



Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 13 January 2021

Attendance

Members of the Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur
Cllr Beverley Momenabadi
Cllr Rita Potter (Chair)
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Rashpal Kaur
Cllr Sohail Khan (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Paul Sweet
Cllr Jasbinder Dehar

Co-opted Members (5)

Cyril Randles Church of England – Diocese of Lichfield Representative
Anna Tabner, Wolverhampton Youth Council
Kiesha Riley, Wolverhampton Youth Council

In Attendance

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre, Cabinet Member Education
Cllr John Reynolds, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer
Julia Cleary	Systems and Scrutiny Manager
Helen Winfield	Head of Community Financial Support
Alison Hinds	Deputy Director of Children's Social Care
Courtney Abbott	Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner for Children and Adults
Emma Bennett	Director of Children and Adult Services

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

1 **Welcome and Introductions**

Cllr Rita Potter, Chair, welcomed everyone to the virtual meeting and advised it was being live streamed to the press and public. Cllr Potter advised that she was not expecting any exempt or restricted items on the agenda. A recording of the meeting would be available for viewing on the Council's website at a future date.

2 Meeting procedures to be followed

Cllr Potter explained the protocol to be followed during the meeting for asking questions and reminded everyone that microphones should be muted and cameras off, unless they have been invited to speak.

Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, invited all attendees to introduce themselves to confirm they were present at the meeting.

3 Apologies

Apologies were received from the following member of the panel:

Cllr Claire Simms

4 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 Minutes of the previous meeting (11 November 2020)

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2020 be approved as a correct record.

6 Matters arising

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

7 Spotlight Review - Safeguarding the most vulnerable

Alison Hinds, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care, presented the report about the work done to support vulnerable children. The Deputy Director outlined the response of the service since the 23 March 2020 when the Council workforce including social workers and members of the MASH team were advised to work from home due to national lockdown restrictions. The Deputy Director commented that the majority of staff adapted well to changes. The service has worked closely with partner agencies to support vulnerable children during the period.

The service introduced alternative methods to communicate with children and families such as social media apps. The service had quickly implemented risk assessments of all children registered to help understand where the risk of vulnerability was and their need for safeguarding. All cases were rated according to outcome of risk assessment. The Deputy Director commented that some children liked the option of virtual meetings using either Teams or WhatsApp while others wanted to continue with face-to-face meetings. The service monitors daily performance information to ensure proper oversight and reassurance that children are being seen according to their risk assessment.

The Deputy Director commented on the charts detailing visits made to vulnerable children and changes in performance since the start of the lockdown. The number of visits reduced in March but has improved in later months.

The Deputy Director commented on the work done with parents of children in need of support and the work done to encourage them to send their children to school. The Deputy Director presented a chart on number of vulnerable children attending school. The DFE has offered support to vulnerable children through a rollout of Government laptops loan scheme to allow them to access online learning resources.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that meetings concerning vulnerable children have continued remotely using Teams. The feedback from children and young people has been positive and attendance rates has also improved which has helped to improve multi agency decision-making. The learning from the experience will be used to adapt the approach taken in the future to get the most out of the opportunities when working remotely with children. The service initially suspended face-to-face family meetings at the start of the pandemic but there are now increased opportunity to do this with reopening of the Family Time Centre.

The Deputy Director commented there has been a significant decrease in the number of referrals to the MASH during early stages of the lockdown. The majority of referrals were made by the police and there was a high incidence of referrals involving domestic abuse due to children being at the home. The increase in referrals reflects the situation of what was happening nationally.

The Deputy Director commented on the range of support offered to care leavers.

The Deputy Director commented on improvements in the stability of placements, particularly internal foster placements. The service continues to encourage children to be involved with participation and engagement groups, which have continued virtually. Health assessments for children in care have also continued virtually and the feedback has been positive from children who have liked the feeling of being in more control of the situation.

