

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

14 SEPTEMBER 2018

WORCESTERSHIRE SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD ANNUAL REPORT 2017-18

Summary

1. Derek Benson, Independent Chair of the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB), has been invited to present the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report 2017-18 (attached as Appendix 1).

Background

2. The Independent Chair of the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board is responsible for publishing an annual report that provides a public assessment of the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements for children and young people in Worcestershire. The report also recognises achievements and is realistic about the challenges that remain.
3. The report is made publicly available through publication on the Board's website. In addition, it is formally presented to the Chief Executive and Leader of the County Council, to the Health and Well-Being Board and to Cabinet. It is sent to West Mercia's Police and Crime Commissioner, to the respective Chairs of the Worcestershire Safeguarding Adults Board and the Safer Communities Board, and it is circulated to lead officers in key partner agencies.
4. In September 2017 Derek Benson, Independent Chair, informed the Panel that whilst the Board had received assurance that strategies were in place to improve frontline practice, it could not yet be assured about the impact of these and therefore the child protection system remained a risk. The Board recognised the scale and challenge facing the local authority and remained committed to working with all partners to bring about the necessary change required to improve outcomes for children in Worcestershire.

Key points from the WSCB Annual Report 2017/18

5. During 2017/18 Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board had a particular focus on a number of priorities including:
 - Children subject to Neglect
 - Children affected by Domestic Abuse
 - Children vulnerable to or experiencing Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)
 - Early Help and Thresholds
 - Key messages in respect of Voice of the Child, Professional Curiosity and Resolution of Professional Differences (Escalation Policy)
 - Critical Friends (Service Improvement Plan)

6. A Task and Finish Group was established in October 2017 to look at neglect in Worcestershire. During the year work commenced on the development of a Neglect Strategy which is to be implemented during 2018/19 with mechanisms in place for monitoring its impact on children and young people.

7. The Worcestershire Domestic Abuse Strategy was launched towards the end of 2017 by the Worcestershire Forum Against Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence and in support of this work a new multi-agency sub group for children and young people was established, chaired by the Assistant Director (Safeguarding). The Board completed a multi-agency case file audit (MACFA) on 12 children who had been exposed to domestic abuse five or more times. It found that in nearly half of these cases the court had made a Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO), providing a window of opportunity for work to be completed with victims and children, but professionals were not always aware that this was the case. The Board has since received assurance that a more robust process is now in place to ensure that this information is shared between agencies in an expedient way to maximise the opportunities to support victims and to safeguard children. One third of all social work assessments and nearly half of all Child Protection Plans had domestic abuse as a factor.

8. The Board's Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Strategic Group, led by West Mercia Police, continued to co-ordinate the implementation of the CSE Strategy 2017-19. Changes were made to operational processes and systems during the year to improve decision making about individual children, and membership of the CSE Operational Group was reviewed to ensure all key agencies were represented, including Education which was a gap identified by Ofsted in 2016. The Board noted a number of concerns in respect of CSE: the absence of an up to date multi-agency CSE Problem Profile (reported to be due to the lack of analyst capacity), difficulties experienced by West Mercia Police in sharing data with partners due to issues with migration to their new data system, and concern about the capacity of commissioned support services for young people who have experienced CSE (at the time of writing the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner were in the process of reviewing the Contract).

9. The Board is able to provide assurance that partner agencies are engaged with the CSE agenda, that Designated Safeguarding Leads in nearly all schools have received CSE training delivered by the Board (with a plan in place to target any gaps), and that children are being identified as being at risk of or experiencing CSE. Two CSE investigations were initiated during the year involving potentially high numbers of child victims or witnesses. All schools were asked by the Board to implement the WSCB Whole School Approach to Healthy Relationships in support of the CSE prevention agenda, however the Board is not yet in a position to provide assurance that it has been widely embedded. Partner agencies have been asked to complete a further CSE self-assessment against a set of practice standards developed by the Board in order to evaluate progress across the partnership. At the time of writing the findings from this audit had not been finalised, but the headlines are that all agencies have graded themselves as being in a better position than one year ago (with action plans in place to improve practice where necessary), which is encouraging.

