

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

### **Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

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

**Tuesday, 20 September 2022, 2.00 pm**

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#### **Present:**

Cllr Steve Mackay (Chairman), Cllr David Chambers (Vice Chairman),  
Cllr Dan Boatright, Cllr Nathan Desmond, Cllr Matt Jenkins and Cllr David Ross

#### **Also attended:**

Cllr Tracey Onslow, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education  
Jane Stanley, Healthwatch Worcestershire

Tina Russell, Director of Children's Services / Chief Executive, Worcestershire  
Children First

Phil Rook, Director of Resources, Worcestershire Children First

Kevin Bryan, Group Manager Supporting Families First

Becki Rowlands, Clinical Lead Supporting Families First

Mark Stebbings, Outreach Support Worker Supporting Families First

Samantha Morris, Overview and Scrutiny Manager

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 7 July 2022 (previously circulated).

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

#### **542 Apologies and Welcome**

Apologies were received from Councillors Kyle Daisley, Jo Monk and Tony Muir, Parent Governor, Mark Hughes, Church Representative Tim Reid and the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Health and Wellbeing Karen May.

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

None.

#### **544 Public Participation**

None.

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

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 7 July 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **546 Supporting Families First Update**

The Panel received a report about the Supporting Families First Service (SFF). The Director of Children's Services/Chief Executive of Worcestershire Children First introduced the SFF Team who were in attendance to provide members with further information on any aspect of the service.

The Director of Children's Services introduced the report and highlighted the following main points:

- The SFF had first been developed in January 2020 as a multidisciplinary service to families on the 'edge of care'. The first year had proved successful with positive feedback received and sustained positive changes being achieved. It was decided therefore that the service would be developed in its second year to adopt the learning and effectiveness of the 'Edge of Care' model into prevention of escalating risk and need for child protection for the Children in Need (CIN) Cohort. Following a pilot, this model of intervention was fully implemented in September 2021.
- The SFF Service continued operating throughout the pandemic, with an increase in both numbers and the complexity of cases being identified.
- Looking at the data for March 2022, a positive intervention outcome rate of 92% had been achieved, with 8% becoming looked after or being escalated to child protection.
- Attention was drawn to the effective and sustainable outcomes achieved with the first year's cohort, whereby 25 months on from the original outcome, 35 of the original 51 children remained closed to social care, which represented a 69% sustained success rate.
- The use of the Webstar enabled children and parents to self-assess the impact of the SFF Service on key aspects of their own lives. The Webstar was usually completed at the start and the end of an intervention, and most families identified a range of positive outcomes.
- The SFF team had been working with the 'Virtual Headteacher' looking at the education needs and experiences of CIN and those on the 'edge of care' following the pandemic and the impacts upon the child at home and their attendance at school. The Virtual Headteacher was seeking to expand their links with schools to be able to offer some support for these children.

Members praised the work of the SFF team for the positive difference they were making to the lives of children and families. Members were given the opportunity to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- Further detail on the Webstar was requested, and it was explained that it was an outcome-based method being used to enable children and parents to self-report in relation to 8 different domains, including their emotional health, happiness, and safety. The Director of Children's Services and the Group Manager both confirmed they were very pleased with the outcome scores, as their aim was always to try and prevent an escalation of a situation.
- It was noted that all referrals came through the Family Front Door and could be received from any source including schools, the Police, health services and families themselves. The Group Manager advised that a family was then referred to one of the 3 locality teams, depending on where they lived. The team would work with the family for an initial period of 16 weeks. With the various specialist teams all based within each of the locality areas, this enabled close links to be maintained which was beneficial on many levels.
- A question was raised regarding the significant increase in referrals in quarter 4 of 2021/22. It was explained that there was a lot of pressure on families from a range of sources. When social workers carried out an assessment of a family, there were prescribed risk factors that would be checked. The prevalence of the 'toxic trio' ie domestic abuse, mental ill-health, and substance abuse, had gradually risen following the Covid-19 pandemic. It was highlighted that a multi-disciplinary approach was taken with the Safeguarding team working alongside the social workers with these families.
- In response to a question regarding numbers of risk factors identified during assessments, the Group Manager explained that it was rare to have just one risk factor present. It could be the case that one factor was mentioned initially, but as the assessment took place, further risk factors were revealed. The Director of Children's Services provided some detailed figures for 2021/22 with parental domestic abuse being the risk most frequently identified in 32% of assessments.
- In response to a query regarding socio-economic backgrounds, the Group Manager advised that referrals were received from all different socio-economic groups. The Panel was informed that whilst parents were asked about accessibility to training and employment, no data was kept on their employment status.
- The Director of Children's Services outlined the difficulties recruiting to certain key roles, including Advanced Social Work Practitioner (ASWP) and Clinical Lead. With the increased demand for services, the recruitment of a new ASWP in each locality, would result in a total of 9 ASWP's across the County. The scope of a newly developed role of Autism Parenting Worker was currently being re-considered, before being recruited to.
- The Outreach Support worker explained that whilst every case was different, the key approach to working with teenagers was to be able to build a trusting relationship. Whilst there were sometimes anti-social behavioural issues, the aim was to prevent matters from deteriorating

further. The Panel was assured that relations with the local police were very helpful and supportive.

- In response to a Member question about how it was decided when it was timely to withdraw SFF support. It was explained that this would usually happen as a result of a combination of factors including improved relationships in the family unit and self-assessments. The Clinical Lead explained that there was never the expectation to solve all a family's problems with the SFF work, rather to support families to be able to access other services, such as mental health or youth support for themselves as and when needed. The Group Manager highlighted that with CIN Plans there were meetings for 6 – 8 weeks, where areas for development were recorded and progress was charted. As a result of this process families would often come to the realisation themselves when they no longer required SFF support.
- The Director of Children's Services praised the work and commitment of the SFF team, which involved working with families in intense or crisis situations where parents would often issue demands about what they wanted to happen. This required careful handling by skilled team members who worked with the family and provided calm support and understanding to enable them to learn to cope with a crisis situation. The Outreach Support Worker explained that the team worked intensively to create some stability and prevent situations where a child was taken into care, wherever possible.

