

Minutes of the Cabinet

County Hall

Thursday, 28 September 2023, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Simon Geraghty (Chairman), Cllr Adrian Hardman, Cllr Marcus Hart (Vice Chairman), Cllr Adam Kent, Cllr Steve Mackay, Cllr Karen May, Cllr Richard Morris, Cllr Tracey Onslow and Cllr Mike Rouse

Also attended:

Cllrs Matt Jenkins and Luke Mallett were in attendance.

Available papers

The Members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated); and
- B. The Minutes of the meeting held on 20 July 2023 (previously circulated).

A Minute's silence for Andy Roberts

A Minute's silence was held in memory of Cllr Andy Roberts who had sadly passed away.

The Leader of the Council welcomed Cllr Steve Mackay to the meeting as the new Cabinet Member for Children and Families.

2169 Apologies and Declarations of Interest (Agenda item 1)

An apology was received from Cllr Marc Bayliss.

2170 Public Participation (Agenda item 2)

None.

2171 Confirmation of the Minutes of the previous meeting (Agenda item 3)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 20 July 2023 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2172 Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2021-22 (Agenda item 4)

Stephen Eccleston - Independent Chairman of the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership introduced the report and outlined the key points from the WSCP Annual Report 2021/2022; the work of the Safeguarding Partnership; the work of the various Partnership sub-groups including the GET SAFE Partnership Group, the Quality Assurance Practice and Procedures Group, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) Group; the Education Head Teachers Safeguarding Steering Group; and the funding arrangements.

The Leader of the Council thanked Stephen Eccleston for the work that the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership carried out on behalf of the Council.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families introduced the report and acknowledged the huge amount of work covered by the Annual Report. He queried whether there were any changes or challenges in safeguarding that the Council needed to be aware of. Stephen Eccleston responded that he expected significant changes in safeguarding, particularly in relation to Early Help and Family Help which would have a significant impact on the Council and partner agencies especially in terms of undertaking assessments. The challenge for the Partnership was to identify and focus on the key issues that were important for Worcestershire for example, children in a domestic abuse setting. All agencies had been given the opportunity to respond to a national consultation on working together.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education commended the Partnership for its work, particularly in relation to inspections and the GET SAFE initiative. She welcomed the work of the Steering Group on behalf of the Partnership to improve the assessment arrangements for the Family Front Door to include the expertise of other agencies in the decision-making process. She emphasised the importance of safeguarding children particularly with the threat of exploitation by criminal gangs. The complexity of protecting young people could not be overstated. Stephen Eccleston responded that it was important that the right referrals were made to the Family Front Door and that people were clear as to where they should report their concerns.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Adult Social Care highlighted a key area of concern which was the ability to safeguard children online. It was clear that changes in AI and social media happened at a fast rate which made it difficult to monitor and report. Stephen Eccleston responded that the safety of children online was a massive problem that the Government was trying to address. It was debatable whether the Government was receiving adequate support from the big social media companies to address these concerns. The problem was that children knew more about the subject matter than the professionals. The Partnership was meeting young people to get a feel for the issue from their perspective. Outlets were being established to enable children

who might be concerned that they were being exploited to feel comfortable raising their concerns and feel that they were not being judged. It was clear that children were not safe in their own bedrooms. It was a challenge to engage with parents despite the best efforts of schools and get the message across that it could happen to their child.

In the ensuing debate, the following points were made:

- The key challenges in relation to the GET SAFE initiative was to try and ensure the safety of children and young people online and address the unregulated supply and use of vapes by children and young people which left them open to exploitation
- Children and young people did not respond well to being told not to do something. Guidance needed to be provided to help them understand the dangers of exploitation online and the actions they could take to protect themselves. Stephen Eccleston responded that education was the key aspect because it was impossible to stop access to social media
- Although safeguarding of children in schools was evolving and improving, had the recent increase in levels of absenteeism (which led to children being outside the school framework) become a cause for concern? Stephen Eccleston responded that the Government had recognised the problem of absenteeism which had been exacerbated since the pandemic. It was another issue that partners needed to address given the increased danger of exploitation. There was a delicate balance to be struck between attempting to engage with parents and deciding whether it was a matter in need of inclusion in a review of Children Missing in Education
- The pandemic had impacted negatively on children's learning and it was important to engage them in a school environment. Stephen Eccleston acknowledged the negative impact of the pandemic on children during their formative years in terms of speech and cognitive understanding
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families pointed out the vulnerability and safeguarding issues associated with NEETS. Work was taking place to engage and raise awareness with local businesses with the possibility of offering mentoring or apprenticeships. In addition, efforts were being made to raise awareness in the community. The Partnership report was very comprehensive and noted that there would be further changes in the future. He thanked all partners for their contribution.

Cabinet:

- a) **received the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2021/22; and**
- b) **noted the progress of the work of the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership.**

2173 Worcestershire Strategy for Children and Young People with SEND 2023-2026 (Agenda item 5)

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education introduced the report and thanked Mel Barnett, Director for All Age Disability and her team for their work in producing the Strategy. She acknowledged that more work needed to be done to improve the service to ensure that families had a positive experience when engaging with the service. It was important that the Strategy met the needs of children and young people and enabled them to be in the right environment, safe and away from harm. She emphasised the importance of the five priorities outlined in the SEND Strategy 2017/21. The vision of the Strategy was to ensure that all children and young people with SEND were recognised as individuals and became the best person they could be. The Strategy would be continually reviewed and feedback was welcomed on those areas that were doing well and areas where improvement was required.

