

## **Minutes of the Children and Families**

### **Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

#### **County Hall, Worcester**

**Friday, 16 July 2021, 10.00 am**

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#### **Present:**

Cllr Kyle Daisley (Chairman), Cllr Tracey Onslow (Vice Chairman),  
Cllr Dan Boatright, Cllr David Chambers, Mr Mark Hughes, Cllr Matt Jenkins,  
Cllr Steve Mackay, Cllr Tony Muir and Cllr David Ross

#### **Also attended:**

Cllr Andy Roberts, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and  
Families  
Jane Stanley, Healthwatch Worcestershire

Tina Russell, Director of Children's Services / Chief Executive, Worcestershire  
Children First  
Phil Rook, Director of Resources, Worcestershire Children First  
Sarah Wilkins, Director of Education and Early Help, Worcestershire Children  
First  
Emma Brittain, Assistant Director of Family Front Door and Partnerships,  
Worcestershire Children First  
Samantha Morris, Scrutiny Co-ordinator  
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 16 March 2021 (previously circulated).

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

#### **482 Apologies and Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed Mark Hughes (Parent Governor Representative) to his first meeting of the Panel. He also welcomed Jane Stanley (Healthwatch).

Apologies were received from Councillor Jo Monk, Mr Bryan Allbut (Church Representative) and Councillor Marcus Hart (Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education).

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

None.

#### **484 Public Participation**

None.

#### **485 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 16 March 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **486 Worcestershire Children First - Social Care Placements Sufficiency Strategy**

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Children and Families and the Director of Children's Services updated the Panel on developments relating to the Worcestershire Children First (WCF) Social Care Placements Sufficiency Strategy.

By way of introduction, the Director of Children's Services made the following main points:

- The strategy set out the aims and objectives to meet WCF's sufficiency duties in relation to children placed in the Council's care.
- The quality of strategic planning was measured through a range of key performance indicators (KPIs) looking at outcomes for children and by Ofsted in service inspections.
- Semi-independent accommodation was also part of the strategy but was not registered with Ofsted.
- The principles underpinning sufficiency planning were outlined, including placing a child close to their local area, providing an experience of 'family life' and using care as a step to permanency. The prevention of care was also part of sufficiency and included support for children to remain at home with parents where possible.
- Provision should cover what was reasonably practicable. The legislation recognised that it was not possible to have specialist placement provision in every local authority.
- Members were reminded of the Council's journey of improvement. Worcestershire's most recent ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) in July 2019 had recognised improved outcomes.
- Attention was drawn to the 'Strategy in Brief' included in the presentation slides which highlighted the main proposals to note from the strategy.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Children and Families told the Panel about the recent independent review of children's social care by Josh McAlister (the founder of the social work charity Frontline) and suggested it should be circulated to Members of the Panel. The report had many synergies with the approach outlined by the Director of Children's Services and cited other local authorities such as North Yorkshire, Essex and Hertfordshire with whom WCF had been working in partnership. He highlighted the poor outcomes of many young people who had been in the care system and reminded the Panel of the importance of not defining young people by having been in care. Each young person must be recognised as an individual.

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

- A question was asked about the most appropriate time for the Scrutiny Panel to be involved in the development of the strategy and it was suggested that, in general, it was important for scrutiny Members to comment on proposals before they had been agreed by Cabinet. The CMR agreed with the general desire for scrutiny to be involved at an early stage. However, in this case the detail of the strategy was based on the professional view. The Director of Children's Services reminded the Panel that this was a dynamic strategy and was not set in stone. The strategy would be reviewed (although not re-written) next year and there would be an opportunity to add to it. The Director was genuinely happy to take on board any ideas from Panel Members either at the meeting or at a later date.
- It was suggested that, as Corporate Parents, there was a desire to give children leaving care the same start as Members' own children. In light of this, it was surprising that children were moved into semi-independent care at age 16 rather than 18. In response, the Director of Children's Services informed the Panel that, although Corporate Parents may want to provide the same things as they would to their own children, this group of children had very different life experiences and may have very different needs. The experience of residential care and living with other young people in an institutional setting could make a young person very independent and resilient at an early age. Semi-independent living provided independence with support such as a trained adult being there overnight.
- It was confirmed that the voice and views of parents would be considered when deciding on the most appropriate provision for a child or young person.
- It was confirmed that 'connected person' referred to what was previously known as a 'kinship carer'. A connected person could be a family member or a friend with a connection to the child.
- Members were reminded that the details of the improvement journey since the 2016 Ofsted inspection had previously been reported to the scrutiny Panel. The ILACS in July 2019 was very positive but WCF was aware of areas that were still in need of improvement.
- In response to a question about why the vision and values of WCF included an aspiration to a 'good' education for all rather than

