than simply providing live lessons.
- Feedback from staff welcomed the fact that some of the remote provision would now become part of normal practice and it was suggested that there may be no need for 'snow days' in the future as learning could continue remotely.
- Teachers also reported increased workloads in adapting the curriculum, learning to use new technology and setting up a mixed delivery system. They also missed the social interaction of school life and questioned whether home learning was as effective for younger pupils.
- The focus was now moving to monitoring and reviewing the quality and impact of remote provision with strategies being introduced to monitor pupil engagement and maximise learning. Ofsted monitoring visits would focus on the quality of remote provision.

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

- The Panel was reminded that, for the very youngest children, nurseries had remained open. For the youngest pupils in schools, support had been provided for parents to engage their children including physical resources. Fewer live lessons were provided for this age group.
- Members identified the pressure on parents acting as proxy teachers and recognised that this was not easy as parents may also be working at home. Particular concern was expressed about the experiences of four to seven year olds.
- In response to a question about whether families were also being helped with access to the internet via, for examples, dongles, it was confirmed that

there was a range of help for parents to access the internet and additional data. Schools could make an application to the DfE or access the County Council's offer. A survey of schools had been carried out which showed that one size did not fit all and requirements would differ by age or circumstance. Members were reminded that pupils may become eligible to attend school if remote learning was not possible for them.

- A Member asked whether a campaign on local radio asking for donations of old laptops for schools was still necessary. Members were advised to contact individual schools if they had equipment to donate.
- A Member wished to highlight the fantastic job that school staff were currently doing and recognised that teachers were under a great deal of stress. Concern was expressed about the health impact on teachers, particularly headteachers.
- In response to a question about the number of pupils who were waiting for laptops, the Panel was told that no global figure was available. However, the County's 107 maintained schools had been provided with 1500 devices through the DfE scheme. 40 schools had been offered 5 or fewer laptops and 12 had been offered only one device. It was recognised that a gap in provision remained and officers were currently surveying all schools (maintained and academies) to understand the level of need. As of the previous day, schools had reported a requirement for 280 devices.
- A question was asked about how the Council was ensuring that food boxes provided to pupils who were eligible for free school meals were nutritious and value for money. Members were reminded that the start of this term had seen a sudden overnight lockdown and a small number of schools had moved quickly to access food box provision without detailed checks. However, issues were quickly identified and addressed. Most schools used the voucher system which was promoted by Worcestershire Children First. The responsibility for the provision of quality nutritious food rested with the school's governing body.
- Schools understood that it was now possible to quickly implement remote education if needed in response to bad weather and saw this as an opportunity. Schools would communicate this to parents when an event occurred.
- It was confirmed that vulnerable children were able to attend school whether in a special school

or mainstream provision.

- It was confirmed that scheduled INSET and other CPD would continue in a planned way with sessions possibly being held remotely.
- The School Improvement Team would focus on supporting schools to evaluate the effectiveness of remote provision including identifying where there were any gaps in learning. Although concern was expressed that further time would be needed to 'catch up' when pupils were back in school, it was suggested that this would be less than in September 2020 as areas needing development had been identified and were being prioritised and addressed via remote education during this term.
- A Member informed the Panel that she was currently supporting home learning for her son and was finding this a challenge. Her experience suggested that remote education was not working for primary school children and there would be huge gaps in learning when children returned to school. The Director of Education and Early Help acknowledged the challenge for parents. She suggested that, although parents may not feel they were doing enough, evidence showed that pupils often retained skills but may not demonstrate them at home. Managing remote relationships was key in helping people to remain positive. The Panel Member welcomed the recognition of the issue.
- It was confirmed that the accessibility of broadband was included as part of the survey to understand technology needs in schools. It was acknowledged that all involved were having to adapt and learn new skills. It was important to remember that remote education was not only online learning.
- Concern was expressed about the potential mental health crisis among young people and teachers once the pandemic was over. The importance of focusing on mental health and well-being was acknowledged, and details of training available to schools in relation to wellbeing and supporting pupils with anxiety were outlined in the agenda report. In relation to the mental health of teachers, the importance of taking a break at half term was noted.

