

Minutes of the Children and Families

Overview and Scrutiny Panel

County Hall, Worcester

Tuesday, 17 January 2023, 2.00 pm

Present:

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

Also attended:

Cllr Andy Roberts, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families

Cllr Tracey Onslow, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Education

Cllr Karen May, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Health and Wellbeing
Sally-Anne Osborne, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust

Louise Langston, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust

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

Phil Rook, Director of Resources, Worcestershire Children First

Michael Hudson, Chief Financial Officer

Liz Altay, Interim Director of Public Health

Claire Mitchell, Senior Public Health Practitioner

Daniel Gray, Group Manager, Quality Assurance and Performance,
Worcestershire Children First

Helen Stanley, Social Worker Academy Manager

Teresa Bufton, Team Manager, Family Front Door and Assessments,
Worcestershire Children 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 3 November 2022 (previously circulated).

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

558 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Councillors David Ross, Nathan Desmond and Jo Monk, from Mark Hughes (Parent Governor representative) and Tim Reid (Church Representative).

559 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

560 Public Participation

There was one public participant, Mr Trevor Knight. Mr Knight asked questions in relation to the Home to School Transport Budget and the Work Programme.

The Chairman thanked Mr Knight for his questions and advised that he would receive a written response.

561 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 3 November 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

562 Starting Well Partnership - School Health Nursing Service

The Panel had requested an update on the school health nursing service which is part of the Starting Well Partnership (SWP). The Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing highlighted that the SWP, which was funded by Public Health, and led by the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care Trust (HWHCT), had been in place since April 2020 and brought together professionals from six different service areas. The Interim Public Health Director (IPHD) added that these services were part of the Council's statutory public health duties provided for children and young people in the county. With the SWP starting in 2020, the first couple of years had been severely disrupted as a result of the pandemic.

The Clinical Services Manager (CSM) provided an overview of the report including the background to the SWP, and highlighted the following key issues:

- The extent and range of the current school nursing health offer. Included in this offer was ChatHealth, a confidential, anonymous text service for young people to be able to access school health nurses (SHN's) directly for advice and support. This service had seen a significant increase in use during the pandemic.
- There was also a new Wellbeing, Resilience and Positivity Programme (WRAPP) service which had just been launched providing one to one

support for those with poor emotional wellbeing or behavioural issues. The WRAPP service was accessed via referrals from schools, families, or young people and offered a 6-week programme of low-level support.

- The current capacity of SHN's was impacted by the significant increases in safeguarding work, which the team prioritised.
- The Panel was informed that pre Covid-19, secondary schools were offered 2-3 hours of SHN time per week for a drop-in service incorporating sexual health support and one to one appointments. The use of this service had declined and work was underway with Headteachers and young people as to their preferred means of accessing the service going forward. Initial feedback from young people suggested that they preferred to access to support via a number of different options.
- A new School Screener health needs assessment questionnaire was being rolled-out to schools. Due to staff capacity issues, the schools within the most deprived areas received the questionnaire in September 2022 for Reception, in January 2023 for Year 9 and the spring term 2023 for Year 6. This approach ensured that the core elements of the service were provided in response to the outcomes of the questionnaire. It was highlighted that whilst these services were offered on a universal basis, the response was on an individual basis.
- There was a national shortage of SHN's and a 30% reduction in numbers in the last decade. The pandemic had a significant impact on the health of SHN's. Feedback from those leaving the role cited burn out, increasing safeguarding work and a lack of career progression as key factors influencing their decision. The service was currently operating at 57% capacity and this was having an impact on early intervention work. Managers were working hard to try to retain the current experienced staff, who would have a crucial role going forward.
- Recruitment of new SHN's was also actively ongoing, with some recent success. It was noted that training and mentoring for newly qualified recruits needed to be factored in when they started in their role.

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

- In response to a question about what else could be done locally to address staff shortages, the CMR encouraged all Members to focus on selling Worcestershire in a positive light which might attract people to come and live in the county and work in healthcare services, which would benefit all residents.
- A Member commented on the difficulty of 'selling' the positives of the health service to the general public. The CMR responded with examples of improved partnership working, shared working, preventative screening programmes and improved health outcomes for residents.
- A Member highlighted that Redditch Borough Council were involved in delivering services as part of the SWP and questioned whether other district councils were involved or whether there were plans for them to get involved. In response the IDPH advised that the Trust worked with alternative providers in different localities as part of the contract. The Associate Director explained that the involvement from Redditch

Borough Council was historical and had arisen due to them being the existing providers when the contract had started and they were deemed to be best placed with their community knowledge to carry out the role.

