

Minutes of the Children and Families

Overview and Scrutiny Panel

County Hall, Worcester

Thursday, 21 March 2024, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr David Chambers (Chairman), Cllr David Ross (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Mel Allcott, Cllr Kyle Daisley, Cllr Matt Jenkins and Cllr Tony Muir

Also attended:

Cllr Steve Mackay, 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
Cllr Dan Boatright-Greene
Bryn Thomas, Headteacher, Wolverley CE Secondary School and Sixth Form
Emma Pritchard, Chief Executive, Black Pear Trust
Debbie Lamont, Healthwatch

Sarah Wilkins, Director of Education, Early Years, Inclusion and Place Planning, Worcestershire Children First
Chris Bird, Interim Director of Resources, Worcestershire Children First
Jane Howard, Leading Educational Improvement Professional, Education Quality and Improvement
Nicky Burford, Early Years and Childcare Sufficiency Improvement Lead.
Samantha Morris, 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 10 January 2024 (previously circulated).

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

621 Apologies and Welcome

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel Thursday, 21 March 2024
Date of Issue: 10 April 2024

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Councillors Nathan Desmond and Jo Monk, Tim Reid (Church Representative) and from the Director of Children's Services/Worcestershire Children First Chief Executive, Tina Russell.

622 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

623 Public Participation

None.

624 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 10 January 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

625 Educational Outcomes 2023 including Ofsted Update

In attendance for this item:

Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Education
CMR for Health and Wellbeing
Director for Education, Early Years, Inclusion and Education Place Planning,
Worcestershire Children First (WCF)
Headteacher, Wolverley CE Secondary School
Chief Executive, Black Pear Trust
Leading Education Improvement professional, Educational Quality and
Improvement (WCF)

The Panel was provided with an update on:

- The educational outcomes for children and young people educated in Worcestershire schools for the academic year 2022/23.
- The overview of Ofsted inspections of Worcestershire's state funded schools for the academic year 2022/23.

A brief introduction to the report was provided by the Director for Education, Early Years, Inclusion and Education Place Planning (the Director). The Headteacher of Wolverley CE Secondary School (the Headteacher) and the Chief Executive of the Black Pear Trust (the Chief Executive) provided some background detail to their roles and their involvement in county wide initiatives.

The Educational Quality and Improvement Lead (EQI Lead) set out some of the key positive outcomes from the school inspections as highlighted in the report including that:

- For school inspections, 86% of all schools had been judged to be either good or outstanding.
- No maintained schools were judged to be inadequate.
- Since the previous year, there had been a reduction in the number of maintained schools requiring intensive support from 37% to 23%.
- The outcomes for Key Stage (KS)1 were all above the national average.
- Worcestershire's Progress 8 score was in line with the national average.

The Panel was informed that the School Improvement Team (SIT) offered a range of bespoke packages of training and support to help vulnerable schools. It was highlighted that the quality of education was a key Ofsted judgement, but small schools often struggled to provide the breadth of curriculum that larger schools could offer. A number of projects had been put in place to support schools in this situation.

In terms of outcome areas that schools could improve, the EQI Lead highlighted the following:

- The KS2 outcomes for Worcestershire remained below the national average and the gap had slightly increased. The gap had remained the same for reading and maths results, with Worcestershire 2% below the national average. For writing, from a previous position of being 1% above the national average Worcestershire was now 1% below.
- The percentage of children achieving a standard pass in English and maths at KS4 was 1% lower for Worcestershire than the national figure.
- At KS5, the percentage of students achieving AAB at A level remained below the national average, but the gap had reduced slightly.

The SIT team would be drilling down to identify the root cause as to why some of the issues of concern had emerged. The Panel was informed that attainment levels for children from disadvantaged backgrounds was an area of challenge and there would be a focus on this group moving forward. Boys reading at KS2 was also identified as a problematic area. Leaders were being encouraged to have a stronger vision and to create a reading rich curriculum to benefit children from a disadvantaged background, but which would also positively impact all children.

Members raised a number of issues, which were responded to as follows:

- In terms of the impact of parental support on a child's educational development, the EQI Lead advised that there wasn't data available on this, but anecdotally it was well reported. The Family Liaison Officer working with schools sought to provide help to families to develop their support mechanisms wherever it was required.
- The pandemic had raised awareness amongst parents as to the complexities of what a child needed to be able to achieve. Schools had seen an increased interest and involvement in school matters from parents since the pandemic.
- The Panel was informed that attendance had suffered since the pandemic, with the perception of having to attend school every day commonly no longer present. The Headteacher referred to a culture

change with daily attendance not being valued in the same way. There had been a 4% decrease in attendance nationally and this situation was continuing to deteriorate. School staff were working to tackle the problem locally, but matters were close to crisis point.

