

Minutes of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny

Panel

County Hall, Worcester

Thursday, 10 March 2022, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Kyle Daisley (Chairman), Cllr Dan Boatright, Cllr David Chambers,
Cllr Matt Jenkins, Cllr Steve Mackay and Cllr David Ross

Also attended:

Cllr Marcus Hart, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education
Cllr Andy Roberts, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and
Families
Tina Russell, Director of Children's Services / Chief Executive, Worcestershire
Children First
Phil Rook, Director of Resources, Worcestershire Children First
Nikki Jones, Assistant Director for Education Quality and Improvement,
Worcestershire Children First
Judith Gibbs, Skills and Investment Group Manager
Gary Woodman, Executive Director, Worcestershire Local Enterprise
Partnership (WLEP)
Jane Stanley, Healthwatch Worcestershire
Samantha Morris, Overview and Scrutiny Manager
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 23 February 2022 (previously
circulated).

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

520 Apologies and Welcome

At the Chairman's request, the Panel held two minutes' silence to remember
the situation in Ukraine.

Apologies were received from Mr Mark Hughes (Parent Governor Representative), Councillor Jo Monk, Councillor Tony Muir, Councillor Tracey Onslow and Mr Tim Reid (Church Representative).

521 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

522 Public Participation

None.

523 Confirmation of the Minutes of the previous meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 23 February 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

524 Educational COVID Recovery - Impact on Educational Outcomes 2021 including Apprenticeships

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and the Director of Children's Services/Chief Executive, Worcestershire Children First (WCF) had been invited to update the Panel on educational outcomes for the academic year 2020/21 with a focus on the impact of the Covid pandemic and on apprenticeships.

The Assistant Director for Education Quality and Improvement (WCF) introduced the report and made the following main points:

- The academic year 2020/21 had been significantly impacted by the pandemic. Members were reminded that there had been no externally verified end of key stage data and no Ofsted inspections had taken place. Although some visits and monitoring by Ofsted had happened, inspections had not restarted until January 2022. Therefore sources of external data were limited.
- With reference to the situation from September 2021 (ie the current academic year) schools had continued to be quite heavily impacted by the absence of pupils and staff due to Covid. Since March 2020, each school had been on an individual journey depending on the number of children and staff affected by Covid and the impact of the pandemic was individual for each school.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education suggested that, as the country came out of the Covid pandemic, schools would adjust to a new normality. Ofsted was now carrying out inspections again and, looking at reports received to date, it was pleasing to see that far more schools had retained their 'good' status than had not. School attendance in the county had been broadly in line with national averages but he acknowledged that issues remained for some children with the return to school. Attendance was

approximately 3% down on pre-pandemic levels and would continue to be a focus of work going forward as children could not learn if they were not in school.

With reference to apprenticeships, the Skills and Investment Group Manager made the following main points:

- As the pandemic hit, the number of apprenticeships available had 'nose-dived' as employers had had to deal with issues relating to their existing staff, such as furlough, working from home and social distancing. This situation had continued into 2021 although some positives had also been seen such as an increase in the number of health and social care apprenticeships when compared to previous years. However, these were predominantly for the over-25s, a reflection of employers re-skilling their existing workforce rather than taking on new staff.
- Overall, in 2020/21 employers had responded well and there had never been so many vacancies. However, many young people had not been in school and had, therefore, missed out on careers education, work experience and employment encounters.
- In summary, apprenticeships had been through a rocky period but employers were now looking to move forward in their workforce planning. The year to December 2021 had seen 152% of the previous year's vacancies, one of the highest figures seen to date. However, challenges remained with finding young people who wanted to take up these opportunities.

