

Dr Catherine Driscoll,
Director of Children's Services

Paula Furnival
Strategic Director of People

Worcestershire County Council
County Hall
Spetchley Road
WORCESTER
WR5 2NP

John Bostock
Department for Education

Our Ref:CD/KW

Date: 30th September 2020

Dear John,

Worcestershire Children First Progress Report

As Worcestershire Children First reaches its first birthday, a report has been prepared to summarise the progress made throughout the past year. The report is a joint report between Worcestershire County Council (WCC) and Worcestershire Children First (WCF) recognising the positive relationships that have been maintained and strengthened throughout the year.

When Worcestershire Children First successfully launched on 1 October 2019, there was no sign of a global pandemic. Fast forward a year and new operating procedures and policies have been developed, introduced and updated to ensure children and young people are kept safe and are accessing education. We remain incredibly proud of how we have responded to the challenge presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and this is evidenced in the attached report and supporting appendices.

This change in focus has resulted in Worcestershire County Council pausing the contracting monitoring arrangements since March 2020, as WCF is not able to operate as set out within the existing contract. In practice this has only meant that the formal contract monitoring meetings have not taken place as all other performance monitoring has continued e.g. WCF's Board and reporting to Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Panel. This is explained in more detail in the progress report. It is recommended that this practice is sustained for the longer term and the contract is officially varied to reflect this. As part of the DfE's consultation rights, we welcome your views on this and any other comments or queries you have on the reports attached.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Catherine Driscoll
Director of Children's Services

Paula Furnival
Strategic Director of People

Worcestershire Children First Report on first year of operation

INTRODUCTION

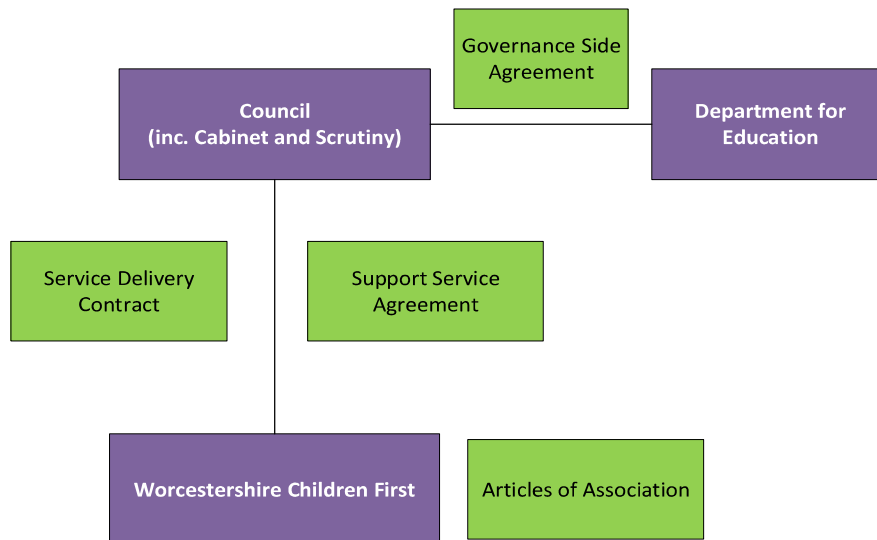
1. This report has been prepared jointly by WCC and WCF to set out the progress achieved during the first year of company operation in delivering children's services in Worcestershire. The Department for Education's Statutory Direction to Worcestershire County Council requires the provision of a joint report to the Department on the first full year of the company's operation with further quarterly joint reports thereafter.

2. On 1 October 2019, following a two-year programme of activity, Worcestershire Children First (WCF) officially took over the operational responsibility for the delivery of Children's Services on behalf of Worcestershire County Council (the Council). The decision to develop WCF as wholly-owned council company was made in direct response to the statutory direction published on 19 September 2017, with the Council agreeing to work in partnership with the Department for Education (DfE). During the company development WCC decided to include education and early help services in the company in order to facilitate a structure that minimised fragmentation of the system. The aim was that at the point of transferring services into WCF, services would be performing well and WCF would have a positive platform on which to sustain and continue to improve outcomes for children and young people.

3. In June 2019, the Council's Children's services were inspected by Ofsted. The judgement was published on 29 July 2019 and the service was judged to be Requires Improvement to be Good. Ofsted recognised that progress had been made in many areas of children's services in Worcestershire since the previous inspection in 2016, when the local authority was judged to be inadequate. They stated that effective work by senior management and staff, together with commitment and investment by political leaders, had led to improved responses to the needs of children and families. As a result, outcomes for many children and their families are better, and there is evidence of a sustained trajectory of improvement. This rate of improvement was a significant achievement for the Council and is testimony of the hard work and tenacity of the leadership team, managers and frontline staff, as well as the wider Council and safeguarding partners. Worcestershire was the first Authority nationally to achieve an improvement in Ofsted grading prior to establishment of an ADM. This progress demonstrates a strong basis for continued improvement.

CONTRACTUAL ARRANGEMENTS

4. As part of the development of WCF three contractual arrangements were developed and agreed. These are depicted in the diagram below and now form the basis of the relationship between WCF and the Council and the Council and the DfE.