In the ensuing debate, the following points were made:

- A key priority in the Strategy was the adoption of a Person-Centred Approach putting children and young people at the centre of planning and decision-making about their own care and support. It was incumbent on this Council to work closely with all statutory partners to achieve the best outcomes for children
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education reported that there was a national shortage of Education Psychologists. However, despite this shortage, alternative ways had been developed to ensure that EHCPs were completed in a timely fashion
- A member from outside the Cabinet queried whether all Children with SEND had been able to get a place in their preferred school. Mel Barnett responded that for various reasons it had not been possible to meet all parental preferences at Reception age. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education added that the matter was complicated by the variety of different SEND placements
- A member from outside the Cabinet queried the progress made in lobbying the Government to address the funding gap for children and young people with SEND. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education responded that the Council continued to lobby local MPs in particular with respect to areas of high need. It was clear that the Government either needed to change policy or make the necessary funding available. The Leader added that resources had not kept pace with demand and each year the Council reported a deficit, albeit a lower deficit than many other councils. The funding for SEND was currently sitting off the balance sheet until April 2026. The Council was putting vulnerable children first whilst acknowledging the resource implications.

Cabinet approved the Worcestershire Strategy for Children and Young People with SEND 2023-2026.

2174 Resources report - Revenue Budget Monitoring Month 4 (31 July) 2023/24 (Agenda item 6)

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and outlined a forecasted net £18.2 million cost pressure at the end of the financial year following the use of

budgeted risk reserves without further action. The majority of the overspend forecast was based on demand being faced within Adults and Children's social care as well as Home to School Transport. This budget pressure was in line with other councils. The Council was unable to mitigate demand in these areas and therefore it was important to understand how the Government intended to address the shortfall in future financial settlements particularly in respect of Children's social care. The Council was lobbying the Government in association with the County Council Network to make the case for additional funding to address these significant shortfalls in funding nationally. Despite these issues, the Council would continue to invest in the county and to plan for the future.

In the ensuing debate, the following points were made:

- The Council had a statutory duty to protect vulnerable children and adults. However the cost of child placements was extremely expensive with some individual placements costing as much as £20k a week. The cost of both adult's and children's social care was continuing to rise along with the number of service users. The Leader added that the the average cost of a placement had risen by 19% in one year. He made a plea to encourage more people to become foster carers because it made such a huge difference to the lives of vulnerable children
- The community had an important role to play in helping to achieve better outcomes for children. The Leader stressed the important role of voluntary carers and the need for the Council to provide the necessary support to help them
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Adult Social Care emphasised that the forecast overspend in Adult social care in Worcestershire was in line with other councils. Adult social care had been particularly vulnerable to inflationary pressures as well as recruitment difficulties. The service had had to use agency staff which was unsatisfactory in terms of their inability to build relationships with clients. The Council would be receiving a non-recurrent £3.6 million from the Government which would be used to offset the increased cost of provision of care and the associated costs of additional social care assessment and reviews. He emphasised that this funding was not a long-term solution. The Council would continue to try to fill staff vacancies, review high-cost placements to ensure value for money and keep clients safe to meet statutory requirements
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport outlined the budgetary pressures on Home to School Transport which reflected a national trend. Despite these financial pressures, the Council would continue to provide funding for the extensive capital programme set out in the report and fund bus services in the county
- In response to a query from a Member outside the Cabinet about the financial implications of the RAAC found within the County Hall campus, the Leader explained that assessments were currently being undertaken on the building. Necessary safety precautions had been taken to protect staff and visitors but at this stage it was not possible to outline the financial implications of the work

- A member from outside the Cabinet queried how the Council had attempted to reduce the costs of placements with the use of early intervention. The Leader responded that the Council had received a good rating for safeguarding from Ofsted. The Council's approach had always been to provide the necessary support to keep families together wherever possible. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Adult Social Care added that the Council worked closely with the partners in the health service in relation to prevention.

Cabinet:

- Noted the forecast year end position as at 31 July 2023 as outlined in paragraphs 11 and 44 and as detailed in Appendix 1 of the report;**
- Noted the current progress regarding savings plans approved by Council in February 2023 contained in paragraphs 45 and 46 and as detailed in Appendix 2 of the report;**
- Noted the current plan for use of the Public Health Reserve, as detailed in paragraphs 22 to 24 and Appendix 3 of the report;**
- Approved the use of reserves as detailed in paragraphs 47 to 53 and noted the forecast year end position on reserves at Appendix 4 of the report;**
- Recommended to Council the variations to the Capital Programme as detailed in paragraphs 54 – 69 and the updated Capital Programme at Appendix 5 of the report;**
- Recommended to Council approval of the updated Capital Strategy 2023-2026 at Appendix 6 of the report; and**
- Noted the report on the Quarter 1 position relating to Treasury Management detailed in paragraph 68 and 69 and Appendix 7 of the report.**

The meeting ended at 12.00 Noon.

Chairman