

CABINET MEMBER DECISION

18 NOVEMBER 2022

PROPOSED CLOSURE OF THE RIDDINGS CHILDREN'S HOME

Relevant Cabinet Member

Andy Roberts, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families

Relevant Chief Officer

Tina Russell, Director of Children's Services

Local Member

Councillor Adrian Hardman

Recommendation

- 1. That the Cabinet Member agrees to the proposed closure of Bricklehampton (the Riddings) children's home.**

Background

2. In July 2022, the Leader delegated to the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families responsibility for taking all decisions in relation to the review of the operation of Bricklehampton (The Riddings) Children's Home.

3. Since the last full Ofsted inspection in June 2019 when Worcestershire Children's Services received a judgement of **Requires Improvement to be Good**, Worcestershire Children First (WCF) has maintained its aspiration to continually improve, sustain and innovate service delivery.

4. The statutory direction by the Department for Education was removed in November 2021 and the early removal of the Support and Supervision phase followed thereafter in June 2022.

5. This improvement journey is underpinned with an ambition to prevent care wherever safe and appropriate and support children to remain within their families; to focus on timely permanency planning for children in care; and to enable children to thrive in good placements when care is unavoidable.

6. On 24 June 2021 Cabinet approved a series of recommendations for the re-purposing and operational adjustments for a number of WCF supported semi-independent provisions and residential homes.

7. Worcestershire County Council currently own two children's homes and two short break units that are operated by WCF as an in-house service:

- **Moule Close** – Kidderminster, 4 bed short break unit for children with disabilities aged 5-18 years.
- **Providence Road** – Bromsgrove, 6 bed short break unit for children with disabilities aged 5-18 years.
- **Vale Lodge** – Evesham, 4 bed residential home for children and young people with disabilities aged 10-18 years.
- **Riddings** – Bricklehampton Nr Pershore, 4 bed residential home for children and young people with Emotional, Social and Behavioural difficulties aged 10-18 years.

8. Moule Close, Providence Road and Vale Lodge all received full Ofsted inspections between November 2021 and March 2022 with judgements of **Good**.

9. The Riddings children's home underwent a full Ofsted inspection in June 2022 with a judgement of **Inadequate**. The last inspection was carried out 30 August 2022 where the Compliance Notice was deemed to be met, but the restriction on placing other children into the home was retained. Ofsted advised that if WCF plan to accommodate any further children a full re-inspection would have to be undertaken first.

Current Service Performance for Children at the Edge of Care and Children in Care

10. From the inception of Supporting Families First in January 2020, the original cohort of 51 children deemed to be on the edge of care have been tracked. Over 2 years later, 69% remain closed to Children's Social Care, one child became subject to a child protection plan and eight children (16%) are Looked After. This demonstrates positive long-term outcomes for over two thirds of the cohort who have remained at home safely with their families.

11. In essence, the Supporting Families First (SFF) approach works in preventing family breakdown and supporting parents to build positive relationships within their network and care for their own children well. See Appendix D SFF May 2021 – April 2022 report.

12. As of Quarter 1 2022-23 there are 916 looked after children for whom WCF act as Corporate Parents. At 76 per 10,000, this is slightly higher than the England average. However, WCF has been the second lowest authority in the region for three consecutive years for children entering care and is one of the second lowest regional authorities with a rate of less than 80 children per 10,000.

13. WCF have slightly more children placed in foster care at 72% compared with an England average of 71%, however there is a decreasing number of children in WCF's internal foster care provision at 16%. This represents a continued declining trend seen through 2021/22. WCF is not immune to the national difficulty in recruiting and retaining foster carers, specifically carers willing to care for the very complex children entering care.

14. However, on a positive note Kinship Carers are increasing and represent 23% of children in foster care. There are much better outcomes for young people in Kinship placements with only a minority breaking down and requiring residential care.

15. Overall, there are 18% of children in residential/semi-independent and secure provision, which is in line with statistical neighbours, although above the England average of 14%. This represents a good news story with an increase to 7% of young people in

semi-independent living. This is reflective of work to support children aged 17 to have a supported year of semi-independent living as they transition from residential care to independence and endorses the Cabinet approved approach in June 2021 to increase Worcestershire's internal semi-independent provision.

16. Conversely, the number of children in residential care at 12%, has risen from 11% at year-end 2021/22. The demand for residential care is coming from foster care breakdowns and for children with disabilities. WCF are focused on preventing fostering care breakdown and supporting young people with complex needs to remain at home longer through increased short breaks and family support.

17. The sufficiency challenge for this 13-17 age group exists where there is a lack of foster care provision able to meet need, this leads to demand for residential care. WCF are working hard to find ways to recruit foster carers for the older age group with the introduction of 'buddy carers' and increased Foster Care payments for those caring for children aged 11 years plus.

