

Minutes of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny

Panel

Council Chamber, County Hall, Worcester

Wednesday, 24 May 2023, 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 Tony Muir and Mr Tim Reid

Also attended:

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

Cllr Tracey Onslow, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Education
Mari Gay, NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board
Steve Eccleston, Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership
Bryn Thomas, Wolverley CE Secondary School and Sixth Form
Jane Stanley, Healthwatch Worcestershire

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

Sarah Wilkins, Director of Education, Early Years, Inclusion and Place Planning, Worcestershire Children First

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

Mel Barnett, Director for All Age Disability, Worcestershire Children First

Maria White, Assistant Director, Permanency, Care Proceedings, Fostering and Adoption, Worcestershire Children First

Daniela Carson, Group Manager, Worcestershire Children First

Lisa Bradbury, Lead Educational Improvement Professional, School Improvements, Worcestershire Children First

Ammanda Walsh, Group Manager for Get Safe, Worcestershire Children First

Kate Griffiths, Interim Democratic Governance 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 22 March 2023 (previously circulated).

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

574 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Councillors Jo Monk and David Ross and from Mark Hughes (Parent Governor representative).

575 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

576 Public Participation

There were 3 public participants, Sally Arblaster, Dr Richard Jenkinson and Katrina Kear-Wood who asked questions in relation to the agenda item on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Accelerated Progress Plan and Worcestershire Strategy for Children and Young People with SEND 2023-26.

The Chairman thanked the speakers for their questions and confirmed that they would each get a written response.

577 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 22 March 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

578 Update on Worcestershire's Get Safe

In attendance for this item:

Cabinet Member with responsibility for Children and Families
Chief Executive WCF and Director of Children's Services, WCC
Director of Early Help, Children in Need and Family Front Door
Independent Chair of the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership
Group Manager, Family Front Door and Assessments

The Panel received an update on activities and achievements relating to GET SAFE in the last 12 months. The Director of Early Help referred to a significant piece of work which had been completed this year with colleagues in adult services to support young people as they reach 18 and transition into adulthood. A Complex Adult Risk Management (CARM) process had been recently introduced and work was ongoing to ensure the GET SAFE and GET THERE processes were harmonised with the CARM framework to enable a smooth transition between child and adult safeguarding services.

The teams had also worked closely with the Police on identifying, investigating and sharing knowledge regarding online sexual exploitation. This was an area of huge concern in terms of the impact on children and efforts were focussed on ensuring that the system could be as robust as possible to address these issues. The Group Manager explained about their work to manage this risk and support vulnerable individuals. She also highlighted work that had been carried out in the community to raise awareness of exploitation, for instance in conjunction with the Knife Angel display and a production at the Swan theatre on exploitation to engage young people. Multi agency training had also been prioritised to ensure that the pathways to support young people were accessed.

The Independent Chair advised that there had been a key focus on ensuring that the expectations of the National Child Safeguarding Review Panel were met in respect of learning from the tragic 'Sarah' case and implementing that learning, including changing practices. He was pleased that all the agencies had taken full responsibility in their approach, had asked searching questions of themselves and provided comprehensive responses as to how they were responding to the recommendations as part of this process. There had also been a multi- agency audit of 10 cases to test the strength of the partnership framework. He reported that, although there were some areas for improvement, he was happy to confirm that all 10 cases were being dealt with appropriately through the system.

Members were invited to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- The Chairman asked what good strong partnership working looked like and what obstacles there were to this. Suggestions put forward included that successful partnership working fed into local planning processes and resulted in effective local multi agency action and the importance of partnership working being delivered at all levels to be effective with agencies working together with families. Some of the challenges highlighted were ensuring that the focus was kept on Get Safe, the potential for knowledge to be lost with turnover of staff and online safety issues. In terms of the latter, it was highlighted that there was a multi-agency Digital Safety Conference the following month, at which all partners would be represented.
- A Member welcomed the report, but also highlighted a serious individual case known to him, where despite police intervention, Get Safe support had never been mentioned to the family. The Director of Early Help agreed to follow up this individual case after the meeting and advised that she would ensure that the Chair of the partnership was also made aware of the circumstances.
- A Member praised the progress being made on GET SAFE and asked if the Panel would be able to see the Action Plan referred to in the report. The Chief Executive confirmed that it could be shared, but Members needed to bear in mind that it was an operational plan.
- In response to a request for figures to be provided on Get Safe, the Chief Executive reminded the Panel that Get Safe data was shared quarterly within the regular performance indicator report.