- A Member queried what advice was given by schools in respect of children attending school with a mild illness. It was clarified that there was specific advice given, in certain circumstances, for instance where a child had a sickness bug. The Director also referred to the NHS App which was promoted as a useful source of advice for common childhood ailments, with guidance provided to parents as to appropriate action to take. It was highlighted that where outbreaks of infectious diseases occurred in a school, liaison took place with the school to offer specific advice on attendance for parents.
- The Panel was informed that Ofsted were currently closely monitoring the link between attendance and outcomes for individual children. The Headteacher highlighted that the gaps in society were widening and in general children from disadvantaged families did less well in this regard, but with strong leadership and collaboration between schools and the local authority, there were some schools that were managing to overcome this variance in outcomes.
- The Chief Executive highlighted that there was a diverse range of disadvantaged children and that they sought to work with the individual families to ensure they could access appropriate support. The CMR for Health and Wellbeing highlighted the importance of looking beyond the high-level data and drilling down into individual absenteeism, for the sake of ensuring appropriate safeguarding. The CMR for Education highlighted that there was a growing view nationally that changing term dates could help with attendance issues, and she would be looking to review this situation locally.
- The Director clarified that Children Missing Education referred to children who were currently not on a school roll. This number was lower than it had previously been as the system was working more effectively to identify these children. With regard to children on roll with a very poor attendance record, this involved a multi-agency approach to seek to improve their situation. Families needed to understand their responsibilities and be enabled to meet them. The EQI Lead gave an insight into the intervention work that was carried out with disadvantaged children and the practical support and opportunities that the schools were able to provide to seek to enrich their lives and improve their life chances.
- The importance of effective transition points was raised, and the Chief Executive stressed how crucial it was to provide additional support for disadvantaged children through this process to ensure a smooth transition.
- The outcome areas requiring improvement were discussed and the impact of some of these ongoing problems. The Director advised that every school sought to provide early help wherever this was required and signposted families as appropriate. The EQI Lead emphasised the importance of addressing problems at the earliest opportunity to prevent under-performance becoming established. The Director confirmed that improving attendance outcomes was a huge focus for schools at this

time and as referred to, with a particular focus on disadvantaged children. It was highlighted that there was a range of programmes to support schools in this regard. An attendance helpline was also available for all to be able to access on the website. In respect of KS5 outcomes, the Director advised that there were a number of detailed issues which required further exploration. The Headteacher explained that sixth forms were judged separately from the main school by Ofsted, and he suggested that that the progress measures were the key aspects to focus on.

- The Healthwatch representative queried the level of absence recorded for children with SEND relating to emotional based school avoidance. The Director explained that this was an emerging issue, which was as yet not diagnosable, but data on the impact of mental health issues on attendance was available. In response to a question about children not attending school as the school was not able to meet their need, the Headteacher explained that data was not held on this, but in a situation where a school could not meet need, this would be identified through the child's Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process and appropriate support would be put in place. The Panel was informed that the Improvement Team worked closely with SEND teams and there was an ongoing dialogue to ensure that the needs of vulnerable children were identified and understood.

626 Early Education and Childcare National Expansion Programme

In attendance for this item:

CMR for Education

CMR for Health and Wellbeing

Director for Education, Early Years, Inclusion and Education Place Planning, Worcestershire Children First (WCF).

Headteacher, Wolverley CE Secondary School

Chief Executive, Black Pear Trust

Leading Educational Improvement professional, Educational Quality and Improvement, WCF

Early Years and Childcare Sufficiency Improvement Lead, WCF (EYCSI Lead)

The Panel received an update on developments in early education and Worcestershire's preparation relating to the Early Education and Childcare National Expansion Programme. The Director introduced the report and provided a brief overview of the current early education provision in the county and advised that the quality of available early years childcare options and wrap around care was good as was the current level of take up.

The Director explained the Government's statutory expansion programme for childcare would be introduced over 2 phases starting in April 2024 with an increase in funding support for working families with 2-year-old children and in September 2024, for the first-time, working families of children aged 9 to 23 months would be able to access free funding for 15 hours of childcare per week. This would be followed in September 2025 by an increase in support for families of these younger children of working families to 30 hours a week.

Another key aspect of the expansion programme was the requirement for provision to be in place by September 2026 for additional wrap around care during term time, for families of all primary aged children to be able to access. WCF staff would be supporting the school sector and local childcare providers to work closely together to meet the needs of families. The Panel was informed that explanatory leaflets had been prepared for parents setting out all the details of the new provision and she would ensure members received a copy for their background information.