- It was confirmed that the operating time for ChatHealth was 8.30am to 4.30pm. The CSM advised that extending the hours into the evening had been considered, but feedback from other areas that had tried this, found there to be minimal interest. For those contacting the service after hours, a message directed them to other sources of help available at that time. Feedback from the survey with young people would be received on this point, so their views would be made known.
- The Panel was made aware of the ways in which ChatHealth was currently promoted as well as a new initiative to seek ChatHealth Champions from amongst pupils in each school, to promote the service from within school. The CSM agreed to provide data on young people accessing the service and further general information for Members' information.
- The Wellbeing, Resilience and Positivity Programme (WRAPP) Service was a new service, that schools were currently being advised about during their 'annual conversations'. The Panel would be provided with further information about the service.
- In response to a Member question about the background to the relaunch of SWP in 2020, the Panel was advised that prior to 2020 multiple services and contracts existed and following a needs assessment, it was agreed that the services should be integrated into one service with shared outcomes. In addition, during the redesign process, the number of SHN's had reduced and the new offer to schools aimed to maximise reach.
- The purpose of the School Screener health needs questionnaire was to determine if a child needed targeted interventions. Whilst the aim was for this questionnaire to cover all schools at the current time the focus was on schools in deprived areas and high need. Members of the Panel were however reassured that any young person seeking help would always be signposted to an appropriate source of help and support.
- In response to a query as to when the school nurse service might be fully staffed, the CSM advised that it was anticipated that the situation should have improved in 6 months-time. The Senior Public Health Practitioner explained that there were a number of initiatives in place to help with recovery plan and ensuring that needs were met, for instance the innovative use of the school screener. Other measures were also being considered with regard to the safeguarding aspect SHN role. The CSM highlighted that the percentage of a SCH time would reduce when staffing numbers were increased. In the meantime, the capacity of the Integrated Safeguarding Team was being increased to help to reduce the load on the SHN's. It was noted that 7 whole time equivalent (WTE) posts were being recruited to in the next 6 months, with a further 3 due to start in post in the summer.

The Chairman thanked the SWP teams for their ongoing work and wished them success with the recruitment and retention of the school health nurse team.

563 Budget Scrutiny 2023/24

As part of the Budget Scrutiny Process, the Chief Financial Officer (CFO), highlighted the key points from the draft Budget 2023/24 and medium-term financial plan for 2024-27 including:

- The overall net Council Budget for 2023/24 was £400.792m. The Council had received net additional grant funding of £26.3m, £8.4 for core spending areas and £19.5m in recognition of pressures in adult and children's social care.
- The Panel was advised that a funding review was anticipated for 2025/26, as the Department for Education (DfE) considered the responses to the Josh McAllister review and other changes, which would be critical moving forward.
- The Council's budget pressures totalled £67.9m, of which pay and contract inflation were significant factors, as was a large increase in service demand, including £5m relating to children's safeguarding.
- The proposed Council Tax increase for 2023/24 was 4.94%, which would provide a net £14m additional income. With a limited use of reserves, the levels of savings and efficiencies needing to be identified was £22.4m.

In terms of specific budget information relating to children and families, the WCF Director of Resources (DOR) highlighted the key points to note:

- The Panel was advised that the 2023/24 Budget for WCF was £147m gross, of this £111.105m related to the Council's net base budget and the balance towards the overall running costs of WCF. The £32.825m other funding mainly related to specific grants for example the Social Care Grant £15.3m, DSG £6.5m and other specific grants and £3.06m related to non-County Council sales, fees, and charges.
- The main budget pressures related to the 'demand led' placements which were consistent with other upper tier authorities and pressure on home to school transport budgets. It was highlighted that there was a risk that the placements budget for 2023/24 could exceed the budget by £2-3m, although this would be mitigated by the £2m risk reserve and close monitoring during the year, with prompt action taken if required. The DOR advised that this approach had been taken and worked well over the last 3 years.
- The DOR outlined that £13.7m gross investment into Children's Services for 2023/24 (net £10.1m), was largely funded by the additional Social Care Grant (£9.3m). Savings of £3.6m had been identified, which included a reduction of the employer pension fund rate from 18.6% to 17.1% which saved £0.6m, an increased vacancy factor from 2.5% to 6.5% equating to savings of £1.7m and savings proposals of £1.3m required by WCF, which were outlined in Appendix 3 of the 5 January 2023 Cabinet Report.
- In relation to the provisional Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), the Council had been notified that an extra grant of £14m, as part of the additional funding outlined in the Autumn Statement, was to be made available for schools (including academies), this was in addition to the

