

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

12 NOVEMBER 2021

VULNERABLE LEARNERS (INCLUDING THOSE CHILDREN MISSING EDUCATION, ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION, YOUNG PEOPLE NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING, EXCLUSIONS, AND ALTERNATIVE PROVISION)

Summary

1. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education, the Director for Education, Early Years and Children with Disabilities (Worcestershire Children First) and the Assistant Director SEND and Vulnerable Learners (Worcestershire Children First) have been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on developments relating to Vulnerable Learners in Worcestershire.

Background

2. The Vision of Worcestershire Children First (WCF) is for Worcestershire to be a wonderful place for all children and young people to grow up, and we value good education as the best start in life for all children and young people. WCF champions the outcomes of all learners, but places a specific focus on vulnerable learners, with targeted support and monitoring.

3. The Worcestershire Education and Skills Strategy 2019 – 2024 sets out the ambition to promote and develop inclusion across the education system to ensure all children have access to a good educational experience and achieve good outcomes.

4. A vulnerable learner could be any child, at a particular time in their education or for a longer period, identified to be at risk of poorer outcomes or life chances. This report focuses on vulnerable learners in the following groups:

- children missing education (CME)
- elective home education (EHE)
- young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- pupils subject to permanent exclusion (PEX) and in receipt of alternative provision (AP)

5. Worcestershire Children First works with schools and settings, parents and carers, and with partner agencies to identify children, assess their needs and ensure timely access to appropriate provision.

Vulnerable Learners in Worcestershire

Children Missing Education (CME)

6. Children Missing Education refers to children who are not on a school roll. As of 15 October 2021, there were 20 registered CME cases, and 185 CME under investigation. The number of children registered as Missing Education has reduced over recent years as targeted interventions to secure education provision have become more successful.

7. Each case continues to be supported by a CME caseworker to ensure educational provision is successfully secured and those who present with additional issues are monitored through the multi-agency Missing Monday group. Missing Monday multi-agency meetings are held weekly and focus CME who we are unable to return to education quickly. Professionals work together to break down barriers to education and to identify and act upon safeguarding issues. This meeting also focuses on children and young people who have been excluded from school and children who may have previously been EHE.

8. Schools and external agencies are continually encouraged to use the centralised hub to provide details for WCF to track, monitor and action CME. The success of this and diligence of casework to ensure the LA's statutory duties are being fulfilled is demonstrable through the reduction seen in those children who are registered as CME.

9. A Fair Access Protocol (FAP) was designed in 2013 to ensure all unplaced children, especially the most vulnerable, were offered a suitable school place without any delay. A review of the FAP including schools as stakeholders in 2019/20 concluded that too few children were being successfully placed, and, following consultation, a new protocol was written and implemented in September 2020. Following 2 years of only placing 1 or 2 pupils through FAP, placements for 8 pupils were agreed with schools during the 2020/21 academic year. This ensured that learners did not remain CME for longer than necessary. The process is now embedded, promoting inclusivity, and schools have an improved understanding that all pupils presented at FAP for discussion will be placed.

Elective Home Education (EHE)

10. Parents and carers can elect to home educate their children by way of Section 7 of the Education Act 1996 in that it obliges:

The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause them to receive efficient full-time education suitable - (a) to their age, ability and aptitude, and (b) to any special educational needs they may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

11. The total number of learners who are Electively Home Educated (EHE) across Worcestershire currently stands at 903. Covid-19 had a significant impact on the numbers of EHE and this impact was seen across the country. There has been an increase of 36% since September 2020, when the number of EHE was 678. The highest number of EHE was in May 2021 at 979. Since May 2021 we have seen 156 children and young people return to school. For this academic year, the numbers currently remain static.

12. When a parent or carer informs a school of their intention to home educate, an exit interview form is used by all schools which confirms parental responsibilities. The form is returned to WCF and a triage officer will contact the family within 10 days to discuss the decision and next steps. If the child is open to social care or has an Education, Health and Care Plan then contact is made with the relevant case workers. These actions have made the service more responsive and the process more robust.

13. There is no national data for a comparison, but the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) undertake a survey of all Local Authorities and in October this year they reported a rise in EHE cases of 38%. The figures for Worcestershire are in line with this. The main reasons given in Worcestershire for the rise are a growing number of families who enjoyed educating their children at home and anxiety of Covid transmission in school, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

14. WCF supports, tracks and monitors young people who are not in Education, Employment or Training, with the aim that they access an education or work placement. The percentage of 16– 18year olds currently NEET is 1.9%. During 2020/21, the impact of Covid resulted in a lower take-up of apprenticeships and increased reporting of mental health issues for students, whose studies and grades were affected by the pandemic.

15. WCF services are working with providers and partner agencies to ensure suitable provision is offered. This includes direct work with young people, additional support for those who are vulnerable and joint work with SEND, Social Care, the Virtual School and Youth Justice Service.