5. The service delivery contract confirms what the Council is expecting WCF to deliver on the Council's behalf, how the Council will pay WCF along with how the Council will hold WCF to account for the services it has delegated to it. The service delivery contract also includes a set of obligations for WCF which include the production of a Business Plan and the maintenance of several key performance indicators within an agreed tolerance level.

6. The Support Service Agreement consists of a set of overarching core terms and 14 individual support service specifications ranging from HR, Property & Facilities Management, Finance and Project Management. These individual specifications describe the services to be provided by the Council to WCF along with the relevant financial information (e.g. the cost of the support services) and the relevant performance information.

7. The Governance Side Agreement is between the Council and the DfE and builds on the agreed Memorandum of Understanding and Statutory Direction. It is in place only whilst the Council remains under Direction.

8. Within the contractual arrangements, a monthly Performance and Commissioning Group (PCG) and a Quarterly Review Board were created. The PCG closely monitors the progress of the contractual Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Support Service Agreements and receives updates on actions taken by WCF and the Council. The PCG also reviews and monitors issues which may have an impact upon the WCF business plan. The Quarterly Review Board aims to provide a more strategic oversight to the governance arrangements and the PCG feeds into this group, providing an update of the discussion at those meetings.

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS: WCC AND WCF

9. There are strong working relationships between WCC and WCF which go far beyond the formal contractual monitoring arrangements and add the most value to improving outcomes for children and young people. The Chief Executive of WCF is the Council's appointed Director of Children's Services and as such has a direct line to the Council's Chief Executive and the Corporate Governance arrangements e.g. Strategic Leadership

Team, Council and Cabinet. The CEx/DCS also meets on a regular basis with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children’s Services.

10. During this time the Council has restructured and recruited a new Strategic Director of People who has the lead commissioning role of WCF within the Council. This has strengthened the strategic system leadership required to improve outcomes for the county’s children and young people. This has already led to a detailed commitment to the development of an all age disability programme of work.

11. WCF’s Director of Resources is a member of the Council’s Finance Management Team and has a place on the Council’s Chief Officer Group. All of WCF’s Executive Management Team have a direct relationship with the Council’s Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel reporting on performance and key areas of development/improvement as well as attending strategic partnership groups such as the Safeguarding Board and Children and Young People’s Strategic Group (a sub-group of the Health and Wellbeing Board). Through the Support Service Agreement, WCF colleagues also have a direct operational relationship with the key support services. In addition to this there are also three Council nominated (two Cabinet Members and one Strategic Director) who are Non-Executive Directors for WCF and attend monthly WCF Board meetings.

12. During the Covid 19 pandemic working relationships have been effective in response to the challenges facing the county. WCF has played a full part in the county’s emergency response arrangements to minimise duplication and meet need. An example of this partnership relates to supporting education providers. WCC and WCF worked together to ensure all education providers have undertaken a Risk Assessment to support the decision making through the different phases of recovery. Public Health, Health and Safety, Human Resources were the primary teams who reviewed the submitted Risk Assessments. SEND Services, School Improvement and Accommodation were also involved in the review and panel decisions. This trust and confidence has really enhanced relationships.

COMPANY GOVERNANCE

13. The governance structure for the Boards of Worcestershire Children First can be seen in the diagram below:



14. Monthly board meetings have taken place since go live with the first public meeting held on 18 February 2020. Both sub boards have met, with the Quality Assurance Board having an overview of the procedures in the Company and focused look at SEND and social care. The Risk, Governance and Audit Board reviewed the 2020/21 Budget

in detail for the Company prior to approval by the Board, received the External Audit Plan for 2019/20 and the Internal Audit arrangements.

15. The company has had the audited financial statements for 2019/20 approved by the WCF Board on 28 July 2020, following a detailed review by the Risk, Governance and Audit Board which was attended by our External Auditors. The audit report was positive and no issues to report to those charged with governance. The AGM is scheduled for the 1 October which will review the first part year of operation of the company. The annual report is attached at **Appendix 1**.

16. The WCF Board (including sub Boards) have continued to meet monthly since 1 October and governance remains strong.

17. Significant achievements have been made during the year of operation, including the seamless transition of support for children and families with no disruption at go live. The experience of other ADM services has been to see a drop in KPI's following transition to any company. WCF Quarter 3 and 4 data for 2019/20, alongside feedback from colleagues in DfE, Regional Schools Commissioner, Schools, partners and importantly our own staff has been positive.