## **547 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 briefed the Panel on highlights of the performance data for Quarter 1 (April to June 2022). The following main points were made:

- Contacts at the Family Front Door (FFD) had established a consistent pattern to the previous 3 quarters, with an average of 3,500 per quarter. Whilst the number of contacts converting to a social work assessment had slightly reduced, concerns for children's welfare remained high, with important information being received which was relevant to triangulate with other known factors. The Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership had agreed to help fund the increased staff capacity required to effectively manage this extra demand.
- The effectiveness of permanency planning was demonstrated by the care figures which showed that 31% of children in care had achieved permanence out of care in less than 12 months and 48% in less than 2 years, despite the impact of Covid.
- There was currently a focused recruitment drive for foster carers. The numbers of kinship carers recruited had increased, which was very

positive, with placement breakdown being much less frequent in such cases.

- Management capacity of the Care leavers Team had been increased which would bolster and stabilise the service following a period of instability.
- Child protection cases were rising and were now in line with the England average. The cases were also of an increasingly complex nature.
- The Panel was informed of the challenges of Social Worker recruitment. The permanency in Team Manager roles was good which provided a supportive environment for social workers in the teams. The financial draw of agency work continued to be a difficult challenge to compete with.

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

- A Member highlighted that the school attendance figures, particularly at secondary level, were not yet rising following the pandemic. The Director of Children's Services highlighted that this was a national problem and that local authorities now had new responsibilities in this area. Efforts were ongoing to seek improvement in this area.
- With reference to a query regarding the length of placements in foster care, the Director of Children's Services explained that some could be short term if a child was going through care proceedings, though most would be longer term. In order to prevent breakdowns in foster care placements, a 'Buddy Carer' initiative had been developed and was actively being recruited to, this would enable foster carers to have a regular break, whilst continuity was maintained for the child with them being cared for by their regular 'Buddy Carer'.
- With regard to numbers of agency workers currently used, the Director of Children's Services advised that this currently stood at 35. It was noted that there was a regional agreement in place with 14 local authorities, setting an agreed cap on agency payments. As referred to earlier, the significant pay differential involved, at roughly three times higher, proved to be a huge ongoing challenge.
- Panel members wished to have an opportunity outside of the meeting to 'brainstorm' and share any ideas for boosting foster carer recruitment. The Director of Children's Services agreed to ensure that arrangements were made by the relevant Head of Service for this to take place.

#### 2022/23 Forecast Outturn for Period 4

The Director of Resources highlighted the following points:

- Over half of the current budget of £136m was 'demand led' relating to Placements and Home to School Transport. In terms of placements, the risk of an overspend could be mitigated by a £1.9m risk reserve, but at the end of period 4 there was a forecast £1.8m overspend, compared to £1m at the same stage last year. With the rising market costs and with demand for placements increasing there were concerns that the budget

would be exceeded. The situation was being carefully monitored. The factors impacting demand on the Home to School Transport budget were highlighted, and the Director explained that these costs would be mitigated this year by a one off Covid payment and the use of a risk reserve.

- The Director advised that the Council had budgeted for a 1.25% pay award, whereas the Government had recently announced a national pay award offer of 4.6%. If agreed, this would need to be funded from reserves this year and built into the budget for 2023/24. The additional pressure on WCF from this was around £1m.
- The Director reported that the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) position was a forecast year end overspend of £4.1m, with a cumulative deficit of £15.4m at the end of 2022/23. The Panel was reminded that the DfE statutory override would come to an end in 2022/23 and at present the Department was carrying out a survey to identify the financial impact this would have on local authorities. Early indications of the DSG budget for 2023/24 was that it would be increased by about 5%, but the Director advised this would not be sufficient to keep up with the demand.
- The Council was one of 55 local authorities with a significant deficit which were taking part in the Government's Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme. This programme was being supported by Newton Europe and CIPFA and was seeking to understand the reasons behind the SEND differentials. The intelligence gained would be considered towards the development of a green paper which would be looking to offer a sustainable solution for local authorities. In the meantime, the Director advised that he had asked the DfE what would happen at the end of the 2022/23 financial year, as the above work was not expected to report back until later in 2023.

A Member commented that the Council's Audit and Governance Committee had also been looking at the impact of what would happen to local authorities across the country when the statutory override was ended in March 2023. It was suggested that this was a false accounting situation, because whilst the money had come off the balance sheet, it would have to go back on at some point. It was a statutory duty that had to be carried out, but at this stage it was not clear how matters would be resolved satisfactorily. The Director gave an indication of likely levels of predicted total deficit should the situation continue, with some local authorities then finding themselves at risk of being issued with a Section 114 notice. The CMR commented that there was a balance to be struck and that it was important that the Council was able to get some financial help to deal with this situation, as the Council's deficit was very serious, despite not being at the highest level of deficit faced by some other local authorities.

## 548 Work Programme

The Panel reviewed its work programme and it was agreed that:

- The 'School Nurse Service and Well Being Practitioners' would be scheduled for January 2023 meeting.

- Following the inspection of SEND *services\** taking place this week, an update on the findings would be requested (*\*confirmed as the DfE/NHS 6-month Inspection of the SEND Accelerated Action Plan*).

The meeting ended at 3.40 pm

Chairman .....