

Minutes of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny

Panel

County Hall, Worcester

Friday, 12 November 2021, 10.00 am

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 Jo Monk and Cllr David Ross

Also attended:

Cllr Marcus Hart, Cabinet Member with Responsibility
Jane Stanley, Healthwatch Worcestershire

Sarah Wilkins, Director of Education and Early Help, Worcestershire Children
First

Emma Brittain, Director of Early Help, Children in Need and Family Front Door,
Worcestershire Children First

Adam Johnston, Director of Child Protection and Through Care,
Worcestershire Children First

Donna Parker, Group Manager, Worcestershire Children First

Mark Sanders, Chief Accountant

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 22 September 2021 (previously circulated).

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

498 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Councillor Tony Muir, Tim Reid (Church Representative), Tina Russell, Phil Rook and Gabrielle Stacey.

499 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

500 Public Participation

None.

501 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 22 September 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

With the Chairman's agreement, the following announcements were made:

- On 5 November, Will Quince MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families had written to the Leader of the Council to confirm the removal of the Statutory Direction from the Department for Education for the Council's children's social care services. For the benefit of new Members, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education provided some background to this announcement, emphasising the huge amount of hard work that had gone into the long improvement journey. He confirmed that the improvement journey would continue with the aim of ensuring that all vulnerable children in the County were safe. The Chairman and Vice Chairman welcomed this announcement and wished to pass on their thanks to all staff who had been part of the improvement journey. The CMR confirmed that the announcement did not have any immediate impact on the future of Worcestershire Children First.
- The report following Ofsted's recent inspection of Worcestershire Children First Fostering had been published on 9 November. The independent fostering agency had been rated as 'requires improvement'. The inspection had found no widespread failings and had concluded that children were well cared for. However, it was acknowledged that there were a number of areas to be improved and an improvement plan was now in place, including applying WCF's quality assurance programme to the fostering agency and providing further senior management support.
- It was confirmed that the long-anticipated Ofsted/CQC local area SEND inspection had taken place on 1 to 3 November. The results would be received in a formal letter to the Chief Executive of WCF and the Chief Executive of Herefordshire and Worcestershire Clinical Commissioning Group, and the Panel would receive a further report once this letter had been received. In response to a question about the number of children with SEN and whether the figure of 1 in 8 was accurate, the Director of Education, Early Years and Children with Disabilities reminded Members that the cohort of children with SEN covered a broad range

and not all children with SEN would be the subject of Education, Health and Care Plans.

502 Performance, In-Year Budget Monitoring and 2022/23 Budget Scrutiny

In order to accommodate Officer availability, the Chairman agreed to amend the order of the agenda items and consider Item 6 before Item 5.

In-Year Budget Monitoring and 2022/23 Budget Scrutiny

The following main points were made:

- As previously reported, the key pressure on the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) was in the High Needs Block, a pressure that was in line with the national picture. The DfE had acknowledged this pressure and the deficit would sit on the Council's balance sheet as an unusable reserve while the DfE considered the way forward. However, it was important to note that the legislation allowing this carry forward would expire at the end of the 22/23 financial year when the deficit could potentially revert to the County Council. Members were reminded that the High Needs Management Plan was in place to monitor this budget closely.
- The forecast overspend in the Education and Early Help Directorate had been driven by pressure on Educational Psychology. A nationwide shortage of educational psychologists had caused staffing problems leading to an income shortfall and a reliance on a number of agency arrangements. It was confirmed that recruitment to these posts had now been completed.
- Trading income was now becoming more stable following the pandemic.
- In terms of forecast overspend, Worcestershire was in a positive position when compared with other local authorities, including statistical neighbours.
- The Chief Accountant informed Members that the Council was still awaiting specific details from the Government in relation to the budget for 2022/23. A further announcement was expected in mid-December. It was expected that there may be some cash increases and an increase in council tax, but this would be set against increasing demand and cost pressures.
- With reference to Home to School Transport, the Vice Chairman congratulated the team on the much-improved budget picture.
- It was confirmed that current budget discussions were broadly based on allowing 2% for staff pay increases, although the final figure was still under consideration.