18. As well as front line service delivery there are corporate governance arrangements that have to be delivered in partnership with colleagues in the Council through support services arrangements which are:

- Full monthly budget monitoring undertaken since go live in October 2019
- Submission to deadline of monthly VAT returns
- Payment of staff and suppliers and PAYE/ NI to inland revenue
- Cash management arrangements for the company – particularly important in a pandemic
- Full input and seamless reporting in the budget process 2020/21
- Joint finance meetings to ensure seamless service to WCF, the Council and Schools. Schools Budget process completed in consultation with the Worcestershire Schools Forum.
- Completion of audited financial statements for 2019/20. (Attached at **Appendix 2**)

WORCESTERSHIRE CHILDREN FIRST BUSINESS PLAN 2020/21

19. The Council requires WCF to develop and publish a Business Plan and the DfE requires the Council to consult with them prior to its approval. In September 2019, Cabinet approved WCF's Interim Business Plan which was adopted in time for the launch of WCF and continued until 31 March 2020 (the interim plan is attached as **Appendix 3**). The Business Plan is owned by WCF on a day to day basis and will be refreshed by WCF and approved by Cabinet on an annual basis. The Plan sets out WCF's vision and strategic goals for the next three-five years and outlines how they will deliver services for children, young people and families, on behalf of the Council. It also describes WCF's staffing and governance structure as well as predictions and proposals in relation to finances.

20. The refreshed 2020/21 Business Plan was approved by Cabinet (and the DfE), in March 2020 (attached as **Appendix 4**). It maintained the previously agreed aims for WCF

which are to improve outcomes for all children and young people in Worcestershire, by addressing their needs holistically through excellent early help and prevention, education provision and social care. Its Vision, Mission and Values define the way WCF will work to improve outcomes for children and young people. They are indicators of the direction of travel, to guide services and colleagues:

- **Vision:** Worcestershire to be a wonderful place for all children and young people to grow up
- **Mission:** Supporting children and young people to be happy, healthy and safe
- **Values:** Children at our heart. Value family life. Good education for all. Protection from harm.

21. Taking into consideration the population and deprivation statistics of Worcestershire as well as the current service levels, the Plan provided details of WCF's strategic goals over the next five years.

22. The Business Plan for 2020/21 outlined that, in the short term, WCF will focus on continuing the improvement of children's social care and safeguarding and SEND services as well as the following specific priorities:

- Implementation of Liquidlogic Case Management System – April 2020
- Supporting delivery of the Early Help Strategy 2020-2024 – April 2020 onwards
- Troubled Families Programme -throughout 2020/21
- Transfer and Integration of Learning and Achievement Services (Babcock Prime) – Transfer 1 June 2020
- Delivery of the Education and Skills Strategy 2019-2024 – Ongoing
- Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) Improvement Programme – Ongoing
- Supporting Families First (Edge of Care)
- Implementation of Family Safeguarding.

23. In the medium to longer term the Plan sets out that WCF will increase its efforts to co-produce with service users and have a relentless focus on delivering good quality, impactful services. Opportunities will be explored that will help deliver the vision and mission and aim to work effectively and efficiently within an agreed financial envelope. WCF also aims to have national recognition for the quality of services it provides and the positive impact it makes to children and young people's lives. The business plan has been reviewed due to the impact of Covid-19 (attached at **Appendix 5**) and provides an update on how the pandemic affected service delivery.

AREAS OF PROGRESS OCTOBER 2019 TO MARCH 2020

Children's Social Care and Safeguarding

24. Full detail of the service's progress and plan for development is attached in the Self - Assessment report attached as **Appendix 6**

25. The Social Care and Safeguarding service developed a plan on a page for the first year of the company. This set out the areas of focus identified by Ofsted in the June

ILACS inspection, priority areas for business development and areas for innovation. The plan is attached as **Appendix 7**.

26. Embedding a Quality Assurance and Performance (QAP) Framework has enabled a true and current understanding of what we are doing, how well we are doing it and what do we need to do differently to ensure we continue to develop and improve our services. Early on in our improvement work we established a three-dimension Framework for Quality Assurance including:

- Performance data
- Service User Feedback
- Audit activity

We have developed and embedded this framework throughout our services to help answer the important questions, how our services are being experienced by children, young people and their families and what difference we are making to their lives.

This framework is one of the service's key strengths and one of the things we are most proud of in our improvement journey to date.

27. We recognise that it is essential to 'close the loop' and embed the learning through a variety of activity and channels including staff communication, supervision, management oversight and training. Working alongside the Director for Social Care and Safeguarding and the senior leadership team, including the Principal Social Worker, dissemination of learning takes place across the Service in a range of ways:

- Case audit feedback to the individual Social Worker/Case worker and Manager at the time of audit
- Team Meeting and Staff Supervision
- Quality Assurance Reports
- Principal Social Worker News Letters
- End to End learning presentations - Whole Service Front Line Management meeting chaired by the Director of Social Care and Safeguarding

28. Family Front Door areas of good progress:

- Work with Police and Education colleagues on Thresholds (known locally as Levels of Need) shows a positive outcome with police contacts resulting in the need for a Social Work assessment rising from 33% to 36% in year and Education maintaining a high 69% through year. This positive trend evidences an increasing appropriate application against the agreed levels of need.
- Timeliness of Social Work Assessments remains a very positive indicator at 89%. This is significantly higher than Statistical Neighbour/ England averages of 79% and 83% respectively
- Repeat social work assessment at 16% remain lower than Statistical Neighbour/ England averages of 23% evidencing appropriate intervention at the conclusion of assessments meeting need.
- Multi Agency engagement in strategy discussions from Police, Health and Education has been a sustained positive indicator year to date
- Multi Agency work through the Safeguarding Board Quality Assurance sub group continues and is supported by a multi-agency audit and training programme.