**472 Performance,
In-Year Budget
Monitoring and
2021/22 Budget**

As part of the budget scrutiny process, the Panel considered the 2021/22 draft budget for areas within its remit. The Panel was also updated on performance and in-year financial information.

The Chief Financial Officer gave a presentation updating the Panel on the 2021/22 draft budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan. The following main points were made:

- The Agenda papers for the 4 February Cabinet meeting had now been published and it was confirmed that the figures in relation to this Panel's remit showed no change.
- Although this had been the most difficult budget for 20 years, the process of working with the Board of Worcestershire Children First (WCF) had gone well and he thanked Board Members and Directors for their work. The budget development process had been ongoing since July.
- The overall Council budget showed £26.5m of funding pressures including £7.7m for WCF. An additional £9m had been received in grants, £5.9m of which was in the form of a Covid-19 grant. This had been a one-off in the first quarter and the Council waited to see if further grants would be provided.
- The slow down in the speed of house building meant that the New Homes Bonus was less this year.
- Overall, the Council needed to find over £10m in savings. £7.1m had been identified £3m of which were in WCF. £3m would be covered by the potential use of reserves.
- Final figures for the Council Tax Grant were not yet known but if worse than expected, reserves would be used as a one off. Figures for the schools capital grant were not yet known and may not be available until April or May.
- Members were reminded that there had been a delay in the Fairer Funding Review and the resolution of provision for the Higher Needs Block. The Council would continue to lobby in these areas.

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

- The Chairman suggested that this was the most complex budget he had seen in his 25 years as a councillor. The Chief Financial Officer reminded Members that, in relation to council tax, in an

ordinary year any deficit would need to be resolved in the following year. However, this could now be spread over 3 years. He suggested that the Panel should monitor the capital budget alongside the revenue budget and this could be reported on a quarterly basis.

- A question was asked about the detail of the local government income compensation scheme. It was confirmed that the scheme referred to by the Panel Member was predominantly used by district councils.

The Director of Resources (WCF) outlined specific budget information in relation to children and families, reminding the Panel that they had discussed emerging issues in November and the report showed no surprises. Points made included:

- The budget setting process had been good, as had WCF's internal governance via the Risk, Governance and Audit Board and the main WCF Board.
- The overspend on safeguarding placements was part of a national picture.
- Of the overall budget of £127m, half represented demand led budgets including home to school transport and placements. It was acknowledged that this involved a level of risk and the risk reserve was there to mitigate this.
- In relation to the Dedicated Schools Grant, the High Needs Block continued to see pressure, again reflecting the national picture. In line with government guidance, the ongoing deficit would sit on the balance sheet. A High Needs recovery plan was in place but this would take time. Members were reminded that other local authorities were in a worse position.

Further Member questions were invited and the following main points were raised:

- It was acknowledged that, as pay was agreed via negotiations between trade unions and local government, it was not possible for central government to impose a pay freeze. The proposed budget did not include provision for any increase and this was in line with government guidance. Therefore, if a pay increase was agreed, it would be argued that this would be the responsibility of central government to fund.
- A question was asked about the level of risk in the

placements budget. Concern was expressed that the agenda report suggested that the budget could be exceeded by up to £2m and that this was mitigated by the £1.1m risk reserve leaving a gap of £900k. There was concern that the additional societal stresses caused by Covid could result in more children needing to be brought into care. Although the Council had a good track record in placement budget monitoring, it was not possible to be certain about the risk involved. If there was a significant rise in the number of placements needed, WCF may need to re-negotiate with the County Council in order to resolve funding issues.

- The Director of Children's Social Care and Safeguarding reminded Members that WCF had been very successful in supporting families to avoid bringing children into care where it was safe to do so. The work of the Supporting Families First team was ongoing and, despite additional pressures on families, there had not so far been a large increase in the number of children coming into care, in contrast to the national picture. This reflected a multi-agency approach and a professional willingness amongst partners to manage risk.
- In line with government guidance, the ongoing £10.5m overspend on the DSG was held on the balance sheet and carried forward against future income.
- In response to a question about school-based actions in relation to the High Needs block, the Panel was reminded that a plan to manage spend was in place led by the Assistant Director for SEND and Vulnerable Learners. It would take time to understand how spend was managed and achieve good value for money. The action plan would be shared with the Panel.
- The Chief Executive of WCF suggested that there should also be a focus on the education system with all schools needing to be more inclusive. Wherever possible, children with SEND should attend their local mainstream school. In relation to inclusion, the Council was still approximately 8% behind the national figure and more work should be done locally to avoid spending more on specialist provision. There had been some progress (for example the development of mainstream autism bases) but there was still more to do. It was not realistic to expect the deficit to be brought down in the next year.
- In response to a question about potential blocks to