Members raised a number of issues which were responded to as follows:

- A Member questioned whether there would be sufficient capacity to meet the increased demand created by the Government's expansion programme. The Director explained that they were confident about the first phase in April 2024 because the children impacted were already in the marketplace using current provision. With regard to levels of provision for September 2024, the EYCSI Lead highlighted that there should be sufficient capacity for the under 2's of working families, but that by September 2025 there was likely to be an increase in demand when the entitlement was increased to 30 hours. It was confirmed that WCF were currently liaising with providers, and whilst acknowledging there would be areas of challenge, it was felt that there would be adequate provision in place to meet demand by that stage.
- From a school's perspective, the Chief Executive highlighted that children attending a pre-school were much more likely to join the school for their mainstream education. They offered a strong provision for 2-to-4-year-olds, but there was a capacity issue to be taken account of to ensure that a high-quality offer was maintained.
- In response to a Member's question, the EYCSI Lead confirmed that every setting would have a free offer, so the new funding support would make attendance much more affordable, but there would still be some limited costs for parents in terms of consumables, meals etc.
- With respect to vulnerable families with a child entitled to funding from 2 years old, the Panel was informed that there were various ways in which these families were identified and encouraged to access available provision, including through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Starting Well Service and via social workers. The Chief Executive highlighted that this funding had proved to make a significant impact for disadvantaged children prior to the pandemic, but it should be noted that the new provisions would not see an increase in their hours in line with that for working families. The EYCSI Lead referred to the early pupil premium which was currently paid to 3–4-year-olds and would be extended to a lower age group to include vulnerable 2-year-olds from April.
- The Healthwatch representative asked how wrap around care would work for children with an EHCP. The Director explained that the programme was for working parents, and for these families with a child with an EHCP, their individual circumstances would need to be assessed. The Panel was informed that this was an area that would be

looked at in detail to determine what would need to be developed going forward.

627 Performance and 2023-24 Budget Monitoring

The Panel received an update on performance and financial information for services related to children and families.

Performance Monitoring

The Director provided a brief overview of the key performance indicators, drawing the Panel's attention to some particular points of interest as follows:

- The data on elective home educated (EHE) children with SEND was being monitored closely as there had been a rise in this figure.
- There had been a reduction in the number of exclusions by 33 compared to the same period last year was positive news.
- There had been a focus on the transition of vulnerable young people to post 16 options, with the Medical Education Team having obtained additional support from the health service.
- EHCP figures continued to rise, currently at the 6,000 level, but steady progress was being made in terms of timeliness of information being received and improvements to the 16-week and 20-week timescales being met.

Members asked questions, which were responded to as follows:

- In respect of the maintained schools which had become sponsored academies, where an Ofsted inspection had since taken place, a Member asked how many of the schools had improved their rating by at least one grade. The Director agreed to provide this information and confirmed that fuller details would be provided in the next report.
- In terms of recruitment of foster carers, it was requested that the Panel receive a regular update on the number of applications that were received for the role and how many of those were recruited to the position. The CMR referred to an article published in a county wide magazine which had included an article focussing on fostering, which had been successful in generating an increase in enquiries. A Member also requested that details of the numbers of staff in the fostering team be supplied to members for their information.
- Referring to the increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children referred to in the report, the Chairman asked what the countries of origin were for these children and the Director agreed to supply this information following the meeting.
- As background to a future meeting on Home to School Transport, a range of questions were asked about the production of ECHP's:
 - The Director advised that there were a number of reasons why there had been an increase in requests for an EHCP and that crucially the threshold which obligated an assessment to take place was quite low.