- A question was raised as to where concerns were reported into the system. The Panel was informed that it did vary but significant numbers came through the Police and the Family Front Door. Wherever they were received the information was logged on to the multi-agency shared portal which was a dynamic system ensuring that timely responses took place. There were weekly meetings to discuss each log entry and determine a way forward for that child. In response to a further question, it was explained that each professional who received information about a child would need to determine whether it should be treated as a GET SAFE concern. They might seek the advice of their Safeguarding lead if necessary to decide this, but this would be done without delay.
- A Member asked about spreading awareness of GET SAFE and ensuring the best possible reach. The Panel was informed of the range of face-to-face initiatives employed to engage with young people as well as other mechanisms, including regular use of social media, that were used to get the message out. Relaunch events also took place every year in each of the 6 districts for awareness raising and to raise the profile of GET SAFE. The Panel was informed that data showed that the above activity extended to a wide audience. The point was also highlighted that it was key that the professionals knew where to refer appropriately and it was confirmed that those working and interacting with children and young people were very familiar with the appropriate sources of support, including Family Front Door.

The Chairman thanked the Officers for their very positive report and commented that it was good to see the partnership working well. The Panel would look forward to a further update at a later date.

579 Update on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Accelerated Progress Plan and Worcestershire Strategy for Children and Young People with SEND 2023-26

In attendance for this item:

Cabinet Member with responsibility for Education
 Chief Executive, WCF and Director of Children's Services, WCC
 Director of All Age Disability (AAD)
 Director of Education, Early Years, Inclusion and Place Planning (Education)
 Managing Director, NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire ICB
 Headteacher, Wolverley CE Secondary School and Sixth Form
 Group Manager, All Age Disability 0-25 Social Care service
 Lead Educational Improvements Professional, School Improvements

The Director of AAD highlighted that there were two elements to this report:

- An update following the Department of Education (DfE)/NHS England (NHSE) 12-month review of the SEND Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) that took place on 29 March 2023.
- An update on the Worcestershire Strategy for Children and Young People with Special Needs and Disabilities (SEND) 2023-26.

In respect of the 4 remaining areas of weakness of the APP identified at the inspection in 2021, the Lead Officers for those workstreams were in attendance to update the Panel on progress in their area. The Director also highlighted that health colleagues had been co-chairs for each of the workstream areas.

The variation in the skills and commitment of some mainstream schools to provide effective support for children who have SEND.

The Lead Educational Improvement Professional advised that they had been working on building relationships with schools, monitoring their activities and building indicators to identify inclusive practice. They were then in a position to support, challenge and share good practice with high quality support and training. In the year ahead the key areas of focus included integrating school improvement with the SEND Strategy, evaluating the impact of existing activities, and developing activities that needed to grow such as extending pupil voice and developing the leadership potential of SENCOs.

The Headteacher, also part of this workstream team, explained that the work required a cultural shift in thinking to ensure that it was successful, but he felt there was now a genuine shared vision and ownership of the challenges ahead with Headteachers believing it was their responsibility to ensure that the changes happened. He highlighted that it would be a long journey for sustainable improvement, but the foundations were in place, it was recognised where support would be needed, and they were on track with the 'next steps' identified in the report.

The lack of suitable specialist provision to meet the identified needs of children and young people

The Director of Education explained that this workstream was not just focussed on increasing the number of places available, but also changing the culture to ensure that a child's needs were analysed, understood and planned for in a timely manner. She confirmed that the information from the All-Age disability team fed into the place planning process and that an annual sufficiency report, including specialist support, was presented to Cabinet each year. She also stressed the importance of health practitioners being involved at an early stage which would enhance forecasting data.

The Director of Education highlighted the successful bid for funding for a new school for children with autism, which would be operational from 2026. She also reported that there was a number of expansion projects in special schools and a few units in mainstream schools having recently opened or being due to be open. In all these cases being able to demonstrate the 'need' to the DfE was a crucial part of the process and going forward, effective forecasting and securing suitable funding were key factors.

Fragile relationships with parents and carers and a lack of meaningful engagement and co-production and collaboration

The Group Manager reported that the work of this team centred on building mechanisms to strengthen relationships with parents and carers and seeking to ensure they were represented on all the workstreams. She provided details of the involvement and attendance of parents and carers in the workstream meetings to date and the co-production of the local offer redesign. She also reported that a good response had been obtained from the parent carer survey. Going forward, this work would be continued developing the work with the parent carer groups further and seeking to reach a wider audience of parents and carers with a broader spectrum of needs.

The poor quality of EHC Plans and limited contributions from health and social care along with the process to check and review the quality of EHC Plans.

The Director of AAD advised that she attended all of the workstream meetings but was the Lead for this particular workstream. She explained some of the measures which had been implemented to improve the system and processes including regular cycles of auditing and quality assurance, use of QR codes on letters to provide an easily accessible feedback mechanism for service users and training for all employees in SEND. The Director confirmed that the feedback obtained through various mechanisms fed into the learning needs for development plans and succession planning processes. The Panel was also informed that the capacity of the WCF workforce had been increased with 5 new casework roles and 6 education psychologist positions being created, meanwhile there had also been additional capacity created in the health service to deal with the increased numbers of health assessments required.

