

Minutes of the Children and Families

Overview and Scrutiny Panel

County Hall, Worcester

Wednesday, 22 September 2021, 2.00 pm

Present:

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

Also attended:

Cllr Marcus Hart, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Education
Cllr Karen May, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Health and Well Being
Cllr Tom Wells, Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Board
Cllr Richard Morris, Vice-Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Board
Sue Harris, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust
Sally-Anne Osborne, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS
Trust
Sue Hetherington, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS
Trust
Jane Stanley, Healthwatch Worcestershire

Dr Kathryn Cobain, Director of Public Health
Liz Altay, Public Health Consultant
Sarah Wilkins, Director of Education and Early Help, Worcestershire Children
First
Phil Rook, Director of Resources, Worcestershire Children First
Emma Brittain, Assistant Director of Family Front Door and Partnerships,
Worcestershire Children First
Hannah Perrott, Assistant Director - Communities and People
Samantha Morris, Scrutiny Co-ordinator
Alison Spall, 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 July 2021 (previously circulated).

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

490 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Councillor Jo Monk, Panel Member, Councillor Andy Roberts, Cabinet Member with Responsibility and Tina Russell, Chief Executive of Worcestershire Children First.

491 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

492 Public Participation

The Chairman reported that two members of the public had asked to speak at the meeting. A summary is shown below of the key points raised by the participants:

David Hall

- Mr Hall referred to the Worcestershire Children First (WCF) complaints system and his dissatisfaction at the length of time complaints took to be investigated. He added that others that he knew experienced similar delays.
- He highlighted that figures relating to cases upheld by the Local Government Ombudsman (88% for Worcestershire, compared to an average of 71% for other authorities) indicated the unfairness of complaints procedures which were stacked against the complainant.
- Mr Hall explained to the Panel that he did not feel that he was being heard or listened to by the Chief Executive of WCF in respect of his grievances about the complaints' procedure.
- He questioned whether there was a plan to address this situation?

The Chairman thanked Mr Hall for his contribution and advised him that he would receive a written response to the points he had raised.

Sally Laver

- Ms Laver referred to an issue concerning the County's Home to School Transport provision, specifically that recent legislative changes had affected the eligibility of Year 5 children being allocated a seat on coach services from Stoke Prior to Aston Fields Middle school (whether paying or not). This was causing significant disruption to a number of parents, who were now having to take time off work to take their children to school, as walking to school was not a safe or practical option.
- The Panel was informed by Ms Laver that when parents applied for school places in September 2020, they had not been informed that if they didn't choose their closest school, they wouldn't be eligible for

school transport, hence they felt they had been misled from the start of this process.

- Ms Laver referred to a 58-seater school coach, which passed through their village every day, with a less than 20% occupancy rate. She asked what the current allowed occupancy rate was and when the level might be raised to enable the remaining 10 pupils to use the service too?

The Chairman thanked Ms Laver for her contribution and advised her that she would receive a written response to the points she had raised.

493 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

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

494 Update on 0 -19 Starting Well Services

Attending for this item were:

Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust

Sue Harris, Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships

Sally-Anne Osborne, Associate Director for Children, Young People & Families

Sue Hetherington, Clinical Project Manager

Worcestershire County Council

Karen May, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-Being

Dr Kathryn Cobain, Director of Public Health

Liz Altay, Public Health Consultant

Worcestershire Children First

Sarah Wilkins, Director for Education and Early Help

The Chairman welcomed representatives from the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust to the meeting to provide an update on the latest developments in relation to 0-19 Prevention and Early Intervention Service (Starting Well).

The Cabinet Member for Health and Well-being reported that a meeting had recently taken place with Dame Andrea Leadsom focusing on the importance of enhancing and enabling positive outcomes for 0–2-year-olds via the use of family hubs. She advised that new funding had recently been announced by the Department of Education to support the continued development of this programme.

The Public Health Consultant reminded the Panel of the background to the establishment of the Starting Well service, which had commenced in April 2020. With the restrictions of COVID-19, the implementation of the service had taken longer than planned as there had been the need to adapt and flex to deliver the services differently. An interim report was presented to the Panel in

November 2020 and since then robust recovery plans continued to be implemented across the whole partnership.