£406m for the schools' block highlighted in the report. The Panel was informed that the Government had also announced its intention to extend the statutory override for the DSG for the next 3 years to 2025/26. This was welcomed in the short term but in effect deferred the problem of funding the historical deficit for SEND and High Needs to March 2026. The Council continued to lobby on this issue and to prioritise work to reduce the deficit through the DfE programme Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND which had commenced, and which would influence and shape future national government policy in this complex and challenging area of activity.

During the discussion, questions raised by Members were responded to as follows:

- Members raised a number of issues about Home to School Transport, including ensuring value for money for the Council was obtained, particularly with the use of taxis, the rising costs for providers and the possibility of extending the use of greener vehicles. The DFO advised that there was to be a deep dive review on all aspects of the Home to School Transport system to see how it could be made more sustainable. The CMR commented that this was an issue currently facing many Councils and that the siting of schools should be given careful thought in the planning process to enable more students to be able to walk or cycle to school. The CMR advised that there had previously been a premium paid by the government to help rural authorities with this area of spend, but this had since been removed.
- In response to financial questions on the HTST budget the CFO and DFO agreed to provide the Panel with details of:
 - the breakdown of figures for areas of spend, e.g., primary, secondary and SEN
 - a breakdown of costs in terms of the types of vehicles used.
 - a specific cost comparison of total HTST costs for 2022/23 compared to projected costs for 2023/24. (The CFO advised there was £4m additional investment).
- In response to a member's query regarding the bar chart on benchmarked council tax figures in respect of the amount spent on children and families, the CFO agreed to provide more detailed information so that members could compare the amount spent by area. He added that Worcestershire's spend on Children's services usually placed it in the middle of CIPFA comparable authorities.
- The impact of the increased vacancy factor was raised. With some key vacancies already being difficult to recruit to, concern was expressed that this would have a negative impact on the recruitment of key staff, and thereby the quality of service provided to children and young people. The Chief Executive provided assurance that this requirement would be safely managed to ensure that there was no impact on recruitment to social worker posts. The Panel was informed that the delivery of this would be monitored carefully across the Council and WCF during 2023/24 - with a provision set aside as a contingency.
- A Member asked what measures were in place to address the High Needs Block funding deficit. The DFO advised that £5m had been

allocated in this year's budget for this purpose to start to provide for the historical deficit which would need to be addressed over the next 3 years. The DFO explained that the DBV in SEND programme would be the key route to deliver a sustainable plan and inform future policy alongside the other 54 authorities included in the programme.

The Chairman thanked the Finance Officers for their report. As this would be the last Panel meeting the CFO attended before leaving the Council to start a new job, the Chairman thanked him for his work and wished him well for the future.

564 Worcestershire Children First: Social Work Workforce

The Panel received an update report on developments relating to the qualified children's social work workforce. The Chief Executive highlighted that it was an ongoing and difficult challenge to ensure that there was a sufficient number of effective social workers recruited and retained and it was a key issue identified by the Care Review. Effort was focussed on trying to ensure that WCF was an employer of choice for qualified social workers who demonstrated high standards of practice.

The Group Manager provided an overview of the assurance report on the work of the social work service. The key issues, successes and challenges in relation to areas including the Workforce Strategy, the Social Work workforce profile, staff turnover and vacancies, capacity and performance management and agency social workers were highlighted. Members' attention was drawn to the Josh McCallister review into social care which reported in May 2022 and highlighted the pressure on practice and funding for children's services in employing agency staff. A DfE announcement was awaited as a response to this review.

The Group Manager informed the Panel that he had been Principal Social Worker (PSW) since 2017 and was a member of the Executive leadership team. An important aspect of the role was that it provided a direct link between the front-line social workers and senior management. The PSW's responsibilities included meeting with all frontline practitioners to allow them the opportunity to feedback on their experiences, providing input to the learning and development function and managing the social work health check process. Recent feedback from WCF staff has been very positive, with staff indicating that they felt listened to and supported in their work. The Panel was advised that WCF had recently secured 5th place nationally in the Standards for Employers of Social Workers awards, which was a significant achievement.