Q2 Performance Information

During the discussion, the following main points were made:

- Although there had been a slight decrease in demand experienced by the Family Front Door, levels of demand remained higher than those seen pre-covid. The 'conversion rates' of referrals from agencies requiring ongoing social worker involvement remained a challenge. Referrals from schools and the police were back on track but those from health (at 19%) remained an area of concern.
- Although referrals to the Family Support Service had increased, an audit of these referrals had revealed that they were not all appropriate. Further work would be carried out in November and December to better understand the data.
- The number of Looked After Children was in line with statistical neighbours at 74 per 10,000, which put the Council in the bottom 2 of 14 West Midlands local authorities.
- The rates of children leaving care (ie no longer needing to be looked after by the local authority) remained a challenge.
- Although the number of children coming into care continued to increase, the rate of increase was not as fast as statistical neighbour authorities.
- The success of Supporting Families First was acknowledged and the Panel was told that the service was now also able to focus on children in need, allowing a more preventative approach to be taken. Safeguarding teams were better able to employ effective risk management strategies to manage potential risk in the home.
- On average, caseloads for social workers in the Looked After Children teams were now 22 or 23 cases. Although this was a significant reduction on previous levels, there was still further work to do to reach the desired level.
- As had recently been reported to the Corporate Parenting Board, there was currently a focus on getting Care Leavers into work via the Government's Kickstart programme, which offered work experience placements to encourage young people into work following the pandemic.
- In response to a question from the Chairman about the delay in care orders as a result of the pandemic, it was confirmed that conversations with the courts and CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) were ongoing and there was a promising picture in relation to the backlog of cases.

503 Vulnerable Learners (including those Children Missing Education, Elective Home Education, Young People not in Education, Employment or Training, Exclusions, and Alternative Provision)

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and the Director for Education, Early Years and Children with Disabilities (Worcestershire Children First) had been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on developments relating to Vulnerable Learners in Worcestershire.

A Member of the Panel suggested that the number of acronyms in the report had made it difficult to read and requested that, for future reports, the number

of acronyms be reduced and a glossary be included at the start of the report, if appropriate.

By way of introduction, the Cabinet Member informed the Panel that in terms of vulnerable learners there was an improving situation, although he acknowledged that there was still work to do. The policy direction agreed by Cabinet recognised that children and young people needed to be in school to learn. In recognising that parents had a right to elect to education their children at home, it was important that elective home education was not used as a means of 'off rolling' pupils. Permanent exclusions should be kept to an absolute minimum.

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

- It was confirmed that the reference to 'timely' access to appropriate provision referred to the range of statutory deadlines which applied to different types of vulnerable learners. The service had developed a much-improved understanding of the children involved and the status of their vulnerabilities. This has led to an improvement in meeting statutory deadlines.
- The increase in the number of parents electing to educate their children at home was split equally between those who had had a positive experience of home schooling during the pandemic and had chosen to continue to educate their children at home, and those who had not returned to school as a result of covid anxiety. Officers had made it clear to those choosing to continue to home educate that there would no longer be the same level of support from schools as had been available during lockdowns.
- It was suggested that the reduction in the number of young people starting apprenticeships was related to fewer companies offering apprenticeships rather than reduced take up from young people. Work was ongoing with the Skills and Investment Group Manager to promote apprenticeships in the County.
- It was confirmed that work in the north of the County with children at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) was a pilot scheme which would be followed up with a similar scheme in the south once appropriate staff had been recruited.
- The term Children Missing Education (CME) referred to children up to Y11 who were not on a school roll. Referrals were received via the Children's Services Portal and the CME team would investigate each case. Some cases were quickly resolved whereas others proved more difficult. Officers would visit the last known address, contact the landlord if relevant and would not give up until they had found the child and established their situation. The cases of the most vulnerable children were discussed at multi-agency 'Missing Monday' meetings.
- The CME system had a significant dependency on schools telling WCF when a child had left. Schools had a responsibility to inform WCF and staff had worked hard to develop a network of communication. The number of notifications had increased and that should be seen as a

good thing as it indicated an improved level of communication from schools.