'outstanding', Members were informed that this was simply a matter of terminology.

- A Member of the Panel suggested that comparisons with the number of children in care in other local authorities were not always helpful, as the important thing was to look after the children that needed to be looked after. The Director of Children's Services agreed. However, she reminded the Panel that the County Council was measured against other local authorities and it was important to tell the full story including what were the trends and what action was being taken.
- The Director of Children's Services confirmed that, when a child came into care, social workers would assess what was the best type of care for that individual. She was confident that carers were provided with long term support to develop the skills to change a child's life for the better, helping them to overcome negative experiences and become resilient. With reference to care leavers, it was the case that some had become young parents but many had coped very well with this.
- It was confirmed that the range of provision for children with autism was always being reviewed. It was recognised that it could sometimes become difficult for older parents to manage older children with challenging behaviour. A pilot scheme was being developed whereby a personal carer would go into the family home and live in for part of the time. The aim was to help parents who may need some support but did not want their child to go into care. The Director of Education and Early Help reminded Members that it was important that WCF's various strategies complemented each other and ensured the whole system worked well. A survey for the Children's Appendix to Worcestershire's All-Age Autism Strategy was currently out for consultation and it was agreed that the consultation documents would be circulated to Panel Members.
- Late identification of ADHD was an issue not only for children in care. However, sometimes children with ADHD may come into care following family breakdown as a result of parents being unable to cope with challenging behaviour. The coordinated contribution of social workers and health colleagues to the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) was important in avoiding a silo assessment. Members were referred to Luke's Story, a short film in which professionals reflected on a particular case. It was suggested that it would be helpful for the Panel to view Luke's Story and the Director of Children's Services agreed to circulate details to Members.
- With reference to private residential providers, the Panel was informed that within the region, costs were now very high. Although all local authorities were on different journeys, colleagues were looking at a regional framework to secure residential provision at a reasonable rate. The County Council would look at private providers within Worcestershire as there were no plans to build Council-owned residential provision.
- It was confirmed that the plan was to close Hill View as a children's home as its design, size and location impacted negatively on outcomes for young people. The building would be redeveloped as semi-independent provision with overnight support.

- Members were reminded that the quality of residential provision was assessed by Ofsted. Also, each home received a monthly visit from an independent person who would look at the whole range of provision (including conversations with children and managers). Outcomes of these visits were reported to the Corporate Parenting Board. Members of the Corporate Parenting Board also undertook 'keeping in touch' events which linked them to a particular child in care and gave an insight into the life of that young person. A buddy system was also in place where WCF staff were matched to a young person and would meet up with them periodically. It was hoped that this scheme could be extended to all County Council staff. It was not felt to be appropriate for Members of the Scrutiny Panel to visit residential homes as this would duplicate work being done by the Corporate Parenting Board and may reinforce the labelling of children in care. However, it was agreed that young people should be invited to a future Panel meeting.
- Concern was expressed that 27% of young people had been in residential care for over 2 years. The Director of Children's Services reminded the Panel that many of these young people were in stable placements and it was not felt to be appropriate to disrupt them.
- It was confirmed that the definition of 'family life' included single parents and reflected all versions of family life as seen in society.
- Refurbishment of semi-independent accommodation was underway and the Panel welcomed the idea of using local businesses wherever possible. A new post of Property Manager had been created with responsibility for maintenance across the estate.