The Team Manager of the Positive Outcomes Project (POP) provided an overview of the POP which had been launched in September 2020 during, and despite the pandemic. POP ensured that students continued to be able to access placements offering a variety of learning opportunities with high expectations of standards of practice. The key focus of POP was to support the growth of the social work workforce in Worcestershire, but it also had the benefit of providing extra capacity to offer support with gaps in provision which

arose during the pandemic with the withdrawal of early help support and advice services provided by partners and health. Students living or studying in the Worcestershire area were targeted for the project to encourage them to seek permanent jobs in the county. The Panel was informed that since POP was launched, 51 student social workers had been provided with a placement, with further details of their onward journey's being included in the report. The majority of these students had provided positive feedback on their experience. On a final point, the Team Manager also highlighted that WCF obtained some revenue income from the project, with this year's projected figure currently at £21,600.

The Social Work Academy Manager provided details of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme, which was a DfE funded programme, currently contracted by Skills for Care. The programme was designed to support newly qualified social workers in their probationary year to help them meet the required qualifying standards. The Social Work Academy worked closely with WCF to facilitate the programme and since 2017, a total of 116 NQSW had successfully passed the programme and been employed by WCF, and of those 87 were still currently in WCF employment.

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

- In response to a Members question about the methods of advertising placements, the Group Manager advised that currently there were two programmes for recruiting student social workers. Firstly, a national programme, 'Step up to Social Work' which provided government funded bursaries and applicants were sponsored by local authorities. The eighth cohort of students via this route was currently underway. Secondly the University of Warwick, Social Work apprentice scheme, which enabled WCF employees to be sponsored to train to be a social worker on a day release basis. Staff in certain front-line roles were targeted for this scheme. The Group Manager advised that two staff had qualified through this route, with a further 8 currently in the process. The Team Manager added that WCF was part of the West Midlands Teaching partnership and regular meetings were held with universities to promote the WCF offer. Members praised these initiatives.
- The Chief Executive advised that job offers were only made to trainee social workers when they had completed their training and successfully interviewed at the end of the process.
- The numbers of social workers leaving to convert to agency posts was raised and how these numbers might be reduced. The Chief Executive reported that this was a significant issue highlighted by the Care Review. WCF currently had 31 agency staff, which was a much-reduced figure from previous years. It was explained that there would always be a role for some agency staff to cover certain roles such as maternity leave and that these staff were well-known, and performance managed by WCF. Some agency staff showed no commitment to a local authority, and this created difficulties for children as it led to a lack of continuity for them. The Panel was reminded that a cap had been agreed by local authorities in the region, however, the significant

financial impact resulting from the high agency costs continued to be a spiralling issue. The Chief Executive commented that this situation would be helped if there was a national approach on agency payment rates for social workers and levels of experience required for the role.

- In providing explanation as to the variety of personal reasons why social workers had left their posts, such as mental health and bereavement, the Chief Executive also highlighted that post-covid some social workers had chosen to move from their highly pressurised front-line role into other teams within WCF such as fostering and adoption.
- The Panel was informed that management stability was of key importance and that retention rates were currently exceptionally high for managers at 96% and 90% for all qualified staff. The CMR for Children and Families commented how crucial this was and that Ofsted regarded this as an important positive indicator.
- The Chief Executive confirmed that bank staff were used for residential social worker roles, but not for the front-line social worker role. They were paid at the same rate as permanent staff, but they had flexibility as to working times.
- The Chief Executive confirmed that agency staff benefitted from managerial support, guidance and mandatory training in the same way that permanent staff did. This was the best way to ensure the quality of the service to children was provided and was a practice that WCF had been commended for by Ofsted.
- Further to the discussion on the impact of the agency rates of pay, the Panel was considering what action they could take to ensure attention continued to be focused on this matter. The Chief Executive advised that representations had already been submitted to the Care Review on this issue and that an announcement was awaited. The CMR and Leader of the Council had also written to the Chair of the Select Committee raising their concerns about this issue. The Chairman agreed that the Panel would await news of the announcement before any further action was determined.

The Chairman thanked the Officers for the comprehensive update. He asked that the Panel's appreciation be conveyed to social workers for the excellent work they carried out in a very complex and challenging environment.

565 Work Programme

The Panel reviewed its work programme and agreed that no changes were needed at this time.

In response to a Member's question, the Overview and Scrutiny Manager confirmed that the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board was responsible for monitoring the implementation of Scrutiny Task Group recommendations unless the responsibility was delegated to an Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

The meeting ended at 4.25 pm

Chairman