- Quarterly audit activity and reflective practice sessions with our Safeguarding Education lead looking at education sector application of the Levels of Need guidance has led to a consistent improvement and understanding of social care's role in children's lives. The evidence of this is, consistency in education achieving 69% of their contacts resulting in level 4 needs outcome to children's social care.
- WCF are now a panel member on the Youth Justice led joint decision-making panel which started in November 2019. This is already demonstrating positive impact for information sharing, services provided to young people and links into early help offers for children and our GET SAFE agenda

29. Children in Need and Child Protection areas of good progress

- Our social work approach continues to ensure we offer support and assistance to a family early, through Early Help or our Child In Need interventions, but also to take proactive safeguarding action within Public Law Outline and Pre-Proceedings/Care Proceedings where there is no timely/sustained outcomes for a child, therefore this cohort should always be the lesser representative group.
- Our rise in the number of children and young people subject to child protection plans now put us in line with England averages. The rise in CP is reflective of our work with partners to:
 - Manage risk in the family home and prevent care where it is safe to do so.
 - Have firm and consistent application of threshold in each category of harm.
 - Address both premature closure at first review and long term "monitoring" of families in risk adverse practice.
 - Raise the understanding of the impact of Neglect on children.
- Our Data audit has shown a reduction in the number of children coming off a Child Protection plan at 3 months (first review) down to 16% year to date from 20% at 18/19-year end. We can also see a positive rise from 49% up to 57% in the number of children coming off a plan at 9 months in line with development of managerial oversight.
- In terms of sustainable outcomes for children, whilst we remain higher than Statistical Neighbours/England for repeat plans over 2 years, there is a continuing reducing trend in repeat plans in under 2 years down to 13% well below Statistical Neighbour/England averages of 21%. Audit has evidenced repeat plans over two years is reflective of historical (4 years +) poor decision making, professional over optimism and limited support on step down which has been addressed in our culture of practice improvements and by the use of the signs of safety model.
- Initial Child Protection Conferences resulting in a CP plan is 85%; this is reflecting the value of the multi-agency conversation and Signs of Safety methodology used in conferences to agree the true level of risk. Whilst this is a considerable improvement on data from 17/18 (averaging 77% and significant inconsistency) ultimately, we would seek this to be a higher outcome to ensure we are not putting families through the children protection process unnecessarily. This is a multi-agency journey that includes parents and young people to share and agree risks.
- We continue to see an increase in our Child In Need population to 46 per 10,000 from 42 for year end 18/19. The increase in Child In Need and Child Protection and decrease in Looked After new entrants is part of the scale of interventions. We would want to see this pattern continuing to recognise our vision of "Valuing Family Life" and ensuring families access early help and Target Family Support early and at the lowest level first.

- Our Outcomes for Children In Need shows a small % resulting in Child Protection and Care which is reflective of an appropriate threshold for social work service being applied.
- Data showing a reducing trend in the length of time children are open to CIN (9 months +) is a positive reflection of active work to achieve outcomes early with no drift and delay as was seen historically in this cohort.
- We continue to see a rising number of young people aged 12 years and over attending their conferences and having their views clearly represented at the child protection conference.

30. Looked After Children and Care Leavers areas of good progress

- The proportion of children subject to section 20 in care has further reduced from 21% last year to 14%.
- Placement stability is also improving at just under 70% of placements continuing for 2 years. This is supported with the success of consolidation meetings in seeking to avoid placement breakdown; currently standing at 78% of placements being maintained.
- NEET figures which were of concern in the last year are now showing a trend (Quarter 2 and 3) of reduction as a result of focussed activity between social care and education colleagues.
- Repeat care episodes are low with only 11 children in the last year.
- Last year 195 children achieved permanency within 6 months of entering care. This currently stands at 25% for this year which reflects timeliness within the PLO process.
- There has been a reduction in the use of placement with parents, currently at 4.5% which is below the England average. This is a result of targeted work on long term Care Orders and care plans for discharge being pursued as well as good quality court care planning.
- Children experiencing 3 or more placement moves is down to 8% from 11% last year.
- The HIT (Homeless Intervention Team) merged with Care Leavers in January 2020 due to the benefits in sharing skills, knowledge and working relationships with Housing colleagues.
- The Care Leavers participation group continues to organise a variety of activities and events and is focussing hard on trying to engage care leavers who are not in touch.
- A film was produced by a care leaver illustrating his own experiences of care and the care leavers service as well as those of a number of other young people. The film was presented to Corporate Parenting Board and a wider staff audience.
The film can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/P4EY2fiHM8E>
- There is regular liaison and review with the Ministry of Housing – Homelessness Advice and Support Team on progress being made and initiatives to avoid young people experiencing homelessness.
- Two additional Personal Advisors have been appointed following DFE funding for homelessness prevention.
- The two Housing panels in the county have been reviewed to re-focus their remit around difficult to place young people and seek joined up solutions. Weekly KPI's and data reporting to senior management on the use of Bed and Breakfast are now in place and clear action plans presented to move a young person to suitable accommodation as efficiently as possible.
- Specialist knowledge continues to be developed within the team around presenting issues such as substance misuse, self-harm, UASC and the avoidance of criminalisation.

