

Corporate Parenting Board

Thursday, 8 July 2021, Online via zoom - 2.00 pm

Minutes

Present:

Cllr Andy Roberts (Chairman), Cllr Rob Adams, Cllr Lynn Denham, Cllr Matt Jenkins, Cllr Mike Johnson, Cllr Steve Mackay, Cllr Nyear Nazir, Cllr Fran Oborski, Cllr Margaret Sherrey and Cllr Tom Wells

Also attended:

Kate Bailey, Wyre Forest Strategic Housing
Sarah Dempsey, NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire CCG
Dr David Lewis, Designated Doctor/Paediatrician for Looked After Children
Sally Stokes, Neville Ebanks and Fred Whiston.

253 Apologies

Heather Manning sent apologies and Sarah Dempsey attended in her place.

254 Confirmation of the Minutes

The minutes of the last meeting held on 27 January 2021 were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting and would be signed by the Chairman.

255 Sufficiency Strategy

Adam Johnston gave a presentation on the Worcester Children's First Sufficiency Strategy for 2021.

Adam explained that the sufficiency strategy related to the process of ensuring that there are enough adequate placements for children and the avoidance of children being unnecessarily looked after.

Adam began the presentation by outlining the legislation and requirements of a sufficiency strategy for local authorities. The core piece of legislation being The Children Act 1989. The Act provides guidance on the requirement to provide accommodation to children in care and care leavers. Adam discussed several aspects and requirements of a sufficiency strategy including:

- the corporate parenting responsibilities,
- the measurement of outcomes for children using KPIs,
- the requirement to determine what is 'reasonably practicable' when considering placing children

with specialist or secure care needs,

- Ofsted service inspections which look at the experiences of children and their outcomes,
- separate focussed visit Ofsted inspections of children's homes,
- the legislation relating to unregulated semi-independent accommodation. Adam clarified that unregulated provision for children aged 16+ is not illegal. No children under 16 would be placed in unregulated provision.

Adam moved on to discuss the principles which underpin the sufficiency strategy. These included principles of:

- placing children locally to their family and friends,
- providing a 'family' experience,
- only using care when absolutely necessary,
- placing children with carers who are connected to the child in some way,
- only using residential care as a short-term strategy with the aim to place a child in long-term family care,
- providing ongoing support to care leavers which fits their needs,
- using short breaks to promote 'shared care' and provide support to parents.

Adam moved on to discuss how Worcester Children's First had developed over recent years and the journey of improvement which the organisation has been through. In 2016, Ofsted provided negative reports on several aspects of the service. Conversely, children's homes were rated as 'outstanding'. Adam explained that at the time, long-term, stable care was viewed as a criteria of a successful home. The focus in 2018/2019 shifted to improving permanency planning for children and placing more value on family life. Since 2019 the service has shown significant improvement across the board. In 2021, the sufficiency strategy aimed to sustain the improvements which Ofsted identified in 2016.

Adam moved on to present statistics relating to looked after children and care leavers which were used to inform the sufficiency strategy.

Finally, Adam summarised the planned elements of the strategy for the future. These included:

- Expansion of Supporting Families First provision to help WCF support care prevention aims.
- Foster care recruitment strategy, including the creation of a 'buddy carers' system.
- A review of Special Guardianship to allow children in family arrangements the opportunity to secure permanence by legal order.
- The conversion of Oak House into a semi-independent supported living provision.
- Refurbishment of all semi-independent provision.
- Maintenance of Riddings and Vale Lodge which have good Ofsted judgements.
- Planned closure of Hill View.
- Plans to maintain and expand relations with regional framework and local providers.
- In response to a trend of a rise in children with disabilities entering the care system, a pilot system was being developed where individuals with experience would go into the home to support the child and the parents.
- West Midlands bid for a new secure estate.

After the presentation questions were taken from the Board. Adam confirmed that he would distribute the slides and the sufficiency strategy to Board Members.

Fran Oborski queried how certainty is gained when a young person is taken into care that their experience is going to be better than their home life. Adam explained that this was established through a combination of approaches which are provided in the sufficiency strategy. Firstly, a child would only be accommodated if this is the only option for them. For children accommodated within Worcestershire, WCF ensure that the accommodation is to the highest possible standard. For children accommodated outside of the County, there is an expectation that the placements are well-rated by Ofsted. WCF will also maintain oversight of these external placements with the support of the regional

256 Work Programme

framework.

Steve Mackay asked whether the regional framework applies to children's residential homes in addition to semi-independent living provision. Adam confirmed that the established regional framework commissions external residential homes and foster placements. The regional framework for external semi-independent living had recently being established in partnership with several other authorities.