The Deputy Director explained the changes to the temporary statutory guidance issued in April 2020. Further updated statutory guidance was issued in September 2020 which reduced the use of previous flexibilities for children's social care services. The guidance supported the temporary model of working which had already been implemented. The Deputy Director briefed the panel about the range of additional support offered to families.

The panel thanked the Deputy Director for the presentation.

The panel queried when the extension of Stay Safe Be Kind helpline to families experiencing financial and emotional vulnerabilities would end. The Deputy Director advised the panel that the helpline service will continue to offer families support but other referral pathways have been developed according to need.

The panel wanted to record their formal thanks and appreciation of the work done by children services teams to support families and their commitment to care leavers.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.

8 **Children's Social Care Self Evaluation**

Alison Hinds, Deputy Director, Children's Social Care, presented a report which detailed the findings of a mid-year review of children and young people's services as part of a self-evaluation exercise.

The Local Authority is required to produce a self-evaluation report. The information collected is helpful in understanding how the Local Authority is delivering its services, what is being doing well and what needs to be improved. The information is also a useful source for Ofsted when reviewing the performance of services. The Deputy Director referred to previous comments on the impact of the national pandemic on the service.

The Deputy Director commented on the implementation of a new electronic children's record reporting system called Eclipse. The system went live on 21 September 2021 and enables the service to record the whole of a child's journey to be recorded on one system.

The Deputy Director commented on the successful migration of data from the old to the new system, with only a small number of issues and overall, the whole transition has been really positive.

The Deputy Director commented on demographic profile of the City's population and advised the panel that there are 263,357 people who live in the City, 62,276 of these are children under the age of 18. The Deputy Director provided an analysis of the number of children receiving support as at the September 2020 and commented on the reduction in the number of children and young people in care.

The service is continuing to see a reduction in the number of children young people in care and there is a program of making sure services are directed at the right level to children and families across the City. The service continues to work virtually and monitor children with a Child Protection Plan. The Deputy Director commented on the decrease in the numbers of children in need, which is lower than usual, but this may be due to impact of Covid. The Deputy Director commented on the early provision of services and the work with local partners to offer families professional support.

The Deputy Director commented on the values of the Children Services and gave details about the progress made to apply them in practice. The provision of services for children in need of help and protection The services was last inspected by Ofsted in March 2017. Ofsted made a further inspection visit in September 2018 and the findings highlighted areas for development, which have been included in service improvement plan.

The service is committed to giving children the best start in life. The Deputy Director commented on the key themes in the Plan on a Page 2020-2021 document and highlighted examples of work being done to achieve them.

The Deputy Director commented on the findings from quality assurance work and explained how the service has significantly improved the way in which audit is undertaken and the value of the information collected during the process in helping managers to understand the impact of services delivered to children and families. The feedback from the audit process has been well received by the workforce.

The Deputy Director commented on improvements in the recruitment and retention of children's social workers and that the overall picture was very positive, with the vacancy rate at 15.8 per cent. This compares to 28 per cent vacancy rate in children's social work posts in March 2019. The stability in workforce also helps to create greater stability for children and families.

The Deputy Director commented that the service is working hard to reduce the rate of exclusions from schools in Wolverhampton. The service has introduced the Culture of Belonging programme which is a whole system approach to supporting schools to be inclusive and to provide alternative options to exclusion. The programme is supported by schools and other partners in the sector. The service has increased resource to support children in families where there is a risk of exclusion, if extra help is needed. The Wolverhampton Child Contact Centre has now re-opened and offers a setting for more intensive family support work.

The Deputy Director commented on the range of work being done to support children at risk of exploitation and advised the panel that there will be a review of how existing services respond to reported concerns about vulnerable children. The work will be supported by a programme of training and workshops.

The Deputy Director commented on the number of missing children in Wolverhampton which has increased steadily over the last few months. This is due to the police changing their processes regarding missing and absent classification. The service expected the number of reported cases when schools reopened in September 2020 to surge, but the picture locally and nationally has been instead a small increase in the numbers. The expectation is that the number of missing children will remain stable. The stability of placements has improved during the period of the report.