- Care leavers in EET and those in suitable accommodation continues to be higher than the England average and statistical neighbours.

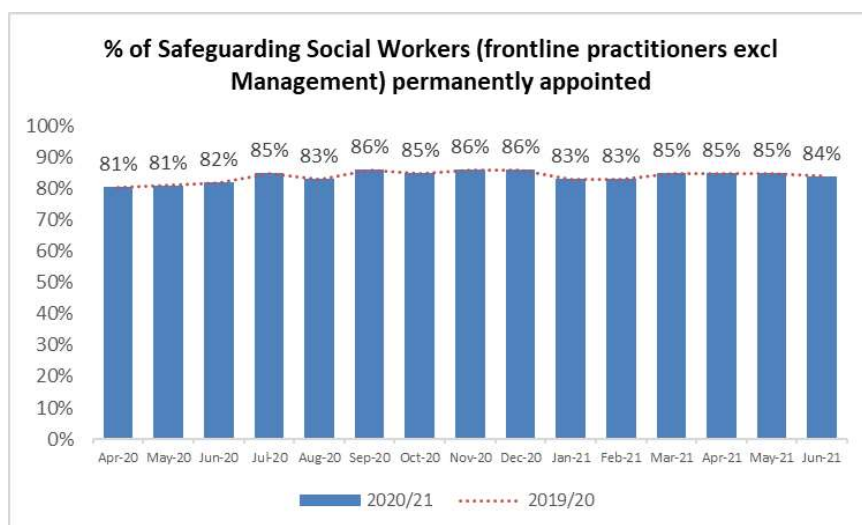
SOCIAL CARE WORKFORCE

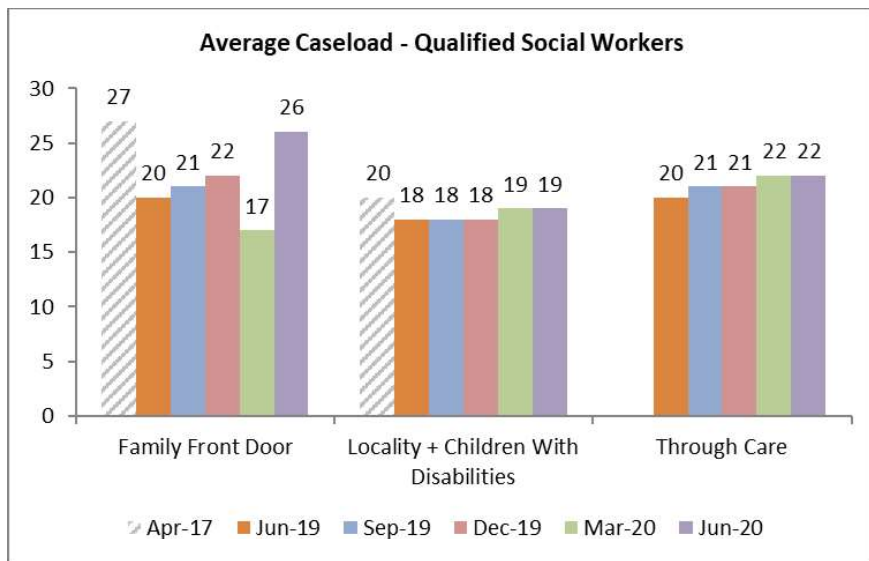
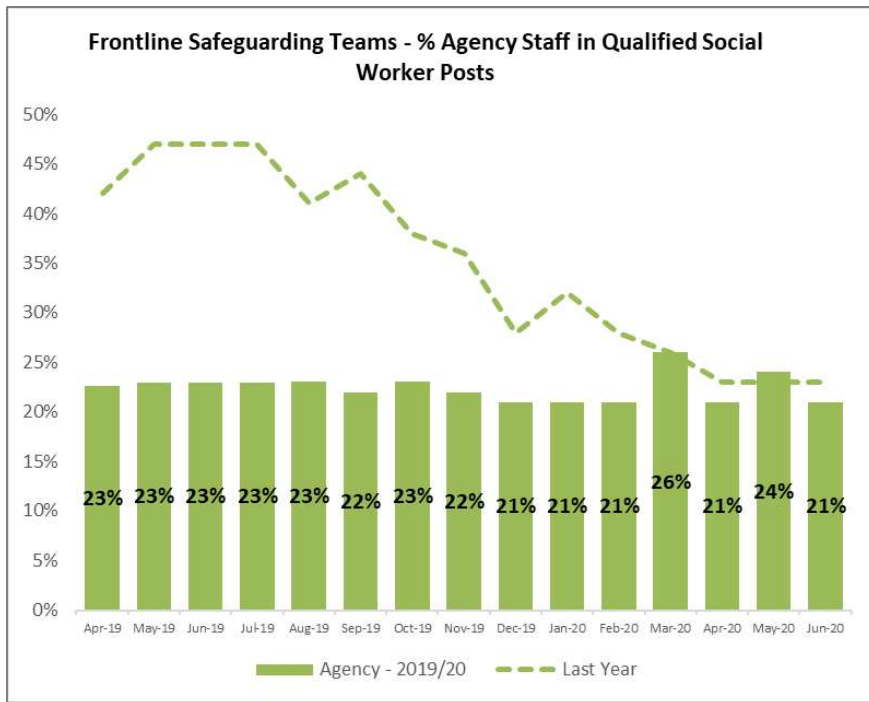
31. The Positive Outcome Project established in 2020 provides high quality 70 and 100-day student Social Work placements and increases capacity for direct work with children and young people across the county at level 3 needs.