In reference to Greenhill Lodge Children's Home, Matthew Jenkins asked whether any lessons had been learned from the process of the closure of the home. Adam referred to the change in culture and attitudes over recent years which was discussed earlier in the presentation. There is now a greater focus on ensuring that the right provision is available for children and that it is fit for purpose.

The Chair reminded Board Members that due to the uncertainty caused by COVID-19, there was currently no work programme in place. Board Members were informed the next meeting would include an item on the issue of 'what is corporate parenting?'. There would also be an item on the recently published Independent Care Review. The Chair encouraged Board Members to read the executive summary of the review prior to this meeting. The Chair asked Board Members to email any suggestions of future items for discussion.

Mike Johnson queried whether there was any work being done which considered the potential benefits and disadvantages of Worcestershire Children's First being kept separate from the Council as opposed to being run 'in house'. The Chair confirmed this was being considered.

Lynn Denham raised that she had numerous general queries further to her attendance of the LGA webinar. She asked for some definitions and general queries to be addressed at the next meeting. Adam Johnston agreed that some of these discussions covered pertinent issues and should be discussed by the Board.

Robert Adams requested a verbal report at the next meeting on how looked-after children and care staff had

**257 Annual
Independent
Reviewing
Officer (IRO)
Report**

been coping over lockdown. The Chair agreed with Adam Johnston that an overview would be presented at the next meeting.

Sally, Fred and Neville presented the annual report for 2020/2021 on behalf of Sally Branchflower.

The report captured the performance of the Independent Reviewing Service, provided feedback on the service and highlighted priorities and improvements to the service for the year ahead.

After the presentation questions were received from Board Members.

Steve Mackay raised a question regarding the complaints and dispute resolution process. He asked about the circumstances under which the dispute resolution process might become necessary and how parents and carers are made aware of the process. Sally responded that the IRO will check in with the children, parents and carers in between reviews, at which point they may pick up on potential issues. If complaints arise, an informal approach is initially taken with the aim to work collaboratively to address issues. If, however, the issue does need to be escalated, they will ensure that children are kept informed on the process. Dispute resolution is an internal process used by the IRO only if parents feel they have not had an adequate response. It does not replace the existing complaints procedure.

Lynn Denham asked for clarification on the role of the IRO and the purpose of the report. It was explained that the purpose of the report was to provide an update on the annual findings of the service and also to provide a check of quality assurance, ensuring that the IRO are fulfilling their statutory responsibility to improve children's care. The overall role of the team is to ensure that children's care plans are appropriate and are being adhered to.

It was raised that the report included too many acronyms, making it difficult to understand. The team noted the feedback.

The Chair asked for further taster sessions to be arranged where Board Members could meet children or carers as this would help Board Members to better understand the various processes. This was agreed by the team.

258 Nomination for

The Chair asked whether a County Councillor member of

**the Virtual
School
Governing Body**

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**Quarterly Data
Report (Q4
2020/21)**

the Board would be interested in becoming a representative on the Virtual School Governing Board. Anyone interested should contact the Virtual School Head Teacher, Colette Maynard.

The Chair advised that the data report was provided to give members the information so that they were able to discuss specific aspects of the data with Children's Services.

Robert Adams queried the reference to the 'percentage of looked after children' being 'subject to s20' on page 20 of the report. It was clarified that s20 refers to Section 20 of the Children's Act. This section applies when there is no legal care order in place for the child in question to be accommodated, and that the authorisation for this has been given by those with parental responsibility for the child.

One Member commented that it was difficult to read the graphs when they were printed in black and white. It was noted that all agendas were available on the County Council's website where the graphs could be viewed in full colour.

In reference to data set number 3, the number of children who are unaccompanied asylum seekers, Lynn Denham asked what is done to offer these children the opportunity to engage with their culture such as by enabling them to participate in religious festivals. Adam Johnston explained that although this is being done to an extent, there is progress to be made. The current numbers of asylum-seeking children are low, and the children usually require immediate accommodation. However, attempts are made to find placements which match with their culture and beliefs.

In response to the interest around the support of asylum-seeking children, it was agreed that an item about the experiences of these children should be placed on a future work programme.

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**Future Meeting
Dates**

The remaining meetings for 2021 would be held on the following dates, at 2.00pm. The venue would be confirmed nearer the time but would hopefully be in person at County Hall.

- 5 October 2021
- 23 November 2021

The meeting ended at 4.15pm

Chairman