The Deputy Director commented on the work of Fostering Service and reported that 127 children from across the Black Country were matched to adopters and of these 46 were Wolverhampton children. The Adoption@Heart regional adoption agency which is hosted by Wolverhampton is working well with 51 prospective adopters approved in its first year of operation.

The Deputy Director commented on the data about the health and wellbeing of children in care and the work being done to understand their emotional health and well-being particularly during this period. The service is using regular assessments to gather information and also to meet the Council's statutory responsibilities for reporting on looked after children. The Deputy Director commented on the impact of work done by social workers and other professionals which has contributed to the improved educational outcomes for children and young people.

The rate of school attendance for children in care is high with low levels of persistent absence and there was no one who was permanently excluded from school in the 2019/20 academic year. Furthermore, six Wolverhampton care leavers graduated from University in 2020 and currently there are 26 care leavers in higher education.

The service is working hard to support employment, education and training opportunities for care leavers and is very conscious of the impact that Covid-19 has had on this particular age group.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that care leavers have a choice of accommodation provision including; supported lodgings dependent on their needs, training flats, and independent accommodation for people aged over 18. The Housing Support Service has 33 flats. Each young person living in one of these homes has a designated Housing Support Worker (HSW) who remains with them throughout their time in the service. The level of support varies but there is a

maximum of up to 30 hours available per week. As the young person progresses, the number of hours of support will decrease. The level of support would be set out in an individual support plan for each young person.

The Deputy Director advised the panel of the summary of achievements in 2019-2020.

The panel wanted to record their formal congratulations on level of commitment across the service to support children and young people and excellent progress made as detailed in the presentation.

The panel queried the information on the number of school exclusions and the work of Culture of Belonging programme to provide alternative options. The panel requested more details about the programme. The Deputy Director advised the panel that the programme is a whole system approach which involves working together with school partners to not only reduce the number of exclusions but also to promote inclusivity in schools. There is a focus on supporting the young person with issues and taking a multi-agency approach. The programme is supported by extra workers, who will also be working with the family of the young person.

The panel queried if there was data that could be shared about the impact and effectiveness of the programme in achieving its stated aim. The Deputy Director advised a report could be presented to a future meeting but added the disruption caused Covid 19 which has led to lengthy school closures would make comparison on school exclusions to the previous period difficult.

The Deputy Director suggested than an update on the programme to a future meeting which include information on the success of the programme in reducing the number of school exclusions.

The panel queried how vulnerable children with ADHD or special needs have been affected Covid-19 restrictions and school closures and how they are coping with the disruption caused.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that child assessments have continued since the start of the pandemic and gave reassurance about the work being done to encourage and support vulnerable children to attend school.

The panel queried the support for children with special needs who may be reluctant to attend school and there was concern that issues may not picked up when they are at home. The Deputy Director reassured the panel about the work done with parents and carers to offer continuous support and encouragement to vulnerable children. The service has increased capacity. In addition, the service has increased the capacity in the Attendance Team.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that there was an expectation that attendance would not be high at the start of September but the service provides follow-up support to the more vulnerable children who either were struggling with confidence issues or who had health and safety concerns. The service is also working closely with the increasing number of families who are chosen to home educate their children.

The panel requested that a report which gives details about the use of specialist assessment tools referred to in the presentation to a future meeting. The Deputy Director gave examples of the assessment tools used by social workers and explained that their use would depend on the needs of the family.

The Deputy Director agreed to present a report to a future meeting of the family.

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre, Cabinet Member Education, praised the dedication and efforts of the employees working in Children Services in supporting families under very difficult circumstances since the start of the pandemic.

The Cabinet Member also highlighted the improved situation in terms of improving outcomes for children and the reduction in the number of children in care compared to that of neighbouring authorities.