## **487 Performance and 2020/21 Year-End Budget Monitoring**

The Panel was updated on performance information and 2020/21 Year-End Budget Monitoring.

### WCF 2020/21 Year-End Budget

The Director of Resources updated the Panel on the year-end financial outturn for 2020/21. The following main points were made:

- Members were reminded that the deficit in the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) High Needs block was held as an unusable reserve on the balance sheet. This deficit was set to rise and forecast to be £14.7 million by the end of March 2022. Lobbying of Government on this issue was ongoing. This was a big issue for the Council but should be seen in the context of much larger deficits in other local authorities.
- The WCF 2020/21 outturn position showed a small surplus which, in the context of a £120 million budget, was a good position to be in at the end of a challenging year. Money had been received from the County Council to cover the direct costs of Covid.
- The pressure on the placements budget was still severe and the risk reserve had been increased to £1.9 million.
- Internal audit had reported that budgets were robustly managed and well run. External audit had been completed at the end of June 2021

and no issues were reported. The accounts had been approved by the WCF Board and would be signed off in the next week.

- It was confirmed that, as a separate company, WCF had to have separately audited accounts.
- It was agreed that a breakdown of costs associated with Alternative Provision would be circulated to the Panel.

### 2020/21 Q4 Performance Information

The Director of Children's Services reminded the Panel that this set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) had been previously agreed with the Scrutiny Panel. The following main points were highlighted:

- The Family Front Door had seen an increase in demand throughout lockdown and this had peaked when schools were re-opened to all pupils. Referrals were assessed as having a lower level of need during the period that access to early help had been limited. Resources had been used to target the peak and some repeat referrals had been seen. Staff had worked well under pressure. The Family Front Door had received an Ofsted focused visit and informal feedback included clear recognition of how well the service had managed demand and maintained quality.
- The higher number of children in care reflected the impact Covid had had on the number of children able to exit the care system. There had been delays in completing court proceedings and therefore overall numbers of children in care and caseloads had increased.
- Care leavers had been provided with an additional £100 per month from December to March to help through lockdown. In-person visits to those in semi-independent provision had continued. There had been fewer visits to those children living in stable placements with carers in order to minimise face to face contact. Children were kept on child protection plans as it had not been possible to have the reassurance that these plans could be removed. Therefore, as new cases were coming into the system, the overall number had gone up and then reduced once face to face work could begin again.
- School attendance was reported weekly to the Department for Education (DfE). Feedback from the DfE indicated that the Council was one of the best examples of supporting children and schools through the Covid pandemic.

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

- It was confirmed that there had been an increase in anxiety from parents and children, in relation to the return to school. The 'Back to School' project had focused on supporting children who may have had a particular problem or anxiety. Attendance rates compared favourably with other local authorities.
- It was confirmed that there had not been a problem with social workers being able to access families and this had been done safely.

