

Scrutiny Report

The relationship between the Family Front Door and Schools

Response from the Cabinet Member for Children and Families and Director of Children's Services

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Task Group's report regarding the relationship between the FFD and schools. Thanks also to members of the Group for the work undertaken with a view to understanding schools' perceptions.

Worcestershire has 242 schools, a mix of first, primary, middle, secondary, special and alternative provision and these schools play an important role in safeguarding and supporting Worcestershire's children and young people. The schools' safeguarding responsibility is set out clearly in Working Together to Safeguard Children, alongside the roles that other organisations play. All parts of the system must play their part in order to be effective. It is disappointing that only 30 of these schools participated in the questionnaire (12% of the total) and 15 (6%) were visited. Whilst the information gathered is helpful to consider in relation to how the system can work better to protect children, it cannot be viewed as comprehensive.

We will respond to each of the recommendations in turn:

Consent

Recommendation 1: The Task Group urges the CMR and Director to clarify and reiterate to the Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs), the source(s) of professional advice and support that are available to them to enable them to complete appropriate referrals to the Family Front Door or Early Help. This should include guidance about parental consent and what to do in the exceptional instances where this cannot be obtained. It is suggested that the ongoing training of DSLs should continue to be strengthened to further improve the confidence of DSLs to achieve more accurate and appropriate referrals.

Response

The statutory guidance is clear about the issue of consent and schools need to gain this from parents/carers unless there is urgent cause for concern. This is not negotiable. Ofsted recognised that Children's Social Care was appropriately understanding and obtaining consent at the Family Front Door during the recent ILACS inspection.

The role of the DSL is set out in Keeping Children Safe in Education, together with the requirement for the school to ensure that these staff have appropriate training and support to carry out their very important role in supporting school staff in making referrals to social care.

We will continue to work in partnership with schools to assist them with their responsibility on support and training for DSLs as these are the appropriate people to support school staff with general advice about scenarios (rather than anonymous advice). This ongoing support through the DSL network, which is very well attended, should enable staff to feel more confident in safeguarding issues.

Communication Issues

Recommendation 2: The CMR and Director should seek to ensure that there is consistency around communication with schools, with agreed standards being reiterated to schools, setting out the expected timescales for updates on the progress of referrals, which schools can expect to be adhered to.

Response

Standards for timeliness for feedback on referrals is set out in Worcestershire Safeguarding Partnership procedures. This is three days and the guidance states that if the referring agency has not heard back, they should contact the Family Front Door. We will reinforce the need to FFD staff for a timely response to schools. Outcomes are emailed back via the schools' portal and schools need to go into the portal to obtain the outcomes themselves. We will reinforce this to schools to remind them of the need for them to do this.

Referral Process

Recommendation 3: The Task Group identified that there were differing and conflicting perceptions of the FFD Service between CSC and schools and therefore asks the CMR and Director to continue to work with schools to ensure a greater mutual understanding of each other's roles.

Response

This is not a recommendation that can usefully be acted upon. 12% of the county's schools have participated in this exercise. Some of these schools have referenced improved experiences. Those who are unhappy appear to base this on some issues which CSC cannot resolve, for example the issue of consent where there is no option to respond to those schools who do not want to gain consent from parents/carers. The WSCB which has had seven educational representatives present has recognised improvements in the FFD over the last year and the level of issues raised has reduced significantly.

There will always be individual responses from the FFD that are not timely enough – this is an ongoing management responsibility that the Assistant Director and her staff will continue to focus on. The well attended DSL networks will also continue and provide a constructive professional forum for working together.

Community Social Workers (CSWs)

Recommendation 4: The Task Group recommends that the CMR and Director should review the role of the Community Social Worker to ensure its best value to schools. The Task Group suggest that schools are provided with a named Community Social Worker to facilitate the development of the role and develop a personal relationship with the schools they are assigned to.

Response

CSC is reviewing the role of the Community Social Worker as the role is not being utilised effectively and action taken in recent years to improve this (including bookable appointments) has not altered this. The role of the CSWs has been to support schools in identifying Early Help needs, assessments and plans but schools are not doing this work. The service will look at other ways of supporting schools in their early help role.

Safeguarding Advisor – Education

Recommendation 5: That the CMR and Director consider the viability of providing additional support to the Safeguarding Advisor – Education

This advisor and administrative support to this role are appreciated by schools and Children's Services fund these posts currently, although in other Local Authority areas this responsibility is picked up by schools. Worcestershire's schools were unable/unwilling to fund the service so WCC picked this up during 2017 in order to support schools and CSC in building a better relationship and improving safeguarding practice. CSC does not have the budget (or indeed the responsibility) to fund further posts in this area. The service is however prepared to continue its current funding as the service is valued and valuable in improving safeguarding practice.

Training

Recommendation 6: The CMR and Director assess the viability and merit of arranging for DSLs and Social Workers to spend some time in each other's work environment as part of their training

Response

This recommendation can be actioned. DSLs can be offered time with Social Workers as part of their DSL induction/training. CSC Team Managers can offer to spend time with DSLs to understand the role and their experiences as users of CSC services.

Encompass system

Recommendation 7: That the feedback given from schools as part of this Scrutiny be considered as part of discussions with the Police about the Encompass system.

Response

Encompass is a police system not CSC system. We have already provided feedback to the police about the system and Scrutiny officers could contact the police to provide the feedback from the scrutiny exercise direct.

Training for Members

Recommendation 8: That specific training on the FFD be offered to all Members to increase their understanding and awareness of the FFD and EH functions.

Response

This training will be incorporated into safeguarding training for members.