Cllr John Reynolds, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People also wanted to formally record his thanks for employees who have contributed to the improvements highlighted in the report. The Cabinet Member also thanked the work of the schools and the partnerships which have contributed to this success.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to note the progress.
2. The panel agreed that the Deputy of Director, Children's Social Care, to present a report to a future meeting of the panel on the assessment tools used by service when determining the level of support offered to families and their children.

9

Welfare Rights Briefing

Helen Winfield, Head of Community Financial Support, introduced the presentation. The Head of Community Financial Support in response to a query advised the panel that there was no news about the continuation £20 weekly benefit increase currently given to people receiving Universal Credit after March 2021. The LGA and other organisations are lobbying the Government to extend the scheme.

The Head of Community Financial Support advised the panel of the structure of the Welfare Rights Team and explained that the service provides advice and information to social workers in order to support families through the benefits claiming process. The service also undertakes complex casework to challenge DWP decisions.

There is a recognition that the need for Council services and resources is often due to financial instability as a result of benefit loss or underpayment. The Head of Community Financial Support commented on the impact of the implementation of Welfare Reform measures on social security benefit claimants.

The underpayment of social security benefit was highlighted as contributing to the issue of financial instability more so than other welfare reform measures such as the benefit. More recently the pandemic has affected people who were perhaps financially secure before with the expectation that as restrictions are relaxed their situation will improve and therefore this will decrease the need for Council services and resources.

The Head of Community Financial Support presented a chart detailing a comparison between the potential and actual benefit and explained the reasons for the decline in gains 2019/2020 compared to previous years. The Head of Community Financial Support added that the service is supporting children and families who need financial support calculations or who going through a process of permanent placements for children and young people in care.

The Head of Community Financial Support advised the panel that CYP Financial Officers have been undertaking Financial Support Calculations (FSCs) for permanent placements for children and young people in care since 2015.

However, in November 2017, the FSC Policy was revised. This resulted in an increased amount of work for the Welfare Rights Officer as the calculations were more complex. As a result of the revised policy there was, and continues to be, increases in revenue gains. However, this has increased the amount of work involved in the FSCs and reduced the Welfare Rights Officer's ability to do benefit maximisation work, hence the decline in benefits gains figures since this time.

The panel queried how the service is promoted to the public who may need help and the referral process.

The Head of Community Financial Support responded that it is second tier service and its primary function is to support social workers and people in the voluntary sector.

If the benefit case becomes complex and representation at a tribunal is needed then there is a referral process for the voluntary sector.

The panel welcomed the report.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.

10 **Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel 2019 20 - Draft Work Programme**

Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, introduced the report and detailed the agenda for the next meeting on 10 March 2021. The Scrutiny Officer advised that the issues discussed at the meeting will be used to inform the work programme.

The panel discussed the issue of the difficulties experienced by children being taught remotely, which has highlighted the digital divide. The panel requested a report to be presented on the work being done to meet different needs and support remote learning. Cllr Beverley Momenabadi, Digital Innovation Champion, advised the panel of sources of help available schools who are struggling with accessing sufficient laptops or mobile devices and other challenges such as the lack of mobile data and broadband or children having to share laptops. The panel were also advised that Councillors can also use their local ward funds to help meet needs from schools. The panel were advised to contact the Councillor directly to discuss the different options available to support schools in meeting their needs.

The panel agreed to receive a report to a future meeting to discuss the issue of the digital divide and the work being done to get children online.

The panel discussed concerns about the mental health impact on young people as a result of the pandemic and also on their emotional wellbeing. The Director of Children's and Adult Services advised the panel that on the agenda for the next meeting is a spotlight on health and well-being. The report will include an update on the emotional well-being of young people.

The panel suggested that an update report on the school improvement strategy which comments on an gaps in provision and also progress made. The panel agreed to add this issue as a future work programme item

The panel discussed the apprenticeships and job opportunities for care leavers, particularly given the challenging employment situation. The panel agreed to add this item to a future work programme.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to update the panel work programme to include the items suggested during the discussion.