The Director of AAD advised that the Council wide case management system, had recently gone live and this allowed all information used by social care to be accessed much more easily in one place.

In terms of the backlog of 1,993 annual reviews relating to pre-September 2022 she was pleased to confirm that these had all now been completed and actioned. Any annual reviews after this date were being carefully monitored.

Going forward amongst the main priorities in this workstream were to develop an effective approach to gathering the children and young people's voice, to develop a programme of multi-agency audits and to work with Research and Improvement for SEND Excellence (RISE) to develop a preparation for adulthood programme.

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

- In response to a question about statutory deadlines for EHCPs not being met, the Panel was advised that issues causing difficulties included the timeliness of educational psychologist appointments, the significant pressures on the teams and whether all the required information was received in time to meet the deadlines, this being 16 weeks for the draft and 20 weeks for the final plan.
- The Managing Director (NHS) commented on similar pressures within the health service, with demand having grown significantly since 2018

and the service not being able to keep up with this increased level of demand. They were working with the provider to increase the workforce to provide the specialist skills to be able to meet the demand, but it was highlighted that for the next year, they would continue to struggle to always meet the deadlines.

- It was reported that the current number of EHCPs was over 5,300 and the number of new requests continued to increase, with 140 new requests in January. Last month 206 plans were able to be finalised, which was the highest figure achieved in a single month.
- In response to a member's suggestion that complaints weren't being dealt with in a timely manner, the Director of AAD commented that this did not match their experience and highlighted that with the dedicated Complaints Officer in post there was tight monitoring of timescales. The Chief Executive backed this up with evidence from the latest performance information and stressed that emails were being replied to, and if there were issues regarding specific emails, they could follow these up if the details were provided. The Member agreed to follow this up with the Director after the meeting .
- On the recruitment of educational psychologists, the Panel was informed that there were good retention levels with current staff and that they were planning ahead, linking in with the university and actively recruiting for 2024/25.
- Responding to a criticism relating to the parent stakeholder group, the Director of AAD explained its purpose and operation and commented that it had proved to be a useful vehicle for consultation and co-production work, particularly regarding the parent engagement toolkit. She advised that there was always an open invite for all parents and carers to attend, and she stressed that the voice of all parents was important whether they were part of a parent group or not. She confirmed that some of the active regular attendees had recently decided not to continue on the group and she provided some background to this situation. The Panel was informed of the contractual basis on which WCF works with parent forums and that the contractor had offered a mediation meeting between various parties to try and move things forward. Members hoped that the mediation would prove helpful to encourage wider involvement and input from all those who wished to take part.
- One Member raised the importance of providing opportunities to offer positive feedback, having experienced this for himself. The Panel was informed that there were opportunities for parents to feedback at key points of review, as well as in the parent carer survey, and that such feedback was welcomed as it was important to recognise good service.
- Assurance was sought that the delays being caused with issues in the carenotes system were now sorted. The Managing Director (NHS) explained that the issue had taken longer to resolve than anticipated, but that it had now been rectified and was being tested. She confirmed that more reliable information should be available in the future.
- A Member commented that integration of children with SEND into mainstream schools should be a priority, wherever possible, accepting that this was not suitable for all such children. He asked about the willingness of schools to engage with this inclusion approach. The

Panel was informed that there were some deterrents to engagement and there was a long way to go, but that with ambitious training programmes, the support of the SENCO network and supportive headteachers who empowered their staff, there were signs of a shift in approach and attitudes.

- A Member queried that with the majority of behavioural issues being trauma related, what the impact was of this on schools if they were seeking to be more inclusive. The Headteacher advised that there was not extensive alternative provision, so schools had to determine those most at risk of exclusion and make use of fair access panels and managed moves to handle the situation and keep students within schools. He highlighted that extreme challenging behaviour was now far more common than it had been in previous years. The Director of Education informed the Panel of the successful uptake of the Virtual School's trauma informed training, which meant staff had a better understanding of what impacted a child. She advised that schools had provided feedback that they appreciated this type of practical training programme which could be embedded over time.
- In terms of the sufficiency report forecast, a Member asked whether the gap was being closed. The Director of Education explained that the understanding of need was much better and thereby forecasting was considerably improved as a result. There had been more places created and ahead of where they had previously been, but they were not as far ahead as they would have wanted to be with this. It was recognised that some children currently in special schools would benefit from being in a carefully managed placement in a mainstream school, and a review process would look at this issue where it was deemed appropriate.
- A number of Panel members expressed thanks to the Directors and their teams for the considerable improvements that had been seen in the service. The Directors stressed that their staff were extremely dedicated and committed, and they would pass on the Panel's appreciation of their efforts.
- The Chief Executive highlighted that the workforce was WCF's most precious resource. She outlined that staff surveys demonstrated that the majority of her staff felt valued and listened to and she was grateful to her Directors for their continued commitment and resilience in highly challenging roles.
- The Director of AAD highlighted that the next review of the AAP was taking place in September this year.