32. Bi-annual Health Checks are undertaken, the most recent of these was completed over November and December 2019. The Health Check provides data that evidences our improvement and how we have sustained this over the last year, the finding were:

- 94% of staff feel listened to and have their worries and concern addressed by managers
- 88% of social work staff have dedicated monthly supervision that is reflective and includes review of performance
- 84% of social worker say they feel valued at work
- 71% of social worker feel they have a manageable case load
- 95% of staff feel their managers are visible, approachable and responsive
- 78% of social workers report receiving direct feedback on audits of their work
- 90% of staff say they receive regular information on learning from Quality Assurance activity within the service.
- 98% of staff feel Signs of Safety are using the Signs of Safety model and 94% feel this is a good tool for working with families
- 94% of social workers say they understand the Vision, Mission and Values of Worcestershire Children First and 91% say they understand how they and their team contribute to these.

33. Management Stability and Capacity is a fundamental foundation on which to build a stable workforce where staff feel supported, challenged and empowered to do the best thing for children and families. Permanent appointed posts remain stable.





SERVICE USER FEEDBACK

34. 94% of families asked told us that practitioners spoke with children and gained their wishes and feelings/views.

35. Good levels of attendance (64%) and participation (94%) by young people in their Looked After Child reviews achieved in 2019/20.

SEND IMPROVEMENT

36. The SEND Improvement programme has continued to make positive progress and improve outcomes for children, young people and their families. Feedback from our DfE and NHSE Advisors has commended the progress being made including the management of the transfer of the SEND Support Services from Babcock Prime to WCF: 'The LA is managing WSoA work well, but there are significant challenges. First, the financial pressures on the High Needs Block, second, senior interim officers leaving at the end of October 2019, third, the establishment of a new Alternative Delivery Model in October 2019, and the winding up of the current provider of SEND services, Babcock Prime, by October 2020. (Monitoring visit 5 July 2019) 'There is a strong sense of drive and optimism amongst the SEND Partnership Board members.....Previous concerns about the continuity of effort across both the organisational change, and personnel change in key lead roles in SEND have been considerably assuaged by this visit.' (Monitoring visit 6, Oct 2019).

37. A Joint Key Performance framework of indicators are monitored by the SEND Improvement Board to review and agree further improvements. This joint agency SEND Dashboard has been commended as an example of 'excellent practice' to be shared with other Local Areas.

38. Another area of significant progress is the rate of completion of Education, Health and Care plans. Since February 2020 the 20 week completion rate has maintained at 100% providing, with the exception of June 2020 (98%) where one EHCP was not completed on time. This improved timeliness includes improved holistic EHC needs assessment, improved timeliness of advice from health colleagues and most importantly better outcomes for children and young people.

TROUBLED FAMILIES PROGRAMME

39. Troubled Families Programme was in the final year of phase 2 of the 5-year programme in 2019/20. At June 2018 Worcestershire had completed 9 % of the programme and was faced with losing significant income. A recovery plan was implemented, and this was overseen by the MHCLG. In September 2020 it was agreed that the authority was no longer in recovery and had 'turned the programme around'. As we move to the end of Q4 we achieved 81% of the total programme and we exceeded our revised target. A significant recovery and beyond the revised projections made with MHCLG.

IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON SERVICE DELIVERY

Children's Social Care and Safeguarding

40. Children's social care services remained operational throughout the pandemic in order to protect and support vulnerable children. The model of operation changed as set out in the April 2020 emergency Covid 19 service delivery protocol for social care and safeguarding services focusing on a risk-based approach to face to face assessments and contacts.

41. The protocol has been updated in phases.

Phase 1 – March – June 2020. The initial management and emergency response to community lockdown.

Phase 2 – July – August 2020. Starting the road to recovery by opening more services and management of workload and workflow in preparation for phase 3.

Phase 3 – September – December 2020. This phase sets out how to reset services responding to demand, hidden harm and new ways of working. During this phase the impact and learning gained from phases 1 and 2 will be kept under review.

Phase 4 – will be launched January 2021.