10. A Task and Finish Group was established in October 2017 to develop the action plan required to support the implementation of the Early Help Strategy approved in September 2017, and in March 2018 it was agreed that responsibility for delivery of the action plan would transfer to the relevant sub group of the Health and Well-Being Board. The Board will, however, retain a role in monitoring the effectiveness of early help and in supporting communications to partner agencies about the Early Help Pathway. The Board is in the process of developing its own effectiveness framework for evaluating early help in

Worcestershire, to include feedback from practitioners and families, but is not in a position to provide assurance at this point in time. Through its quality assurance activity the Board is aware of examples of good practice, but is unable to draw conclusions from the relatively small sample size. As reported last year there remain questions about the effectiveness of wider universal services in the delivery of early help as there is no mechanism in place for capturing information about what is being offered to children and families other than when a service is delivered by a commissioned service. The Service Improvement Plan has identified the need for an improved robust dataset which will provide consistent and accurate information about early help provision going forward.

11. It is currently a statutory responsibility of Local Safeguarding Children Boards to publish guidance on the thresholds for making a referral to Children's Social Care. The revised Levels of Need (Thresholds) guidance was approved in September 2017 and was referenced at Learning and Improvement Briefings for practitioners held during the Autumn 2017. A survey was subsequently circulated which asked partner agencies to confirm that the Levels of Need (Thresholds) guidance had been circulated to all relevant staff and commissioned services. The Board can provide assurance that the guidance has been actively disseminated by all statutory partner agencies (reaching approximately 13,000 practitioners) and that, in addition, all agencies have confirmed that their staff know the name and contact details of their respective safeguarding lead. Questions remain about the consistent application of thresholds by practitioners and the Board will continue to evaluate this during 2018/19.

12. This year has continued to see further pressure on the Family Front Door with the number of Contacts up by 10% compared with last year. Just over one third (36%) of Contacts became Referrals to Children's Social Care. The number of looked after children increased slightly (up 4.5% compared to last year), thought to be associated with a reduction in the number of children on Child Protection Plans where the Plan had not achieved the required outcomes and children had been moved into local authority Care. The number of Child in Need Plans also reduced this year, reflecting a positive approach to reviewing cases and addressing drift and delay. Performance in respect of completion of social work Assessments within time scale continued to improve. The Board was well sighted on the Service Improvement Plan and eight Board members were nominated to act as Critical Friends to provide support and challenge to the Children's Social Care improvement work stream leads. This input was acknowledged by the Director of Children, Families and Communities to have been constructive and helpful and will continue during 2018/19. The Board was also well sighted on the Service Improvement Plan dashboard presented at each Board meeting by the Assistant Director (Safeguarding), which provided opportunity for Board members to ask questions and receive assurance on progress.

13. Audit and case review findings in previous years had indicated that practitioners did not always have an understanding of the lived experience of children and young people or use this to inform decisions. Professional curiosity was often absent and explanations from parents and carers taken at face value, sometimes leading to disguised compliance. In addition, there was evidence that practitioners were not always familiar with the WSCB policy for resolving professional differences of opinion. The Board undertook a number of initiatives to raise awareness of these key messages, including introduction of the Learning and Improvement Briefings (LIBs) at briefings for practitioners, and utilising the Board's newsletter and Practitioner Network. A subsequent survey sent out to partner agencies provided assurance that all statutory partners had disseminated the LIBs to relevant staff and commissioned services (again reaching approximately 13,000 practitioners). The Board was pleased to note positive comments made by Ofsted inspectors about the evidence of professional curiosity during one of their monitoring

visits in 2018. During the coming year the Board will continue to look for evidence of practitioners listening to the voice of the child, exercising professional curiosity and employing the Escalation Policy when professional differences of opinion cannot be easily resolved.

14. Three cases were presented during the year for consideration of a Serious Case Review (SCR) and all three were found to meet the criteria resulting in SCRs being formally commissioned by the Board. At the time of writing one Serious Case Review has been completed but not yet published while the outcome of parallel processes are awaited. Learning from these SCRs will inform the Board's Learning and Improvement communications during 2018/19.

