

Minutes of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny

Panel

County Hall, Worcester

Thursday, 3 November 2022, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Steve Mackay (Chairman), Cllr David Chambers (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Dan Boatright, Cllr Kyle Daisley, Cllr Nathan Desmond, Cllr Matt Jenkins,
Cllr Jo Monk, Cllr Tony Muir and Mr M Hughes

Also attended:

Cllr Tracey Onslow, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education

Liz Altay, Interim Director of Public Health
Emma Brittain, Director of Early Help, Children in Need and Family Front Door,
Worcestershire Children First
Daniel Gray, Group Manager, Quality Assurance and Performance,
Worcestershire Children First
Paul Kinsella, Senior Public Health Practitioner
Tim Rice, Head of Service for Safer Communities, Public Health
Maria White, Assistant Director, Permanency, Care Proceedings, Fostering
and Adoption, Worcestershire Children First
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 20 September 2022 (previously circulated).

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

549 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Councillor David Ross, Tim Reid (Church Representative), Councillor Andy Roberts (Cabinet Member with Responsibility

for Children and Families), Councillor Karen May (Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Well-being) and Tina Russell (Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive, Worcestershire Children First).

550 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

551 Public Participation

None.

552 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 September 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

553 Domestic Abuse and Children

The Panel had requested an update on developments relating to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and the specific support offered to children and families.

By way of introduction, the Head of Safer Communities (Public Health) made the following main points:

- The Panel was reminded that the Public Health Team had strategic oversight of community safety including domestic abuse and the commissioning of relevant services.
- The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 set out a range of requirements and responsibilities and placed some new duties on upper tier local authorities, with a focus on providing safe accommodation and support services for victims of domestic abuse and their families.
- The Act required the setting up of a multi-agency Domestic Abuse Partnership Board (DAPB) to oversee the responsibilities, including developing a Needs Assessment and an associated Domestic Abuse Strategy. The Strategy had been consulted on and was now in place alongside an action plan. The DAPB was a subgroup of the Worcestershire Safer Communities Board which has strategic oversight of community safety across the County.
- Other activity as part of the action plan included the development of a service directory and working with businesses to ensure they had access to information on how to support staff who may disclose domestic abuse.
- The Domestic Abuse Grant was an annual rolling Government grant which provided funding to the County Council and the District Councils.
- West Mercia Women's Aid (WMWA) provided a spectrum of services as part of the Domestic Abuse Advice and Support Service contract.
- Members were told about the Sanctuary approach which allowed victims/survivors and their children to stay in their own homes, subject to a risk assessment, by adding security measures and a package of

support. This would initially operate as a pilot funded by Public Health with a view to commissioning a service to deliver the model across Worcestershire in a consistent manner.

- Training for staff on approaches to domestic abuse was provided regularly and was also open to Councillors.
- In line with the requirements of the Act, the County Council had partnered with Herefordshire Council to jointly commission a Lived Experience Advisory Project.
- Worcestershire Children First (WCF) Family Front Door received information on incidents of domestic abuse from West Mercia Police. The Police also shared information with the WCF Early Help Family Support Service.
- Work also included data analysis of referrals to look at the impact on children and young people. WCF had developed open working relationships with partners, and were open to challenge and suggestions for improvement, demonstrating a maturity of cooperation.
- Partnership with West Mercia Police had successfully delivered Operation Encompass to schools in Worcestershire for some years and a pilot project in Early Years settings was now being developed.

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

- In response to a question about whether there were enough refuges in the County, Members were told that as a result of the Needs Assessment partners were looking at an additional 29 units of accommodation, although not all of this would be in the form of refuges. Women's Aid felt that dispersed safe accommodation was more appropriate, although a refuge place might be needed in the short term. This was a developing approach and would be worked through together with the Sanctuary approach. The Sanctuary approach was a risk-based approach which had been used successfully in cases of low and medium risk.
- It was confirmed that the Domestic Abuse Grant included a total of £194,000 pa for Worcestershire District Councils and this was split reasonably equally across the six councils. The Grant was provided by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to fund very specific provision in the Domestic Abuse Act, in relation to supporting individuals in safe accommodation. It was suggested that the amount was sufficient, in terms of what the money could be used for, although there were questions about the funding of other related areas of work.
- The additional 29 accommodation units would be a combination of small houses and flats. There was a long list of requirements for this accommodation and the District Councils were working with Housing Associations on behalf of the County Council. Private accommodation would not be used at this stage.
- It was confirmed that the data table on page 1 of the agenda report referred to specific single isolated incidents which may have taken place at the same house or involve the same individuals. It was agreed that future reports would include figures for the number of families or same

home addresses where incidents had taken place in order to clarify where there had been multiple incidents at the same address.