- To give context to the EHCP process, the Director explained that when an initial request was made for an EHCP by a school, appropriate interventions were put in place and then assessed whether they had worked or whether additional support was required from another agency. This process was co-ordinated by the local education authority (LEA) and where appropriate an EHCP was issued. EHCP's were then monitored and reviewed annually by schools unless there were significant changes during the year in which case an interim review could be arranged. Outcomes of reviews were sent to the LEA and if the plan needed updating, this was then completed by the LEA.
 - As to who was present at reviews this was dependent on a number of factors, with more complex cases involving the attendance of SEND Officers or occasionally Education Psychologists. It varied whether a child was present during their review as to what was deemed most appropriate for that child. There was always, however, an expectation that the voice of the child and parents would be heard in a review, even if this was not through attendance on the day.
 - The SEND caseworkers determined transport eligibility for individual applications and there was close contact with the Highways Team on individual cases. Regular meetings took place between the Director of All Age Ability and the Transport Network Development and Commissioning Manager who had responsibility for this area.
- The sufficiency of school places for SEND children was raised and how this could be more effectively scrutinised. The Director advised that the Panel had looked at SEND specific topics and she provided some context to the increasing demand for SEND places, with fewer children with SEND being taught in mainstream settings. It was explained that sufficiency considerations involved a whole system approach in which children were accommodated in the right setting at the right time to best suit their needs.
 - A query was raised as to why the Ofsted rating of an Academy previously judged to be good was now in special measures. The Panel was informed that this was a middle school that Ofsted had challenged on a number of areas including the quality of the primary aspects of the curriculum, leadership issues and that persistent absenteeism was not being addressed appropriately. The Director confirmed that additional support was being provided to the school and that an Ofsted monitoring visit report had not yet been received.
 - The rising number of care leavers who were NEETs (not in education employment or training) was raised. The Panel was informed of initiatives to help this situation including a new mentoring scheme supporting care leavers to obtain sustained employment and also an agreement for the post-16 workers in the Virtual School to work closely with the Care Leavers team.
 - The Healthwatch representative highlighted the increasing number of requests for early help, the growing pressure on that team and the need for preventative measures. The Director explained that this related to areas of statutory responsibility which needed to be protected and

involved working with a number of agencies. The Interim Director of Resources added that the service sought to mitigate the costs relating to this statutory duty wherever possible to avoid the risk of increased costs in the future.

Budget Monitoring

The Interim Director of Resources gave an overview of the key elements of the 2023/24 Forecast outturn at Period 9, highlighting in particular:

- That pressure on the demand-led placements budget continued and represented around half of the total expenditure budget at Period 9.
- There had been a small improvement in the forecast outturn 2023/24 forecast overspend to £18.5m, as compared to the equivalent figure in Period 6. This trend was seen to be continuing in Period 10.
- The Panel was informed that the current number of social care placements was 1,061, a small rise from the previous year, although starting to hold steady. The Panel was reminded that it was the inflation on placement costs that was the main driver for the overspend where average placement costs had increased by 25% since the same period last year. The Interim Director advised that there was some cause for optimism with the most significant period of inflation now having passed and a recently published internal Audit Board report giving substantial assurance in the WCF processes around social care placements, including value for money.
- There was currently a 1% underspend on the staffing budget. In terms of the permanency of safeguarding social workers, there was a slight reduction in permanency compared to the previous year. Financial incentives were used to attract permanent staff in this area.
- With regard to savings delivery for 2023/24 WCF, had £1.3m savings accounted for in the budget and was on track to deliver these by year-end.
- There had been a significant overspend of £22.1m on the High Needs block of the Dedicated Schools Grant at Period 9. This figure was ringfenced from the Council's wider financial position due to the statutory instrument in place. The Interim Director highlighted that the DfE had indicated that High Needs would increase by 4.3% for 2024/25, making Worcestershire's allocation just under £80m, still far below this year's forecast outturn and next year's projected £100m spend.
- With placement costs rising by 25% in one year, a Member asked whether the system could now be seen as broken. The Interim Director highlighted the initiatives in place aimed at reducing the number of residential placements including new foster carer incentives as well as the supported living provision allowing greater independence for 16-17-year-olds by making use of the rented sector. The CMR for Children and Families drew attention to the ongoing lobbying and pressure being put on the Government to seek regulation of the escalating profits being made by private companies in this area.
- With regard to the mitigating actions for the forecast outturn 2023/24, a Member asked that further information be provided on the detail of these actions.

- A Member asked whether the enhanced payment to super foster carers was sustainable in the long run. The Interim Director advised that the enhanced payment was only for very specific circumstances, and at this stage that option was much better from a financial position than the alternative high cost of a placement for that child.

628 Refresh of the Scrutiny Work Programme 2024-25

The Panel considered suggestions for their 2024-25 Work Programme ahead of it being considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board and then forwarded to Council for approval.

After discussion, the Panel agreed the following additions to their Work Programme:

- Renumeration of Foster Carers for the May Panel
- The Impact of WCF being brought back 'in house' for the July Panel
- Progress report on the Forecast Outturn 2023/24 mitigating actions for the July Panel.
- Sufficiency of SEND places in schools to be added to SEND report for the September Panel

In respect of a suggestion about the transition service for social care for 18-25 year olds, it was highlighted that this would be covered by the Worcestershire Strategy for CYP with SEND (All Age Disability Strategy), which the Adult Care and Wellbeing Panel was now leading on. It was highlighted that Members of this Panel would be informed of the date it would be considered, when known, so that they could attend if they wished.

It was also anticipated that there would be a separate Panel meeting arranged to consider the Home to School Transport situation, at the appropriate time.

The meeting ended at 1.27 pm

Chairman