The Clinical Project Manager led the meeting through a presentation providing an overview of the Starting Well Service including:

- The broad composition of the Starting Well teams in each District area which were led by a Public Health Nurse Team Leader alongside a Community and Parenting Manager.
- The flexible and proactive approach to the delivery of services during the pandemic to ensure that need continued to be met.
- Working with partners to support the needs of each district, as outlined in their district profile, and linked to health outcomes.
- The development of the Starting Well website which parents could use to self-refer and which included links to other relevant agencies offering support.
- The Healthy Child Programme which used evidence-based assessments to determine health, well-being, and development of a child, following which appropriate support was delivered through universal services, overseen by specialist public health nurses.
- The importance of partnership working with Action for Children, Barnardo's and Redditch Borough Council which provided shared expertise to enhance the service able to be offered to families. Details were provided of initiatives aimed at young people who identified as transgender, offering them and their parents effective means of communication and support networks.
- The delivery of health visiting services during the pandemic had largely been via virtual platforms but was also backed up by the telephone advisory service and bookable appointments at the family hub. Face to face contacts were now increasing and were once again the usual way of engaging with families. Having listened to feedback from service users, however, a blended approach would continue to be offered, so that there would still be some virtual sessions provided, such as breastfeeding support.
- The provision of school nursing continued during the pandemic with safeguarding and health assessment work and initiatives to support children and young people such as ChatHealth and the Back-to-School project.
- Key challenges faced for service implementation during the year including a critical shortage of specialist public health nurses, a reduced access to children within schools and a reduction in 2-year-olds taking up nursery provision.
- The next steps for the year ahead included embedding the school screener for school aged children and an intensive home visiting programme for young and vulnerable parents.

The Director of Public Health thanked her health colleagues for the provision of the Starting Well service during the last year and also for all their help with the overall response to COVID-19. The Chairman added his appreciation for the service provided.

Members of the Panel were invited to ask questions on the presentation received and the following main points were raised:

- Referring to the volunteers and peer supporters who support the Starting Well Team, assurance was sought that, with the impact of the pandemic, there was still sufficient numbers available to assist where needed. The Associate Director confirmed that during the height of the pandemic it had been challenging with many volunteers being unavailable, however the situation was now that many of that number had returned and also that new volunteers were being recruited.
- In response to a follow up question on the recruitment process for volunteers, the Panel was informed that some volunteers came forward through informal means or were ex-service users whereas others responded to external advertising. There was a formal volunteer recruitment process in place for all prospective volunteers to ensure suitability for the role.
- The return to face-to-face home visits was raised and the Associate Director advised that all new births would receive a face-to-face visit, but that for some areas, they would also be offering a blended approach. The Executive Director highlighted that some families preferred different formats and that some young people were engaging with the service as a result of the virtual platforms, when they previously hadn't done so.
- In respect of partnerships, the importance of attracting additional expertise into the County was crucial. It was clarified that Action for Children led on the transgender initiatives, Trancakes and Safe Space which were available to all young people county-wide. Barnardo's were the lead partner for the Henry programme which included as part of their 'growing up' programme, identifying emotional need and resilience building.
- Further detail was sought on the shortage of staff previously referred to. The Associate Director advised that whilst there had been a significant number of school nurse vacancies, recent recruitment had proved successful, with only one vacancy now remaining. She added that the Clinical Project Manager had been moved into her role to ensure that there was a robust induction process and supportive environment for the new staff.
- The low uptake of free childcare for 2-year-olds was raised as a concern and whether there was a current lack of use of early years providers in general? The Associate Director confirmed that the pandemic had contributed to the low uptake levels. The Director for Education and Early Help advised that prior to the pandemic, take up of these free places was at about 70%, slightly higher than the national average. Whilst there had been a significant reduction in take-up in 2020, there hadn't been a major reduction in children accessing childcare overall. She advised that there was a current drive to ensure families were aware of the childcare options available to them. The importance of targeting first-time parents was essential to avoid developmental milestones not being reached. It was clarified that the free funding for 2-year-olds was dependent on income, whilst for 3 and 4-year-olds, there was allocated free provision for all.

- The approach to managing childhood obesity was raised. The Clinical Project Manager explained the child measurement programme that was in place and advised how results were followed up with parents/carers and health partners as appropriate. The personal approach by the family information service engaging with families was used as a proactive way forward to make progress on this issue. The Director also highlighted that promotional work via early years providers was also a helpful method of ensuring key messages reached the target audience.

495 The Continuum of Early Help in Worcestershire

The Cabinet Member for Education provided a brief introduction to the early help report. The Director of Education and Early Help then explained that due to the broad range of the continuum of early help services in the County, a joint report had been produced involving colleagues in Worcestershire Children First and the County Council (both Communities and Public Health). Full details of each service area were included in the report.