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

Schools

- With reference to Government 'catch up' funding, a Member of the Panel suggested that the amount allocated to Worcestershire schools had been disappointing. He acknowledged that in distributing the funding there had been a focus on children from deprived areas but felt that the IT issues experienced by those in some rural communities and the resulting lack of access to remote learning had been catastrophic. In response, Members were reminded that catching up on education lost due to the pandemic would need a long-term approach and would not be achieved in one term or even in one academic year. Schools were proactively adapting their curriculum to support catch up. It was recognised by Ofsted that recovery would be an individual journey depending on the context of each school. The Assistant Director had recently attended an Ofsted seminar on small and rural schools which had emphasised the importance of inspections being supportive.
- The Director of Children's Services reminded the Panel that children who were missing education were looked at on a weekly basis as part of multi-agency 'Missing Monday' discussions, an approach that produced positive results and was seen as best practice by the Department for Education (DfE). In addition, the role of the Virtual Head

was being expanded to include children in need and ensure that the most vulnerable children were identified.

- Concern was expressed about the 60% of pupils who were in the middle of the attainment scale and were in danger of going under the radar, particularly at the time of transition from first to middle school. In response, the Panel was reminded that schools would know their children as individuals and were carrying out a range of observations so that these children would be identified.
- The School Improvement Team was bringing together groups of small schools to look at approaches to curriculum development and to develop collaborative networks to avoid isolation.
- A question was asked about the current situation in relation to school attendance and Covid and Members were told that WCF guidance was in line with guidance published by the DfE. The expectation was that, as with any other illness, if a child was unwell they should not attend school. Families may be testing regularly but this was no longer enforceable as Covid regulations had changed. In response to a further question about what advice would be given when a child tested positive but was not unwell, the Panel was reminded that there was no longer an expectation that children were testing regularly. Testing was only advised if a child was symptomatic (although the situation was different for staff).
- Members were informed that the reasons that some children were not returning to school were not simple and there was a need for further work in order to fully understand the situation. The report referred to WCF's involvement in an attendance project that had recently been started by Wyre Forest Secondary Schools looking at sector-led local activity to address absence. Very early findings suggested that what may seem initially to be the reason for absence was not necessarily the underlying reason. It was suggested that children may be reflecting anxiety within the home and there may be a need for further work with families.
- It was confirmed that DfE guidance would advise a child who had tested positive but did not feel ill to stay at home until they tested negative. However, it was pointed out that those who were not testing would not know they were Covid-positive, if they were not experiencing symptoms. It was confirmed that the level of enforcement of the DfE guidance may differ from school to school. It was suggested that the level of testing would change when test kits were no longer available free of charge.
- The autumn term of 2021 had seen an increase in absence levels in secondary schools which had reduced as the vaccination programme reached secondary pupils. Rates had increased again at the end of January as the Omicron variant had spread. Staffing absence had now started to stabilise again. In the primary sector, there had been a greater impact after Christmas. The vaccination programme for younger children was due to commence shortly and would be done through vaccination sites rather than in schools. WCF was working closely with health colleagues to ensure the programme was as child-centred as possible with schools used as a conduit to support arrangements. The greatest impact of covid-related absence had been seen in small schools.

- It was confirmed that the School Improvement Team had supported all maintained schools in dealing with absence related issues. In addition, weekly meetings had been held with phase representatives across all schools with the School Improvement Team proactively brokering additional support where needed.
- It was agreed that the Panel would be provided with up-to-date data on absence levels of pupils and school staff in Worcestershire schools. As a caveat, Members were reminded that not all schools had returned their data and the figures provided should be viewed with that in mind.
- It was suggested that, even though the country was now looking to live with Covid, there was no guarantee that new variants would not emerge and cause further disruption to schools. With reference to retaining the learning from previous disruption, the Panel was told that schools had been encouraged to identify 'Covid keeps', ie areas of practice that they would wish to retain such as better communication with parents, changes to homework policies and changes in expectations when a child was not in school. There had been a huge amount of learning gained from the experiences of the last two years and the key was to maintain quality assurance of the provision.
- It was confirmed that the aim was to return to the best levels of attendance possible, although there would be challenges and bumps along the road in reaching this point.
- In response to a question about why there was a difference in Ofsted judgements in relation to maintained and academy schools in the County, it was confirmed that, if a school was judged to be 'inadequate' by Ofsted, it would then be subject to an academisation order. The figures given in the agenda report were a reflection of the pause in Ofsted inspections due to the pandemic. Schools had become academies but had not yet received a re-inspection to allow them to demonstrate improvement. It was confirmed that once a school became an academy, it could not return to being LA maintained. There was currently a four-term delay in the Ofsted inspection programme.
- It was confirmed that the School Improvement Team would be discussing with schools how they were using their 'Covid keeps' as they moved forward and how they were quality assuring these to ensure they remained fit for purpose. This would not be a particular focus for Ofsted but would be covered during discussions on curriculum development and attendance.
- The Assistant Director confirmed that schools used the full range of remote learning techniques when pupils were unable to attend, including methods other than online learning. The Director of Children's Services added that the main aim was to get all children back in school not only for the educational benefits but also for reasons of safeguarding and social development.
- With reference to the National Tutoring Programme, the Assistant Director suggested that schools in Worcestershire remained cautious and had questions about whether it was fit for purpose. Instead, some schools had used in-house tutors for their own school-led programmes.