greater inclusion, the Chief Executive suggested this was cultural with schools (who were not well funded) worried about exam results and their capacity to cope. Also, placing a child in specialist provision was often supported by parental expectation and choice through the tribunal system.

- The Chairman asked a question about the fragility of the home to school transport market and the fact that providers had continued to be paid during lockdown when fewer children were travelling to school. It was confirmed that providers had used the furlough scheme and capacity was used by the Council in other ways, for example to transport equipment. Once children returned to school, additional capacity was needed to accommodate social distancing requirements. It was clear that no one would make money from the service. It was a complex, changing picture and the Council needed the market to survive.
- The Chairman pointed out that with only 15% of children in school for much of the year, 100% of the home to school transport budget had been spent. Members were reminded that those children who were in school were the most vulnerable. In particular, special schools had worked hard to remain open with a greater proportion of pupils still attending. Operators were required to deliver transport in a Covid secure way meaning the service was not as efficient as in normal times. It was important to protect children and develop parental confidence. There had been additional pressure on the system from a loss of parental income.
- The Chairman expressed concern that continuing requirements for Covid security and social distancing on school transport once all children returned to school may result in additional costs and further budget pressures. Any additional expenditure would need to be funded through government grants.
- It was confirmed that the budget had been considered line by line to check all spending was necessary.

The Panel considered in-year budget information for period 8 and the following points were made:

- The Dedicated Schools Grant showed a forecast overspend of £4.6m with County Council budgets forecasting a slight underspend.

- Confirmation had now been received from HMRC that transactions between Worcestershire County Council and Worcestershire Children First would be disregarded for tax purposes.

With reference to performance information, the following main points were made:

Children's Social Care

- Q3 data showed a rise in the number of contacts received by the Family Front Door with over 1000 contacts per month compared with approximately 800 per month previously. However, these contacts had not led to an increase in requests for social worker interventions. Instead referrals had been to lower level early help interventions. This was a pattern seen across all partners including health, police, schools and members of the public. It was suggested that those contacting the family front door were looking for a safeguarding assurance and were not sure which services were open so rang the FFD for advice. This was not a manageable level of demand and was often outside the remit of the FFD staff who were having to signpost to other services rather than focus on level 4 safeguarding concerns. Further work was needed to assess whether families did not know what support was available or whether this support was not meeting their needs.
- The Covid pandemic had led to greater pressure on families in relation to poverty and emotional health and well-being. Although national headlines suggested that cases of domestic abuse had risen significantly, this had not been the case in Worcestershire. However, information for September to December showed an increase in additional risk factors such as substance misuse, parenting challenges and anti-social behaviour in young people, all of which contributed to a worrying picture.
- Partnership work was good and the virtual way of working had proved very positive especially with schools, with 91% of strategy discussions now attended by an education representative.
- Data for the timeliness of social work assessments showed that 95% were now completed within timescales. The low rate of repeat social work assessments was an indication of the quality of those assessments.
- The Director of Social Care and Safeguarding

wished to thank all staff and managers for the way they had responded to the challenges of the pandemic. A recent staff survey had revealed exceptionally high levels of staff morale and she did not underestimate the work undertaken to achieve this.

- It was important that the early help offer was accessible and meaningful to families to meet the challenges. Some families may need a telephone conversation or to be helped through an online course or literature rather than simply signposted to material. Often the early help offer did not provide this support and therefore did not meet families' needs.
- It was suggested that the solution to levels of demand was not simply to employ more social workers as there was a shortage in the current market. Instead, the answer was to support existing staff and share issues with partners. Youth workers, money mentors and emotional wellbeing workers were also important.
- In response to a question about newly recruited police officers, Members were told that training in appropriate decision making was working and would be continuing.
- When asked about whether the service had everything it needed in terms of administrative staff, IT equipment etc, the Director confirmed that the service felt well supported.