- Bed and breakfast accommodation would only be considered a safe place in an emergency and could not be classified as safe accommodation under the Act.
- It was confirmed that referrals to WMWA that did not enter the service or require support would be signposted to other services. Members were told that WMWA was very committed to ensuring appropriate support even if this was outside of commissioned activity.
- The Panel was informed that prevention work could be challenging as it involved reaching out to potential perpetrators. The County Council was engaged with the White Ribbon campaign and Members were reminded that pledges to the campaign could be made online. Other activity included a conference for local businesses to encourage them to look at their staff policies and take responsibility in this area. It was suggested that the strategy could not prevent domestic abuse but could support the education of children and young people and increase awareness of healthy relationships. Early help partnership work looked at the prevention of conflict as part of the early identification of issues and health visitors were also involved. Prevention work was undertaken through all services.
- In response to a question about the number of male victims and, in particular, those with learning disabilities or mental health problems, the Panel was informed that the service was in the process of commissioning a lived experience advisory group to work with 'hard to reach' groups especially those with protected characteristics, so that a broader picture of domestic abuse could be understood.
- It was confirmed that WCF delivered training and support direct to schools. Operation Encompass had been operating since 2018 and was well embedded in the school environment. The Domestic Abuse Act was very clear that, even if the abuse was between adults, children in the family were victims too.
- With reference to audits of performance at the Family Front Door, between January and September 2022 the number of cases receiving managerial oversight within 24 hours had improved from 60% to 95%.
- It was agreed that details of domestic abuse training opportunities would be circulated to all Members.

The Chairman thanked the officers for attending and welcomed the progress that had been made. It was agreed that the Panel would receive a further update in due course.

554 Worcestershire Children First Quality Assurance

The Panel received an update on Worcestershire Children First's Social Care and Safeguarding Quality Assurance Framework. By way of introduction, the Group Manager Safeguarding Quality Assurance & Principal Social Worker made the following main points:

- The Quality Assurance Framework covered three areas:
 1. Key Performance Indicators

2. Feedback from Children, Young People and Families
 3. Audit activity
- The aim was to build quality assurance into normal business practice and to evidence improvements and where the service made a difference for children. The strength of WCF's quality assurance framework had been recognised by Ofsted following a focused inspection visit to Children's Social Care in 2021 and the service was proud that improvement had been recognised via independent verification.
 - Other areas covered by the framework were Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Fostering. Further work was needed in these areas but improvements were starting to be seen. Improvements in SEND had recently been independently validated by the Department for Education/NHS England and officers had been asked to present to the Council for Disabled Children's Regional Conference. Officers understood that concerns remained but were proud of the achievements seen so far.
 - Complaints were seen as an opportunity to learn and dedicated staff were identified to undertake investigations with the aim of ensuring that families felt heard.
 - Staff understood the importance of 'closing the learning loop' and would strive to celebrate successes but learn when things did not go as well, by acknowledging what had happened and acting to improve.
 - The series of appendices to the agenda report aimed to show the volume and depth of quality assurance work and to highlight that this was a priority.

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

- It was noted that feedback on SEND for Q2 2022/23 indicated that, although only 50% of people felt it was easy to contact a Case Worker, support was good once contact had been made. The Panel was reminded that WCF had invested in staffing and training and had introduced a communication framework to drive up performance and demonstrate what good looked like. This would be a focus for the next quarter.
- With reference to workforce development, officers were congratulated on Worcestershire being ranked 1st in the region and 12th nationally in a survey of social workers commissioned by the Local Government Association. A question was asked about how this had been achieved and whether pay was a major factor. The Group Manager confirmed that the service was proud of this assessment as it had been achieved via an independent survey. It was confirmed that social workers were not paid over and above comparable rates in other authorities. Pay rates were in the upper quartile but not at the top. When asked, social workers did not reference pay as a main reason for staying in a job. Instead, consistent and stable management, good continuous professional development/training and management structure were stated as key drivers for staff retention.