42. The DfE have monitored performance during the pandemic and Worcestershire has consistently performed very well comparatively. The latest DfE analysis is detailed below:

Covid-19 Key Performance Indicators - Phase 3									
No.	Indicator	02/08/20	09/08/20	16/08/20	23/08/20	30/08/20	Stat. Neigh. *	Region *	National *
1	Children Looked After contacted by their Social Worker in the last 2 weeks	49.8% (407/817)	45.5% (372/817)	52.2% (428/820)	51.0% (419/821)	47.3% (390/825)	34.53	36.99	44.22
2	Children Looked After contacted by their Social Worker in the last 4 weeks	81.3% (664/817)	78.8% (644/817)	75.9% (622/820)	76.9% (631/821)	77.2% (637/825)	63.5	62.7	70.46
3	Children Looked After who have had their care plan reviewed in light of Covid-19	99.6% (814/817)	99.6% (814/817)	100.0% (820/820)	100.0% (821/821)	100.0% (825/825)	99.78	85.7	94.9
4	Children Subject of a Child Protection Plan contacted by their Social Worker in the last 2 weeks	85.9% (549/639)	80.3% (508/633)	78.6% (480/611)	81.5% (510/626)	78.4% (498/635)	76.96	72.35	77.12
5	Children Subject of a Child Protection Plan contacted by their Social Worker in the last 4 weeks	98.1% (627/639)	95.9% (607/633)	95.3% (582/611)	94.7% (593/626)	94.5% (600/635)	94.7	92.73	70.46
6	Children Subject of a Child Protection Plan who have had their care plan reviewed in light of Covid-19	100.0% (639/639)	100.0% (633/633)	100.0% (611/611)	100.0% (626/626)	100.0% (635/635)	99.73	89.83	95.99
7	Children in Need Contacted by their Social Worker in the last 2 weeks	52.7% (1109/2104)	49.8% (1032/2074)	50.6% (1050/2076)	49.8% (1043/2096)	43.1% (858/1993)	31.15	38.47	41.47
8	Children in Need Contacted by their Social Worker in the last 4 weeks	71.3% (1499/2104)	70.4% (1460/2074)	68.6% (1423/2076)	67.8% (1421/2096)	67.3% (1342/1993)	52.55	61.03	63.41
9	Children in Need who have had their care plan reviewed in light of Covid-19	88.7% (1866/2104)	88.7% (1840/2074)	88.8% (1844/2076)	90.4% (1894/2096)	92.1% (1835/1993)	89.78	76.76	86.19
10	Children Becoming Looked After in the Period	3	7	3	1	9			

43. The pandemic affected partners' service delivery arrangements which have had an impact on children's social care services. Additional low level contacts have been received at the Family Front Door from families and professionals seeking early help for children and young people, many reporting they were unsure of what other agency support was available or accessible during the pandemic and community lock down. These contacts were all responded to in order to provide the information and support required but they did not meet the level 4 safeguarding criteria of social work services.

44. Work is being undertaken via the Safeguarding partnership and directly with Early Help providers to ensure families and professionals do know how and where to access early help and to ensure these are accessible and effective for the families who need them.

45. Arrangements for moving looked after children onto permanency were slowed due to court capacity and community lock down. The number of children leaving our care this year were half of the number in the same period last year. Good safeguarding practice has been in place under our phase 1 and 2 protocols where CIN and CP cases have not been closed or stepped down due to the more limited ability to assess accurately the level of risk and the more limited engagement of partners in the lives of those children.

46. This has led to a higher than usual number of children Looked After as well as those subject to CP and CIN remaining open to the service. Phase 3 is designed to address this safely but will take time as new incoming work also needs to be managed.

47. These factors are having an impact on social worker caseloads which we need to monitor closely due to the increased demand seen as a result of schools returning and "Hidden Harm" being identified.

48. Contacts at the Family Front Door have been consistently higher than the same period last year for all contacts and domestic abuse contacts as follows:

Family Front Door contacts (excluding domestic abuse)	2019	2020
April	746	961
May	821	1,054
June	920	1,582
July	846	1,497
August	710	1,192
TOTAL	4043	6,286
Family Front Door Domestic Abuse contacts	2019	2020
April	288	417
May	290	425
June	220	524
July	365	482
August	324	406
TOTAL	1,487	2,254

Education

49. On 20th March schools closed to all pupils other than vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. From June schools welcomed pupils back from specific year groups. Worcestershire schools supported a better than national attendance of pupils during the wider re-opening period. However, this was still only 18% of the total school age population in school, with other pupils receiving their education through home learning.

50. WCF have led the Education Incident Planning Group, with school leaders from all phases and staff from WCC throughout the pandemic in order to provide guidance, advice and develop processes to support the continuation of education and plan for full return in Autumn term. Specialist task groups for early years, special schools and alternative provision run alongside the Planning Group to understand and address particular arrangements for children accessing this provision.

51. A comprehensive risk assessment (RA) document has been provided to all schools (maintained, voluntary aided and academies) to support both partial return and full return. The primary purpose of the RA is to ensure the safety of pupils, families and staff. For maintained and voluntary aided schools, WCC and WCF specialist public health, health and safety, education and HR teams, have reviewed the assessments to support full opening.

52. All schools were open by 7th September 2020 as follows:

Date of return	Maintained	Academy	All Schools
01/09/2020	5	0	5
02/09/2020	42	45	87
03/09/2020	75	62	137
04/09/2020	2	5	7
07/09/2020	1	6	7
	125	118	243

53. Many schools initially opened to specific age groups to plan carefully the implementation of the changes for pupils in line with the preventive measures described in their risk assessments.