Education

- Members were reminded that there was no change to the data relating to Ofsted performance as inspections were currently paused.
- Figures for school attendance had gone up last term and were above the national average.
- The number of enquiries relating to elective home education was much lower in the spring term, as would be expected during a lockdown. There was now a focus on understanding the experience of children whose families chose to electively home educate last term and consider the suitability of the education provided. The expectation was that some children would return to school.
- The number of 16 to 18-year olds who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) had reduced as destinations from September became known. This would be a key group to monitor going forward.
- Attendance figures for children who were looked

after were monitored closely and shared with social care colleagues on a weekly basis.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

- The timeliness of decision making with reference to SEND remained good. Although the percentage of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) completed within 20 weeks had fallen from 100% to 93% in Q3, this related to only 7 plans where it had not been possible to complete assessments due to Covid related issues.
- There had been an increase in the number of electively home educated pupils with SEND. This mirrored the national picture and would be monitored through the SEND team.

The following points were made in response to Members' questions:

- The Chairman noted that over time there had been a fall in the Ofsted performance of academies and free schools and a general plateauing of performance across all schools. He reminded Members that there would be a fuller discussion on educational attainment at the Panel's next meeting. The Director of Education and Early Help reminded Members that the Ofsted external inspection regime had now been paused for almost 12 months. Before the pause, there had been a change in the inspection framework in September 2019 and Worcestershire had seen 50 inspections following this change. The trend had been identified and officers would continue to build up intelligence, develop working relationships and consider evidence from monitoring visits but it was difficult to make a comment at this time.
- Members were reminded that figures for permanent exclusions were cumulative. The education strategy included an ambition to minimise exclusion and a review was currently underway. Officers were in touch with schools where the data was a cause for concern. It was recognised that permanent exclusion was a serious experience for children, families and schools.
- Further concern was expressed about young people who were NEET with the suggestion that it would be very difficult for young people to get a job when sectors such as hospitality and retail

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were struggling due to the pandemic. It was suggested that the Panel should hold a more detailed discussion on NEETs in the future and agreed that this should be added to the work programme.

- Concern was expressed about children with SEND who were electively home educated. It was suggested that not many parents would have the skills to provide an adequate education for a child with SEND.

The Panel reviewed its work programme and the following points were noted:

- As agreed, a detailed discussion on NEETs would be added to the work programme for consideration following the May County Council elections.
- Headteachers would be invited to the Panel's 16 March meeting to join the discussion on educational outcomes.

The following comments on the 2021/22 draft budget were agreed and would be fed back to the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board on 3 February:

- Members were concerned about the ongoing significant cost pressures in relation to the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant, and the resulting deficit of around £10.5m which will be carried forward into 2021/22. The Panel was concerned about how this deficit will be dealt with when the time-limited accounting regulations expire but understands that this will be dependent on future decisions by central Government. Members noted that the Council continues to lobby on this.
- The Panel highlighted the fact that £0.1m has been included in the WCF budget for pay inflation in line with the pay freeze announced by the Chancellor and noted that this would be insufficient if national negotiations between local government and trade unions resulted in a higher pay award.
- The Panel noted the pressure on the Home to School Transport budget and was concerned that continuing requirements for covid security and social distancing on school transport once all children returned to school would result in additional costs and further budget pressures.
- Members noted the risk that the demand-led

Placements budget could exceed allocated funds by up to £2m and the proposal to mitigate this risk by using the £1.1m risk reserve, leaving a £0.9m overspend. The Panel sought assurance that mitigating this risk through the use of reserves was sustainable.

- The Panel noted the postponement of the Government's Fair Funding Review and wished to support the Council's ongoing lobbying in this area.

Members noted that it was the final Panel meeting for the Director of Children's Services who was leaving the authority shortly to take up a new post. Members wished to formally record their thanks to the Director for her fantastic service to the County and for leaving the service in a far better state than when she arrived.

The meeting ended at 1.06 pm

Chairman