- Members of the Adult Care and Well-being O&S Panel had asked about the impact of the pandemic on young carers. The Director of Education and Early Help agreed to share her response to this enquiry with the Children and Families O&S Panel. Through the pandemic, contact with young carers had initially reduced but was now increasing again. Members were informed that, when a referral was received, one of the mandatory questions as part of the assessment process was 'Is the child a young carer?'. It was agreed that young carers would be invited to contribute to a future meeting of the Panel.
- It was confirmed that the reduction in contacts at the Family Front Door reflected a return to pre-Covid normal levels.
- The number of social workers was published annually as part of social work sustainability data. It was agreed that this would be shared with the Panel on an annual basis.
- A Member highlighted that schools' Ofsted performance had gone from tracking marginally above the national figure to consistently below. The Director of Education and Early Help reminded the Panel of the impact of Covid. A new Ofsted inspection framework had been published in September 2019 and the County had seen 56 inspections under the new framework before inspections were suspended in March 2020. Since March 2020 there had been virtual visits to inadequate schools. The WCF School Improvement team had continued to work with all schools and saw a consistently good response. In the Spring and Summer terms Ofsted monitoring visits of inadequate schools had resumed and all schools seen in Worcestershire were reported to have been taking effective action. The trajectory of improvement was on track but the Ofsted inspection schedule was behind so many schools had not yet experienced full inspections under the new framework. The data would therefore take a while to change.
- The Panel was reminded that there were 116 maintained schools in the County and they were reviewed on a termly basis by School Improvement Advisers, a system which would highlight schools which may need additional support. WCF did not have the same degree of leverage with academy schools but, overall, relationships were good with academy schools often contacting WCF officers for advice.
- Although it was acknowledged that the Ofsted inspection framework had changed for all schools in England at the same time, it was suggested that the high proportion of single academy schools in the County (ie those which were not part of a group or chain) would have an impact.
- In response to a question about the impact of Covid on children in care, the Director of Children's Services reported that children in stable placements had responded positively. Children in family-based care were supported to return to school where necessary but many were happy to continue home learning. There had been a reduction in the number of children missing during lockdown and for some children it was an opportunity to build relationships. There had been a rise in demand for support for families but not a rise in the number of children coming into care.
- With reference to virtual learning, it was confirmed that all children in care and care leavers had been provided with laptops. Children with a

social worker were classed as vulnerable and schools had remained open for these children, although they had been able to study via remote learning if they preferred.

- The data showing the disparity between maintained and academy schools in relation to Ofsted inspections was welcomed. It was agreed that for future discussions, this would be broken down further to show the differences between schools which were single academies and those which were part of a multi-academy trust.
- In response to a question about the relationship between the local authority and academy schools, Members were reminded that the local authority remained responsible for the provision of education throughout the County. In terms of quality, there were the same expectations for all state-funded schools. If Ofsted received a complaint about a school, the local authority would take this forward with a maintained school, whereas the DfE would be the contact for academies. The local authority had a close relationship with the DfE with meetings taking place on a fortnightly basis. Relationships were close with Worcestershire-based multi-academy trusts and good but slightly more distant with non-Worcestershire based trusts. On behalf of the local authority, WCF administered in-year admissions for all academies in the County.

## **488 Work Programme 2021/22**

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

- Alternative provision should be added as a future item.
- The annual report on educational attainment should include reference to apprenticeships.
- Consideration of the 2 and 3 tier systems in the County should be added. The Chairman agreed to put together some ideas about the particular aspects the Panel would wish to focus on.

The Director of Children's Services confirmed that she had already had an input into the Work Programme. She reminded the Panel of the importance of leaving space for items that might crop up through the year.

## **489 Supporting Families First - Year One Evaluation and Future Development Plans**

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families and the Director of Children's Services had been asked to update the Panel on the year one evaluation and future development plans of Supporting Families First.

The Assistant Director, Family Front Door and Partnerships had arranged for a service user to join the meeting virtually to inform the Panel about the service she had received. Members were told that the family had received support from an Outreach Worker, a Youth Mentor and an Emotional Health and Well-being Worker since January 2020.



During the discussion, the service user emphasised the importance of the workers supporting her son's needs in order to establish improvements in family life. She agreed that she would come back to the Panel in six months' time so that the longer-term impact of the work could be assessed.

The Director of Children's Services referred Panel Members to the Webstar which was a mechanism which supported families to express whether they felt better and to identify areas of progress, however small.

She went on to confirm that the next steps would be to develop this way of working with the families of children in need. This would be a fundamental whole service change which would aim to identify problems earlier and reduce the number of child protection cases. She confirmed that the programme included specialist provision to deal with substance misuse and acknowledged that some children would still need to come into care.

The Chairman thanked the officers for the positive report and for arranging the powerful conversation with the service user.

The meeting ended at 12.44 pm

Chairman .....