The Director advised that the report set out the significant progress being made on developing the provision and collaboration of early help services across Worcestershire. The importance of the 'working together' guidance was critical for promoting the welfare of children. Partners working closely together for instance through the use of family hubs ensured that access to help and support was readily available at the earliest opportunity.

Details were provided on the recently established WCF Early Help Family Support service which was located within Children's social care and which provided family support workers to families where there was level 2 or level 3 need.

The Panel was also informed of the evolving role of Here2Help which now offered advice and support on a range of services. Plans to ensure that the children's centres buildings continued to be used for the wider early help, early education and care and family hub offer were also highlighted.

The Panel was provided with a copy of an Early Help booklet which had recently been launched and was available on the website and in print for partners to distribute.

Members asked a range of questions, which were responded to as follows:

- A Member commented that the recent Ofsted letter was very encouraging but queried the reference to 'most' children rather than every child being reached by the service. The Assistant Director, Family Front Door and Partnerships explained that they were continually addressing the potential barriers for people to access support, to improve accessibility, for instance, through the use of language. There was a multi-agency approach in place to ensure that help and support was provided, and all parties were encouraging families to come forward to seek support at an early stage.

- In response to a question about the lack of access to early help facilities in rural areas, particularly South Worcestershire, the Director commented that it was an ongoing challenge to ensure that residents in rural areas had access to the early help offer. Rural schools were used as a key place for information to be available and/or disseminated. She highlighted that the vast majority of the children's centres continued to have a role in early childhood, so these were another source of information, particularly for younger children's needs and also that the family hubs were being more connected.
- The role of Here2Help in relation to the current financial struggle of families was raised. The Assistant Director for Communities advised that additional resources had been made available to support free school meals in the holidays. There had also been grants available through the Act on Energy Fund, but this had now come to an end. The Assistant Director explained that there was now a focus on working together with the voluntary sector to promote sources of help. A Community Directory was being launched the following week, which contained information on the whole of the voluntary sector in the County, and what it could offer. In response to a follow up question, the Assistant Director explained that this directory was an interactive portal, which residents would be able to access themselves. There would be some additional telephone support in the short term, but this would be time limited.
- The Director advised that the percentage of schools referred to in paragraph 42 by the word 'most' was over 80%. She commented that they continued to work with schools to promote the importance of the early help offer and that through monitoring this situation, they could identify that there were still about 16 state funded schools without an early help offer showing on their website.
- The Director referred to a video that had been produced by Cookley Sebright primary school setting out how their early help offer had been developed. It was agreed to circulate the video to the Panel for their information.

496 Performance and In-Year Budget Monitoring

The Panel was updated on performance information relating to Quarter 1 (April to June 2021) and financial information for Quarter 1. Members were also provided with the Ofsted letter following their inspection visit to the Family Front Door in July.

Budget Monitoring 2021/22

The Director of Resources highlighted the following points:

- The Designated Schools Grant year-end position at Period 3 was a forecast overspend of £5.7m. The forecast deficit on the DSG for the end of 2021/22 was £15.7m and for 2022/23, £19.7m. The Director explained that this Council was working with others to seek urgent Government action on this situation.

- For the High Needs Block allocation, owing to some extra Government funding, the variance on overspend had been slightly reduced.
- The Society of County Treasurers had written to the Chancellor to lobby for the Government to take urgent action in the Spending Review to address the national £1.3bn special education needs deficit position which was predicted by the end of 2022/23.
- Over half of the WCF annual Budget related to ‘demand led’ budgets of placements and Home to School Transport, upon which there was considerable pressure.
- In response to a query about what was suggested by the ‘prompt action’ that might be required on the placements budget, the Director explained that an end-to-end audit was being carried out, in addition to closely monitoring the situation. In terms of the £1.9m risk reserve, this was available should it prove necessary. In the previous 3 years it had not been necessary to make use of this.
- The Director highlighted that the Annual General Meeting of Worcestershire Children First was being held on 30 September.

Children’s Social Care

The Assistant Director (Family Front Door and Partnerships) introduced the performance information and made the following key points:

- The demand on the FFD and the conversion rate were areas of concern. There were still big challenges ahead, but the Ofsted letter had provided welcome reassurance that timely decisions were being made.
- Through care (Looked after Children and Care Leavers) – there was significant pressure on finding the right placements for young people.
- The data on children missing from home during the pandemic indicated that the figures had stayed low during this period. The situation was being looked at in detail to ensure that cases were being reported accurately.