- It was acknowledged that the level of permanent exclusions in Worcestershire was higher than in statistical neighbours. Work was ongoing to further understand why this was the case. In relation to children with SEND and/or EHCPs, schools were encouraged to look at those pupils with fixed term exclusions and assess whether their needs were being met. Schools were monitored on a monthly basis by WCF officers in order to identify trends and challenge schools when necessary.
- In response to a Member question, the Panel was informed that schools were unlikely to permanently exclude a pupil in order to influence public data such as exam results. Members were reminded that a permanent exclusion was a life changing experience for a pupil and was not something that a school would be proud of doing. Also, the new Ofsted framework looked very closely at a school's inclusion behaviour.
- It was confirmed that Warwickshire and Staffordshire were included in Worcestershire's statistical neighbours and officers met with colleagues in other local authorities on a regular basis to share best practice.
- Members were informed of a project to prevent school exclusion which took a multi-agency approach and aimed to change the culture in schools so that everyone took ownership of exclusions.
- Best practice in the primary sector was shared through outreach work by Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). Following lockdown, the return to school in September 2020 had been challenging for some reception children and the PRUs had run virtual surgeries for schools offering behaviour management support. The Authority also had two schools (St Augustine's and Perryfields) which had been successful in obtaining behaviour hub status from the DfE.
- The Exclusions and Alternative Provision Review had highlighted the need to undertake further work with statistical neighbours. No one piece of work would achieve whole system change but rather incremental changes would lead to improvements.
- The Panel was informed that there had been 29 permanent exclusions to date this academic year which was slightly higher than the same time last year. It was agreed that data for 2020/21 would be shared with the Panel.
- Members were given details of the systems schools used in relation to attendance, including taking two registers a day, first day calling (ie phoning parents if a child did not arrive at school), and notifying WCF of any absence greater than 10 days. Where a child had a medical issue, they might be referred to the Medical Education Team. However, the criteria for referral included the need to have consultant-led evidence, and this could mean that children were not in school but did not meet the criteria for support via the MET. Members were reminded that the Local Authority had a responsibility to provide an education for all children.
- In response to a question about short term 'unofficial' exclusions, the Panel was informed that this would be monitored through the Education Absence Monitoring Officer.

- Worcestershire had been successful in its Preventing School Exclusions RSA (Royal Society of Arts) research and development bid. It was agreed that Councillors Jenkins and Monk would join the Preventing Exclusions Project Group and report back to the Panel in due course.

The Panel adjourned for a ten-minute break.

The discussion resumed and the following main points were made:

- In relation to Children Missing Education, reassurance was given that all cases were monitored on an ongoing basis.
- The Panel noted that the majority of permanent exclusions were given for persistent disruptive behaviour. Concern was expressed that this behaviour might mask other issues that a child was dealing with. It was confirmed that schools would be encouraged to look into this. The Panel was informed that the number of children being given an Education, Health and Care Plan after a permanent exclusion had significantly reduced. It was confirmed that a child's situation would be taken into account during the exclusions process.
- It was agreed that more up to date data on the number of children permanently excluded who had a recognised mental health disorder would be circulated. The Panel was reminded that, since 2018, mental health practitioners had been working in schools. In addition, Public Health had funded additional training for schools to improve identification and support for children and young people with mental health problems.
- It was suggested that the chart showing reasons for permanent exclusions gave a helpful insight into the lives of children and the effects on their education.
- Members were reminded that, in Worcestershire, a contextual safeguarding model was used which included looking at external risks from, for example, peer groups, social media and the school environment.
- GET SAFE was a multi-agency scheme for all levels of need aiming to identify and prevent risks to children and young people from criminal exploitation. The Panel was due to receive an update at a future meeting and it was agreed that this should include input from young people who had been involved in the scheme.
- It was suggested that some schools did not have sufficient space to remove disruptive pupils from the classroom and safely accommodate them elsewhere in the school. It was acknowledged that finding a safe separate space would be easier in some schools than others. Although training in behaviour management would include making the best use of the school environment, it was recognised that for some schools, the environment may be a barrier.
- It was confirmed that, in previous years, children may have been excluded from school before a better understanding of their situation meant they were given an EHCP. It would be surprising if a child was excluded while they were going through the EHCP process. If the assessment process had started, a school could ask for additional support before the EHCP was formally in place.

- A Member suggested that it was not surprising that 100% of decisions to exclude had been upheld by Governing Bodies, given that Governing Bodies were responsible for appointing Headteachers. Members were reminded that this was the process as set out in statutory guidance, although it was acknowledged that there may be tensions and families may not always feel equipped to challenge decisions.

In conclusion, the Chairman confirmed the request for more up to date data on exclusions to be circulated to Members as it may be an issue that the Panel would wish to consider again in the future.

504 Work Programme 2021/22

The Panel reviewed its current work programme and agreed the following:

- The update on GET SAFE should be delayed to a future meeting and the discussion should include young people who had used the service.
- Cllr Chambers would discuss the role of school nurses with officers outside of the meeting.

The meeting ended at 12.24 pm

Chairman