15. During the year 25 Child Death Notifications were received, the lowest number since the Child Death Overview Panel (CDOP) process began in 2008. The Panel reviewed 25 deaths during the year (not necessarily the same 25 children) and modifiable factors were found to be present in 11 of the deaths. Modifiable factors included lack of parental supervision, inaction following expression of suicidal ideation, maternal obesity, smoking and incomplete evaluation of previous miscarriages. National data for 2017/18 is not yet available for comparison purposes. An analysis of all Worcestershire child deaths categorised as 'Suicide or Deliberate Self-Harm' was completed and compared with findings from a recent national study into suicides, both highlighting the importance of supporting and responding to young people who have been told of another child's suicidal thoughts or behaviours. The Panel was particularly pleased to receive information about the work undertaken by one local secondary school to support students who might find themselves in this position.

16. The Board delivered 58 training events to 1308 practitioners during 2017/18. This multi-agency training continues to be rated highly by attendees who report an improvement in knowledge and confidence after attending training events. Post-training impact evaluations and audits also demonstrate that learning is transferred into the workplace and has a positive impact on children and families. 1389 practitioners completed an e-learning course with 97% being satisfied or very satisfied that the course gave them all the information they needed. This was a significant reduction in demand compared to previous years and in March 2018 the decision was taken by the Board to cease providing e-learning from April 2019.

17. The Section 11 Audit is a self-assessment by partner agencies of the extent to which they are fulfilling their safeguarding responsibilities as defined in the Children Act 2004. This year the Board conducted its Section 11 Audit using a new audit template which has been developed by a West Midlands working group. The Board can provide assurance that partner agencies continue to report good compliance with their safeguarding duties with plans in place to address any areas requiring improvement. A challenge event to be facilitated by the WSCB Independent Chair during 2018/9 will seek further assurance about the evidence provided by partner agencies to support their self-assessments.

18. There were 15 private fostering arrangements in place in 2017/18. This is lower than expected, but in line with the national picture, suggesting that there is a lack of awareness of private fostering situations or of the need to notify them to the local authority for assessment. Since the report was drafted lead practitioners with responsibility for private fostering have been identified within Children's Social Care and there are developments in place to raise awareness. The Board will continue to monitor this during the coming year.

Conclusion

19. The Board has concluded that at a strategic level there is a strong commitment to safeguarding children in Worcestershire. It has also received assurances that safeguarding arrangements are in place in partner agencies and that safeguarding responsibilities are taken seriously. In addition, the Board's contributory partners have made additional monies available following the Ofsted inspection to support improvement work despite operating within financial constraints.

20. Much of the Board's attention has this year focussed on Children's Social Care as lead agency for safeguarding children. In October 2017 Ofsted acknowledged that the local authority had taken steps to tackle its 'serious weaknesses' and was beginning to make progress to improve services for children and young people. By February 2018 Ofsted were acknowledging that 'whilst services for children in Worcestershire continue to require much work to be of a good standard, progress has been made since the last monitoring visit'. The Board is assured that robust monitoring arrangements are in place through Ofsted, the Children's Commissioner and Essex County Council (Improvement Partner) and that progress is being made by Children's Social Care through delivery of its Service Improvement Plan, whilst acknowledging that further work is required to ensure that children and young people in Worcestershire receive a consistently good standard of service. Partner agencies have a part to play in ensuring that they also respond robustly to children and families, especially where the threshold is not met for a Children's Social Care intervention but families require additional support through the provision of early help

21. From September 2019 the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board will not exist and new safeguarding partnership arrangements will be in place. The Board will, however, continue to deliver its statutory functions until the new arrangements have been established. Assurance will continue to be sought from partner agencies during the coming year as outlined in the body of this report.

Purpose of the Meeting

The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel is asked to:

- consider the information in the report
- determine whether it would wish to carry out any further scrutiny, and
- agree whether it would wish to make any comments to the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children, Families and Communities

Supporting Information

Appendix 1 - Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board Annual Report 2017/18

Specific Contact Points for this report

Alyson Grice/Samantha Morris, Overview and Scrutiny Officers 01905 844962/844963
Email: scrutiny@worcestershire.gov.uk

Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director of Children, Families and Communities) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report.