- With reference to management oversight of SEND services, it was confirmed that this had been a challenge and a new template was being introduced to support this. As an area of concern, new measures had been put in place which would be followed by a targeted audit to see if these were working and, if not, why not.
- The Panel was informed that, although both internal and external compliments were captured and celebrated, only external compliments were recorded in the statistics.
- In introducing the Education, Health and Care Plan Audit Procedure, staff had received support and training and compliance was good. A Member of the Panel noted that the quality assurance framework had been highlighted as a strong area of practice by Ofsted and wished to record his thanks to everyone involved in this good work.
- It was important that all key partners were on board with the approach to Quality Assurance and service improvement. Feedback was given directly via the SEND Improvement Board, allowing all partners to take ownership.
- Concern was expressed that the number of case file audits graded as 'requires improvement' was quite high. The Panel was informed that a grading of 'requires improvement' meant that a case file had achieved the required baseline but showed the need for more good practice to be demonstrated. Members were informed that if only one of the areas considered as part of the case file audit was graded as 'requires improvement', then that would be the overall judgement, even if all other areas were graded as 'good'. The service was ambitious and set a high bar as it wanted to demonstrate good practice and be judged as good.
- The Chairman suggested that receiving complaints offered the service a clear learning opportunity. Figures given in the agenda report showed that the highest number of complaints had related to communication and he asked how this was being resolved. In response, it was pointed out that the majority of complaints relating to communication were in relation to the two largest teams, namely Through Care and Safeguarding and, when outcomes were considered, the percentage upheld was relatively low. It was noted that these teams worked in a complex area of practice, often involving court proceedings. Following up conversations in writing could be helpful in clarifying messages.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked the officers for attending and reiterated the Panel's congratulations on Ofsted's positive comments in relation to the quality assurance framework.

555 Performance Monitoring

The Panel received an update on performance information relating to Education and SEND. By way of introduction, the Director of Early Help, Children in Need and the Family Front Door made the following main points:

- Although the Director of Education and Early Help and the Director of All Age Disability had been unable to attend, where relevant they would provide answers to questions following the meeting.

- Following a request at a previous Panel meeting, schools' performance in relation to Ofsted inspections was now shown separately for academies and maintained schools.
- Levels of school attendance continued to improve following the Covid pandemic.
- The number of children missing education had increased significantly due to better reporting mechanisms giving a more accurate picture.
- The large increase in the number of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) was typical of the September picture. This figure would decline once post-school destinations for 16-year-olds were confirmed.

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

- A Member requested more detail be provided on the new reporting system for children missing education to further explain the increase.
- It was suggested that levels of school attendance were still quite low and further details were requested on what was being done to improve the situation.
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education pointed out that, in relation to young people who were NEET, the figures for looked after children were concerning. Although Worcestershire's figures were good in relation to national data, they were still not good enough.
- She went on to note that for young people who were looked after, remaining in their placement for a longer period post-16 was a real advantage in determining whether or not they would become NEET.
- It was noted that the number of children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) had increased in Q2. A Member of the Panel requested details on the analysis of why this was the case.
- The continued unavailability of the Trust's electronic patient record system (Carenotes) was noted. Members were concerned about the impact this might have on the Council's ability to meet statutory deadlines and requested further information on the situation, including when the system might be available again and how many EHCPs had been effected. The Cabinet Member confirmed that this issue had been raised with the Trust.
- In relation to NEETs, further information was requested on whether the fall in numbers from Q1 to Q2 was usual and whether the figure was expected to rise throughout the year.
- The Cabinet Member outlined actions taken to increase the capacity of Educational Psychologists (EPs). Although there was a shortage of EPs nationally, junior EPs were being recruited to undertake preparatory work, allowing more senior colleagues to take cases forward.
- In relation to children missing education, it was confirmed that new statutory guidance would come into effect from September 2023.

It was agreed that the Chairman would write to the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education to confirm the Panel's concerns about the lack of availability of Carenotes and the impact of this on Worcestershire Children

First's ability to make decisions within statutory timescales and the subsequent delays for children and young people and their families.

556 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Accelerated Progress Plan Update

The Panel received an update following the Department for Education (DfE)/NHS England (NHSE) review of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Accelerated Progress Plan that had taken place in September 2022. Although the Director of All Age Disability was unable to attend, where relevant, answers to questions would be provided following the meeting.

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

- A Member who was new to the Panel requested further information on the context of the review including details of the remaining journey and where the Council was on the trajectory of improvement. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education reminded the Panel that detailed action plans lay behind each area and it was agreed that these would be shared with the Panel.
- The Cabinet Member informed the Panel that the comments received from the DfE following the review had highlighted improved communication with parents.
- Figures were requested on the lack of suitable specialist provision, including what provision was currently available and what additional provision was needed.
- With reference to the effectiveness of leaders and managers, further information was requested on what had been done to secure improvement.

In conclusion, Members asked for the Panel's thanks to be passed on to the Director of All Age Disability and her team for the service improvement demonstrated.

557 Work Programme

The Panel reviewed its work programme and it was agreed that Home to School Transport would be added to the work programme for March 2023.

In addition, Members were encouraged to promote and support the work of the Youth Cabinet where possible.

The meeting ended at 12.15 pm

Chairman