16. WCF is working with the Skills team in WCC to update the NEET Strategy which is currently receiving stakeholder input. In addition, to support those young people at risk of NEET, a project has been initiated with the Careers Hub and Careers Enterprise Company to review and assess the effectiveness of the Risk of NEET Indicator and its use by schools. Transition support will be available for those at risk of NEET (including Children Missing Education and those Electively Home Educated) towards the end of the academic year to secure a positive destination.

Exclusions and Alternative Provision

17. The number of permanent exclusions in Worcestershire since September 2021 is 26. Inspection of Worcestershire's Local Area response to the 2014 Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Reforms in 2018 identified that permanent exclusions of pupils with SEND were too high and that inclusive practice in mainstreams was inconsistent. WCF are on a trajectory for addressing the issues highlighted by Ofsted in 2018. An overview of the fixed term and permanent exclusions can be found in Appendix 1.

18. In 2019 the Timpson Review reported a national rise in exclusion rates since 2013/14 and raised concerns about poor outcomes for these learners. There is considerable research evidence describing the negative impact of being excluded, both for the pupil and their parent/carer. Exclusion adversely affects emotional well-being, educational achievement and can be associated with mental health problems, criminality and poor outcomes in adulthood. The 2019 OFSTED framework for schools has a renewed focus on ensuring schools' use of exclusions and use of alternative provision complies with statutory guidance, evidenced in school inspections in Worcestershire since its introduction in September. The 'good' grade descriptors for the quality of education judgement include 'leaders use or construct a curriculum that is ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and including pupils with SEND, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life'.

19. Local authorities are responsible for arranging suitable full-time education for permanently excluded pupils who would not receive suitable education without such provision being made. This applies to all children of compulsory school age resident in the local authority area, whether or not they are on the roll of a school, and whatever type of school they attend. Full-time education for excluded pupils must begin no later than the sixth day of the exclusion.

20. Where a pupil has been permanently excluded from a school and cannot access appropriate provision in another mainstream school, WCF is committed to the appropriate use of Alternative Provision with successful integration as a key outcome.

Exclusions and Alternative Provision Review

21. Children and young people who access AP (Alternative Provision) are amongst some of the most vulnerable pupils. WCF recognises the challenges of offering engaging and purposeful educational AP opportunities, and is aware that many current providers also work hard supporting students and their families experiencing significant social, emotional and mental health issues. **To respond to the Education and Skills Strategy a review of exclusions and alternative provision was launched in 2020.** Research carried out as part of the review in 2020 reveals that Worcestershire reflects the national position, where there are systemic barriers locally to ensuring every AP pupil obtains better outcomes. The aims of this review are:

- To understand the current model and practice of exclusions and use of alternative provision in Worcestershire
- To agree future needs and aspirations in regard to exclusions and use of alternative provision

- To agree a sustainable and effective approach to exclusions and use of alternative provision which will meet future needs and aspirations for children and young people

22. WCF sees the AP system as part of the wider educational landscape, it is both influenced by and impacts on mainstream and special sectors. The review has held collaboration at its core, and WCF values the time and feedback from professionals, pupils and parent/carers at each stage of developing the implementation plan. WCF are committed to embedding on-going participation within the cycle of evaluation and review across AP commissioning. The implementation plan for the Review can be accessed in Appendix 2.

23. Worcestershire has been successful in Preventing School Exclusions RSA (Royal School of Arts) research and development bid, as one of 3 Local Authorities in the country. RSA will support the Local Authority to:

- Establish working collaboratives of schools, statutory and non-statutory services, committed to reducing preventable exclusions
- Co-design collaborative processes for identifying and assessing children at risk of exclusion, responding to their needs and testing preventative interventions

24. A six weekly Early Years and School Inclusion Forum chaired by the Assistant Director for SEND and Vulnerable Learners examines attendance and inclusion data by school and identifies actions including challenge and support to settings where concerns are identified. Settings with the weakest outcomes are identified and trends in data considered and triangulated against practitioner feedback and understanding of the setting's specific improvement journey. This challenge and support does lead to change in practice, policy and procedure in schools and settings and where actions are not considered effective, appropriate escalation procedures are taken.

Conclusion

25. Improving outcomes for vulnerable learners is a priority for WCF and is a priority within the 2021/22 Business Plan. System wide understanding and actions for children have been undertaken and Worcestershire has a better understanding and capacity to take actions to support children and young people. Further actions and work together is intended to improve and sustain access to education for all children including actions and the approach at a school level.

Purpose of the Meeting

26. The Panel is asked to:

- consider and comment on the information provided, asking questions of the present Chief Officers if relevant; and
- determine whether any further information or scrutiny on a particular topic is required.

Supporting Information

Appendix 1 - Fixed Term and Permanent Exclusions Summary

Appendix 2 - Exclusions and Alternative Provision Review Implementation Plan

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 Director of Children's Services) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

- Agenda and minutes of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel 10 May 2019 [Link to Report on Children who are Educated Otherwise](#)

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