Apprenticeships

- All sectors offering apprenticeships had recovered well. Specifically, engineering and manufacturing had recovered strongly, construction had remained strong throughout and ICT was showing positive signs. The only area requiring further work was health and care with the recruitment of young people into this sector proving challenging. Members were reminded that providing day release as part of an apprenticeship was often difficult for care providers. Also, care needs were often in rural areas and the cost of transport was a challenge for many young people. The Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) was looking at how it could support young people with their transport costs.
- It was confirmed that the LEP and the County Council were very committed to apprenticeships and were looking to support local businesses who may wish to tailor apprenticeship standards to their own circumstances. However, although the number of higher apprenticeships had grown exponentially in recent years, there were challenges nationally with standards which were often set by larger companies proving difficult in the context of a smaller company.
- The Chief Executive of WLEP reminded Panel Members that the LEP was working hard to bring employers together and to develop a common understanding across different sectors. He went on to suggest that the experience of the pandemic had had an effect on how some young people viewed university and may result in them being more open to considering different routes into their chosen career.
- With reference to supporting this work, the Chairman suggested that Councillors were very well-placed to promote apprenticeships within their local communities.
- Although it was always the end game for young people to stay in employment with a company after finishing an apprenticeship, data on how many people were successful in this was not currently collected. It was pointed out that, even if a young person was not kept on after an apprenticeship, they would still have benefitted from work experience and training making them more attractive to other employers.
- It was agreed that data on the number of County Council apprenticeships that had led to permanent employment with the Council would be requested.
- It was confirmed that young people could access grants to support travel costs through the district councils, and there was a need for this support to be more widely known about. Although the suggestion that those looking to work in the health and care sector could be supported to use bicycles for travel (whether electric or standard bicycles), this may not be appropriate in very rural areas.
- In response to a question about whether a change in attitude was being seen in relation to higher apprenticeships and university, it was suggested that this was still a challenge, with parents often wanting their child to attend university. The LEP and the County Council would continue to work to change hearts and minds and encourage young people to take the best route for them as an individual.
- It was noted that the figures for recruitment to apprenticeships given in the agenda report were very positive with the first quarter of 2021/22 showing apprenticeship starts as being 52% up on the previous year. With reference to the promotion of apprenticeships, the Panel was

reminded that this was constant work as the 'product' was being sold to a different cohort each year. It was important to have successful role models such as young people who had recently completed apprenticeships. The strong message from Government was that young people should be given a range of options to support their career progression.

- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families asked about the role of the Council as corporate parent and whether care leavers were being encouraged to join the 'family firm' via apprenticeships. The Director of Children's Services confirmed that this had worked in some cases but there remained a gap as there was a cohort of care leavers who were hard to reach and were often disengaged from education and from society. Employers would have to go above and beyond in order to engage them. The best people to do this would be the County Council and WCF and a concerted effort was needed to make this happen. The Chairman agreed that the County Council should be at the forefront of this work. It was confirmed that the forthcoming Education and Skills Strategy would have a section dedicated to care leavers.

525 Performance and In-Year Budget Monitoring

The Panel was updated on performance and financial information for services relating to Children and Families.

