

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 13 NOVEMBER 2020

UPDATE ON THE ASSESSMENT PATHWAY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO MAY HAVE AUTISM

Summary

1. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel will receive an update on the assessment and diagnostic pathway for children and young people who it is considered are, or may be, on the autistic spectrum (the umbrella pathway).
2. Representatives from the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust, the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Clinical Commissioning Group and Worcestershire County Council (the Council) have been invited to attend the meeting.

Background

3. Members will be aware of the Notice of Motion in respect of the Diagnosis of Children with Autism which was agreed at Council in November 2017. A further update was provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Board (OSPB) in May 2019.
4. At this meeting Members were reminded that it was the service's aspiration to have a maximum wait time of 6 months and a business case was in development to achieve this.
5. Officers agreed to follow up on what was currently provided to schools with regard to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines to ensure accurate referrals and look into providing further written guidance if necessary.
6. The Business case for the Umbrella Pathway was presented to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel in September 2019 with a request for an update in November 2020.

Actions

7. Delay was identified between the receipt of the referral to the pathway and the ability to triage and plan if assessment was required. This was due to the need to seek the relevant consent in order to request information from parents/carers (including estranged parents with parental responsibility) and schools. Therefore, commissioners requested the referrer should include consent with parent and school questionnaires at the time of submitting the referral. This change was implemented from January 2020.
8. Professional guidance in the form of Worcestershire Graduated Response, has been co-produced with local families and was published in September 2019. This document informs professionals and families about what support can be expected

from all statutory services. The outcome of this guidance was to ensure that all opportunities to meet the child or young person's needs were explored in order to minimise the need for further assessments.

9. Approval to recruit to the additional posts funded through the Mental Health Investment Standards (MHIS) business case was granted. This included:

- a. Additional 1.5 sessions of Associate Speciality Doctor
- b. Additional 0.6 whole time equivalent (wte) SLT (recruited in advance from Sept 2019)
- c. Additional 0.6 wte senior administrator
- d. Clinical Psychologist 0.6 wte (plus vacancy 0.4 wte)
- e. Advanced Clinical Practitioner 0.4 wte (recruited development role in advance from Sept 2019)
- f. Support Facilitator 0.6 wte (with lived experience)

10. Recruitment to new posts and vacant substantive posts has been challenging due to limited applications, possibly due to an increase in demand from local and regional investment to services for children and young people.

11. Development of post diagnosis/assessment support, specific to those who have recently been assessed has also been delayed due to the limitations in recruitment. However, recruitment processes included assessment of candidate's commitment and vision for the development of universal and targeted support models. Plans are underway to deliver workshops starting January 2021.

12. In March 2020 COVID-19 resulted in all umbrella pathway assessments being cancelled, due to the Government's directive to stop non-essential services. Some professionals were redeployed to front line acute care.

13. As a response to COVID-19, an increased support offer was developed for children and young people and their families by the Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) Team. This was accessible by those with an autism diagnosis, undergoing assessment or whose difficulties were in line with autism traits. Feedback from families has been positive. Families who were not previously known to SLT have also benefited. On-line resources were also made available which have been accessed by a high volume of people.

14. Following initial lockdown, clinicians who had not been redeployed focused their clinical Umbrella Pathway working hours to non-patient facing activities to support the pathway. This included triage and planning and diagnostic discussion. At the start of December 2019 there were 216 children waiting for diagnostic discussion. At the end of October 2020 there are 38 waiting for diagnostic discussion.

15. Trials of virtual assessments were also initiated in order to minimise additional waiting times within the umbrella pathway. Limitations were experienced according to the age of the child with greater success in the teenagers. Development of new/adapted assessment tools were also implemented by SLT. These have been introduced since September 2020 but again are only suitable for specific young people.

16. Recruitment to all clinical roles is now complete including appointment of a Consultant Paediatrician to Community Paediatrics who has extensive experience (12 years) in neurodevelopmental diagnosis. This offers opportunity to further strengthen the skills and knowledge within the pathway team to maximise efficiency within the pathway.

Current Position

17. Average waiting times within the Umbrella Pathway have improved overall since 2017 when average waiting times were reported as 157 weeks. Despite delays in recruitment and the impact of all clinical assessments being stopped (NHSE- Next steps on NHS response to COVID-19 – 17 March 2020) between middle of March 2020 to end of June 2020 due to COVID-19, there have been some improvements to the overall waiting times for autism assessment during the past 12 months.

18. This is due to the reduced waiting time between referral and planning and completion of assessments to diagnosis. Table 1 shows the waiting times from referral to planning meeting where evidence of graduated response are considered to decide if the referral should proceed for full assessment including which assessments may be needed. Table 2 shows the overall waiting times in the last 12 months from referral to diagnosis.

Table 1

Average waiting times in weeks from referral to planning meeting

| OCT 19 | JAN 20 | APR 20 | JUL 20 | SEP 20 |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 21.56 | 21.24 | 16.88 | 19.04 | 4.50 |

Table 2

Average waiting time on pathway in weeks - Referral to Diagnosis

| OCT 19 | JAN 20 | APR 20 | JUL 20 | SEP 20 |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 81.94 | 69.70 | 67.92 | 65.17 | 60.73 |

Next steps

19. Maintain new referral process with evidence of full graduated response is included in referrals with information from parents and schools.

20. Focus on recovery and restoration of specific assessments, despite ongoing COVID-19 restrictions.

21. Appointment of a project manager to ensure milestones of recovery are achieved, negotiating and implementing urgent actions in the event of any slippage.

22. Ensure all children and young people access a comprehensive Neurodevelopmental history at the start of the pathway to better inform the additional assessment needs.

23. Identify children and young people who are less complex or demonstrate strong traits of autism at the outset for 'one stop shop' assessment with prompt diagnostic discussion. (Example child recently referred to pathway and received diagnosis within 6 weeks of referral.)

24. Monitor impact of above on waiting times and other agreed key performance indicators (KPIs)

Purpose of the Meeting

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

- Consider the information in this report, including impact and limitations due to COVID-19;
- 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 and Families.

Supporting Information

Appendix 1 – Umbrella Pathway update October 2020 – presentation slides

Contact Points

Alyson Grice / Alison Spall, Overview and Scrutiny Officers, Tel: 01905 844962 / 846607
Email: scrutiny@worcestershire.gov.uk

Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance), the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

[Agenda and minutes of Council 9 November 2017](#)

[Agenda and minutes of Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board 24 May 2019](#)

[Agenda and minutes of Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel 25 September 2019](#)

[All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here](#)