Members raised a few questions:

- In response to a question about whether 2020/21 figures would be relevant to make comparisons with going forward, the Assistant Director suggested that it would depend on what was being measured. There was also the question as to whether this was the ‘new norm’?
- A question was raised about the situation where vulnerable children had been kept on the Child Protection register during the pandemic for their protection. The Assistant Director advised that this situation had changed in September 2020, when each family situation had been assessed and reviewed. Assurance was given that only those children who had needed to remain on a Child Protection Plan had done so.

Education and SEND

The Director of Education and Early Help introduced the performance data and made the following points:

- The Director advised that Ofsted had re-started their full inspections this term, with one visit having already been completed. As there was a 3-term lag in inspections, a high volume of inspections were expected going forward.
- Attendance figures for last term had been good, particularly when there was a full return to school. Unfortunately, the figures didn't show the children who were receiving education from home. A new Attendance Officer role had been created to scrutinise the data and liaise with the schools offering early help where problems with pupils were identified.
- Children missing education – this data was showing an improving picture, slightly affected by the Year 11 leavers.
- The NEET figure was not as significant as had been anticipated with the effect of the pandemic, with the figure about 100 higher than the previous year.
- In partnership with Social Care, a new Personal Progression Plan for LAC's had been successfully piloted by the Virtual school and was looking to be extended by social workers.
- The number of children who were being home educated remained fairly static for this quarter, with some families remaining anxious about a return to school with the ongoing COVID-19 situation, whilst others had found the home education model had been a positive experience for their children.

Members raised a number of points:

- The CMR commented that it was difficult to assess the impact of the lag in Ofsted inspections. Over the year ahead, he was keen to see whether the improvement works that had been carried out by schools had made a positive impact. In particular he highlighted that the Academy Converters had not been externally inspected recently, so he was keen to see whether their situation had significantly improved.
- A Member highlighted that the numbers of children and young people being permanently excluded had risen from 63 to 83. The Director advised that they had been reviewing this situation in detail to try to understand what was causing this trend. Whilst fixed term exclusion could serve a helpful purpose, permanent exclusions should be avoided wherever possible. The Director advised that the numbers had since reduced from the Quarter 1 figure and that an implementation plan was in place to address the situation, including the use of two behaviour hubs in the County.
- School exclusions – a Member requested data on excluded pupils over recent years as to whether they had moved to another school or been moved to the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). Details were also sought on the number of Exclusion Review Panels which had been upheld. The Director reported that there were very few appeals of exclusions, but would check information on both queries and report back. It was agreed that a review of exclusions should be added to the Panel's Work Programme.
- In response to a question regarding undiagnosed autism and a link to exclusions, the Director advised that this situation was now much-improved and the data demonstrated that this was no longer a

significant issue. Mainstream schools were now better able to identify and support such children.

- A Member questioned the classification of schools which had recently been converted to an Academy. The Director confirmed that they would be classed as 'uninspected' and were included in a separate breakdown of figures but were just not showing in this data set.

The Chairman commented that the Panel were pleased with the positive Ofsted letter and thanked the Chief Executive and WCF colleagues for their work on the Family Front Door which had led to this.

497 **Work Programme 2021-22**

The Panel reviewed its current Work Programme. The Chairman highlighted that the current organisation of Education within the County (2 tier/3 tier) had been added to the November Panel meeting and the Update on GETSAFE had been moved to the January meeting.

Home to School Transport – It was agreed that the impact of the legislative change on Home to School Transport would be added to the Work Programme. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education (CMR) advised that this issue was currently under review and that the CMR for Highways and Transport would be bringing a report to Cabinet on this subject. The timely input from Scrutiny in this process would be welcomed.

Following discussion, it was agreed that that two Panel Members (Cllrs Chamber and Ross) would meet with the CMR to gather information on the legislative changes and the impact on local residents. The findings would then be reported to the Panel members.

Alternative Provision/Review of Exclusions – It was agreed that the Review of Exclusions, referred to earlier in the meeting, would be combined with the 'Alternative Provision' item already included on the Work Programme. The Chairman and Vice-Chairman would identify the most suitable Panel meeting for this item to be included on the Work Programme.

Carer's Strategy - The Chairman informed Members that the Adult Care and Well-Being Panel was considering this Strategy at its meeting on 29 September. Members of this Panel were welcome to attend and participate for this item.

The meeting ended at 4.10 pm

Chairman