An update on the Worcestershire Strategy for Children and Young People with Special Needs and Disabilities (SEND) 2023-26.

The Director of AAD set out the purpose of the draft strategy in that it delivered the local partners statutory duties by setting out a case for change and improvement. The refreshed partnership strategy had been co-produced with the SEND and All Age Disability Partnership Board including the Parent Carer Forum. There were 6 strategic priorities identified which were aligned to the accelerated progress plan. The detailed delivery plan set out the way in which

the priorities would aim to be achieved and it had been ensured that this linked to other relevant transformation plans and strategies already in place.

A Member raised further concerns regarding the impact of not issuing EHCP's on time because of health service delays regarding care notes, and then families potentially seeking a legal route to obtain an outcome. The Panel was informed that there was monitoring of these issues which were formally reported in the system. The Managing Director (NHS) advised that there were significant challenges in recruitment which was a major problem, but she advised that business continuity measures had been put in place in response to the care notes situation. She understood that the latter had largely been resolved but she agreed to provide a written update on this matter for the Panel including clarification on the specific reasons for any delays which had been experienced in their system.

The Chairman thanked the Officers for the report and commented that he was pleased that there seemed to be a growing awareness and understanding of SEND issues within local communities and the problems faced by those families affected.

It was noted that a report would be brought back to the Panel following the next AAP review in September.

580 Worcestershire Children First Independent Fostering Service Ofsted Inspection

The Panel received an update on the outcome of the Ofsted Inspection carried out in February 2023.

The Cabinet Member took the opportunity to inform the Panel of the positive experiences of a young man who had been in foster care in Worcestershire, who had recently shared some of his journey through the care system as part of a book which included a collection of experiences from a range of contributors.

The Assistant Director of Safeguarding Services set out the background reminding the Panel of the Ofsted visit in September 2021 where an overall judgment was issued of 'requires improvement'. In response to that judgement the Fostering Service Improvement Plan (SIP) had been developed with 7 workstreams to address the areas where improvement was required. The Panel was informed that during the recent 5-day inspection inspectors recognised that good progress had been made with all requirements having been met.

The Panel was informed that in terms of the grading awarded the overall grading was 'good' although the effectiveness of leaders and managers was identified as 'requires improvement to be good'. The Assistant Director reported that the Inspectors had provided very positive feedback on improvements, and highlighted that children felt happy and safe with their foster families, they were well supported by their fostering social workers who had a strong emphasis on the voice of the child and of whom families were

overwhelmingly positive in respect of the support they received. In terms of the effectiveness of leaders and managers, the Inspectors recognised that the interim arrangements had been effective, but that a registered manager must be appointed.

The Assistant Director advised that they were very pleased with the outcome of the Inspection, and she praised the Team Managers for stepping up to ensure that the required changes identified in the Improvement Plan were completed. She also informed the Panel that the registered manager post had now been successfully recruited to and she was pleased that they would take up their post in late July.

In response to a Member's question, the Chief Executive explained that the only reason why the service had received a 'requires improvement to be good' for its effectiveness of leaders and managers was due to the lack of a permanent Registered Manager in post. Ofsted had acknowledged that proactive efforts had been made to recruit, but without a registered manager in post a 'good' rating could not be awarded. The Inspectors had recognised that the interim management arrangements had not stopped progress, with requirements and recommendations from the last inspection having been met.

A further question was raised regarding the availability of comparative data of foster carers pay with independent fostering agencies. The Chief Executive advised that pay varied so significantly in the independent sector, for various reasons, and it was not always easy to identify exactly what their pay levels were. She confirmed that the WCF Independent Foster Carers had received a 2% pay increase, with 4% to those supporting children aged over 11. She also confirmed that connected kinship carers had received the same level of increase.

The Chief Executive highlighted that the Ofsted reports for adoption and fostering had both received a 'good' rating. With both service areas under the management of the Assistant Director of Safeguarding Services she praised her for this achievement. The Chairman added the Panel's thanks for a positive report. He reminded members of the foster carer recruitment event taking place that weekend and encouraged members to offer their support.

581 Work Programme

The Panel reviewed its Work Programme and the following additions were made:

- Youth Justice would be added to the December Panel meeting.
- Update on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Accelerated Progress Plan, if possible, for December Panel.

The meeting ended at 1.00 pm

Chairman