Performance Information

The Director of Children's Services/Chief Executive of Worcestershire Children First briefed the Panel on the headlines from performance data for Q3 2021/22. The following main points were made:

- The rise in the number of referrals to the Family Front Door was consistent with data from previous years. However, the rate of conversion of referrals to social worker assessments was low meaning that the Family Front Door was receiving contacts that it did not need to. Officers were looking at the figures to find out why this was the case. Possible reasons included:
 - Professionals needed more support to use the Family Front Door properly. It was not clear why they were not making greater use of early help services.
 - Professionals were themselves very busy and did not have time to direct to the correct channels.
 - Levels of professional anxiety were high given recent high-profile cases in the press.
- It was suggested that all three reasons were in play with the end result that the Family Front Door was overloaded. Work had been commissioned through the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership to look at the availability and effectiveness of early help. Audit work was also underway to look at cases where a referral had resulted in signposting to universal or early help services.

- The number of social work assessments had dropped. It was essential to address the current backlog in writing up assessments and a plan was in place to address this by the end of March.
- This year had seen 166 new children becoming looked after, a figure that was consistent with previous years. In terms of new accommodations, Worcestershire was second lowest in the region, a result of the work of the Supporting Families First team. Members were informed that a recent report by the County Council Network on The Future of Children's Social Care had showcased WCF's care prevention work as good practice.
- The number of Looked After Children per 10,000 under 18s was 75, a figure at the lower end when compared to regional authorities. However, Members were reassured that social workers would always act when a child needed to come into care.
- The rate of 35 children on Child Protection Plans per 10,000 under 18s was in line with national and statistical neighbours.
- In terms of staffing, there were very positive levels of stability and permanency. WCF strived to be an employer of choice. Pay rates were good but other issues were also important such as the stability of the management structure.
- Caseloads had reduced in the locality teams (child protection) but were higher for those working in the Family Front Door and through care. WCF would continue to monitor this situation closely.

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

- It was confirmed that data on the number of Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) annual reviews completed within 12 weeks was not included in the Performance Information. The Director of Children's Services agreed to consider adding this KPI for future Panel discussions. She went on to confirm that the timescale for reviews was a challenge. Staffing had been inconsistent and had recently been increased, and it was hoped that all reviews would be completed before the end of the school year. It was pointed out that the review timetable was an issue for authorities nationally. The team was also changing the process behind the development of EHCPs, improving the flow of information to support a better process. Recruitment to a Director post was taking place this month.
- It was confirmed that an annual review of an EHCP would not necessarily change all elements of the Plan. The team was keen to develop a less process driven, more relationship driven practice. However, it was not possible to change working practices at the same time as addressing the backlog. The Director of Children's Service was confident in the improvement plan that had been developed.
- With reference to the Family Front Door, it was confirmed that case audits were undertaken and the findings shared with colleagues from the police and health.
- With reference to children with an EHCP who were Electively Home Educated, a question was asked about whether 'elective' was the correct term when many families felt they had no choice but to remove

their child from the school environment. Members were informed that this was a continuing difficulty and something that had been raised as a national concern. It was confirmed that, if a school notified WCF that a child was moving to be Electively Home Educated, officers would have a conversation with the family to ensure that there was no pressure from the school for the child to be removed.

In-Year Budget Monitoring

The Director of Resources made the following main points:

- The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) had a forecast deficit of £12m for the end of 2021/22. Discussions with the Department for Education continued with a meeting planned for later this month to consider what the DfE could do to help. The DSG had increased but still did not cover expenditure. Legislation which allowed the deficit to sit on the County Council's balance sheet would expire at the end of 2022/23. WCF was also working with the County Council Network and the Society of County Treasurers to take this forward.
- WCF's Forecast Outturn at Q3 2021/22 showed an in-year deficit of £0.45m. It was anticipated that the final figure would be around break even.
- The agenda papers included a chart showing a comparison with other local authorities. It was confirmed that WCF and the County Council were working well together.
- The pay award had now been agreed and would be paid to staff this month.

526 Work Programme

The Panel reviewed its current work programme and the following was noted:

- The Future of Youth Work would be considered by the Panel in July and would be discussed at Cabinet later that month.
- It was suggested that qualitative data in relation to educational attainment could be considered by the Panel in September. The Chairman would raise this suggestion with the Director of Children's Services.

The meeting ended at 12.01 pm

Chairman