54. There has been a positive return to school during September. Figures for 24th September show that 91.5% of pupils are in school compared with the national rate of 86.4%

55. There are positive Covid 19 cases in a small number of schools and the protocol to collapse 'bubbles' of children and staff to prevent transmission are in place. In the event of bubbles needing to self-isolate schools have prepared for and will implement a remote learning offer. Public health support and advice is available to schools through the Local Outbreak Response Team (LORT) supplemented by staff from WCF. Here 2 Help are assisting those families who need to self-isolate who require additional assistance.

56. The focus in the coming weeks is to ensure that children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are fully supported in school and that vulnerable children are back in school.

57. Ofsted will be making visits during the autumn term to a range of schools for the purpose of helping parents and the public to understand how individual schools are returning to the school's normal curriculum.

58. There are over 500 Early Years settings in Worcestershire in receipt of nursery education funding. We have worked with WCC and settings to support sustainability issues including the provision of grant opportunities. Figures for 17th September show all funded settings open with over 4000 children reported as attending. The Early Years sector has had the same access to risk assessment tools and Public Health advice including access to the LORT as the school sector.

CONTRACT MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

59. In late March 2020, WCC and WCF jointly agreed to a 'pause' of the contract arrangements as a result of COVID-19. This enabled the County Council and Worcestershire Children First to prioritise working together on co-ordinating their business continuity plans during the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring resource is put where it is required most to keep children and their families safe and supported.

In practice this has meant that:

- Any performance management implications relating to the KPIs have been suspended during this time, for example escalation processes.
- Covid-19 KPI data is shared with the County Council to ensure visibility of the changes in service provision during the pandemic and analysis from DfE national returns when the analysis is available.
- Contract variations apart from financial arrangements have been suspended during this time, including the KPI refresh.
- The Governance groups (PCG and QRB) have not met throughout this period. Instead regular (monthly) keep in touch online meetings are in place with key WCC and WCF colleagues.
- WCC and WCF continued to work together on business continuity planning / co-ordinating responses at all levels and communications and WCF colleagues form part of the emergency response.

60. During the pandemic the company has kept both Cabinet and elected members updated. The Chair of the Children's and Families Scrutiny panel expressed her thanks to everyone and said she "couldn't be more proud of the work we have done".

FINANCIAL POSITION

61. In 2019/20 the outturn for the company was a small net underspend of £0.5M after corporation tax (0.9%) on a £55M budget. The breakdown by service area is set out in the tables below. The £522k has been transferred to the company's retained earnings.

Service Area	Revised		Variance £000's
	Budget 2019/20 £000's	Outturn 2019/20 £000's	
Resources	2,152	1,938	-214
Support Services Contracts	3,518	3,518	0
Social Care and Safeguarding	35,832	34,780	-1,052
Education and Early Help	5,192	5,423	231
Home to School Transport	8,223	8,469	246
Youth Offending Services	254	254	0
Total Expense budgets	55,171	54,382	-789
Income	-55,171	-55,027	144
Net Expenditure before Tax	0	-645	-645

Retained Earnings

Opening Balance	0
Contribution to Retained Earnings (Net Profit)	522
Closing Balance	<u>522</u>

62. Whilst a robust process of assurance, review and authorisation surrounds the budget, some areas are clearly not without risk. Monitoring of the 2020/21 budget will be critical during the year particularly during Covid-19 and close arrangements are in place with Worcestershire County Council. The current financial position is challenging and there is considerable pressure on children's social care budgets, locally and nationally. The overall position for WCF at the end of August is a forecast overspend of £0.9m on a £120m budget or 0.8%.

63. The forecast deficit is driven by a recent increase in External Placements for Looked After Children, an increase which is in contrast to the relatively stable numbers seen over the last 12-18 months. There is evidence to show that some of the recent increase is Covid-19 related due to our ability to move children and young people onto permanent arrangements which has contributed to increased costs as children are not leaving care at the same rate as normal.

64. Detailed work is well underway in planning for 2021/22 Budget given the financial context the company will be given a contribution to meet unavoidable pay, inflationary and demand pressures in the contract price, but will need to make cost reductions / savings in order to ensure the budget is balanced, these reductions amount to £3m.

CONCLUSION

65. The first year of the Company has delivered considerable progress despite the unexpected challenges in dealing with the impact of Covid-19. The demand for advice, guidance and practical support has been relentless. The response from all teams has

been excellent and this has been acknowledged and appreciated by a wide range of partners and stakeholders. The delivery of our services has been well managed and has been a considerable achievement. Partnership working remains strong and effective. Our data and experience of delivery during the pandemic will influence service delivery and demand; we have the intelligence we need to inform our thinking as we plan and continue to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families.

66. Despite the challenges, performance is strong and we are innovating and growing. We are a trusted partner and have achieved a great deal in the first year in all aspects of service delivery.

67. We are in the process of planning for 2021/22 which will be financially challenging with increased demand for services with pressure and uncertainty for financial resources across the public sector. However, we have a sound platform to build upon and to address the challenges ahead.