18. WCF case work shows that residential care is commonly not providing stability or positive outcomes for young people and as Josh Macalister's Independent Care Review illustrated, the market is provider led with inconsistent quality. WCF commonly experience notice being served by residential providers when a young person's behaviour becomes challenging, which in turn leads to heightened difficulties in identifying a suitable alternative provision.

19. The prevention of care approach has proven by far the most effective strategy but there will always remain a need for residential provision for young people whose behaviours are particularly challenging and complex.

The Riddings

20. The Riddings children's home was conceived as a 4-bed home for young people with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties; the cohort of young people described above.

21. The matching of young people has proved a challenge. Any given child's dysregulated behaviour inevitably has an adverse and potentially escalating impact upon the other children residing in the home. This requires skilled, proactive and sustained intervention from residential staff to deescalate and risk manage such situations.

22. Whilst the last 3 placements of young people met the criteria of the homes Statement of Purpose, each placement unfortunately broke down. This was due to staff being unable to manage a continuation of challenging behaviour as well as the impact on other children within the home. It remains however, that these are the very children who require residential care.

23. During the recent Ofsted inspections and monitoring visits, inspectors have raised concerns around matching of the young people - whilst fully recognising the need for their residential care.

24. The Riddings has been subject to inconsistent inspection findings where for example, staffing levels, the updating of risk management and behavioural plans and managerial oversight have been subject to significant critique. The home is currently subject to an

Inadequate judgement and a **Restriction Notice** in placing any further children until future inspection review.

25. Despite efforts to improve relationships within the local community, there remains significant community challenge to the existence of the Riddings as a children's home. This has escalated to the point where community representatives have pursued avenues to secure a Compulsory Purchase Order on the property itself.

26. In turn, this has a particularly detrimental impact upon the children living at the home. They invariably feel ostracised and not wanted in the community where **their** home is situated and are blamed for issues for which they are not always culpable.

27. Recruitment of residential staff has proved problematic, and the Registered Manager has recently left WCF's employment.

28. In reference to a recent Ofsted report the Shropshire Star ran a news article (published 27 July 2022) entitled '**Too many children not getting help they need due to social care staff shortage**' which underlines this issue:

Many residential care workers have "reassessed their priorities" and work-life balance during the coronavirus pandemic and have left the sector, while a "large number" of social workers are quitting demanding jobs for better-paid, more flexible agency positions or for roles in other sectors.

Providers are also struggling to recruit children's home managers, with 17% of homes without a manager as of March 2022 – up from 9% in March 2019.

Staffing challenges mean children lack stability or are being placed in homes where their needs are not being met, and in some cases are being placed in unregistered homes, the regulator said.

29. In addition, the rate of pay offered to residential staff within the private sector cannot be competed with. Despite best and sustained endeavours to address the aforementioned, it is unsustainable and disproportionate to continue in this vein. As illustrated, the Riddings children's home, due to this combination of adverse factors, cannot be successfully operated to fulfil its remit.

Impact on children and young people

30. The Riddings is currently subject to a Restriction Notice and there remains only one young person living in the home.

31. The remaining young person has somewhat vacillated in their wishes. Given their age of 16 years, care planning considerations were commencing to consider transitions to supported semi-independence. A WCF 'supported plus' provision with additional staffing including a sleep-in member of staff, has been identified and an introductory visit has been undertaken. The provision enables the young person to easily access their college placement which commenced in September 2022 as well as maintaining contact with their birth father who lives near the provision.

32. In line with requirements and good practice, consultation has taken place and continues, with the young person to ensure they have every opportunity to express their wishes and feelings. At this time they have expressed a positive view about moving to the provision they have visited.

33. The Independent Reviewing Officer is liaising closely with the social work, residential and outreach team, all of whom share a good understanding of the young person's individual needs. The transition plan is being carefully developed and reviewed between all parties, including the young person's parents who are integral in positively supporting their child.

34. Regardless of the proposal to close the Riddings children's home, transition discussions and planning would necessarily have commenced for any 16-year-old in residential care, given the need to gradually prepare and support a move to semi-independent living in preparation for independence as an adult. That said, should the proposal to close the home be agreed, closure will not be pursued until such a time when the young person has successfully transitioned to alternate appropriate provision.

Formal Staff consultation

35. The proposal to close the Riddings children's home was shared with Trade Unions and members on 24 August 2022. The formal collective staff consultation commenced on 25 August 2022 and ran to 21 October 2022.

36. All affected staff have participated in at least one 1:1 formal consultation session and follow up consultations have also taken place with each member of staff.

37. Affected staff have also been given the opportunity to shadow service areas they have shown potential interest in redeploying to.

38. Each staff member has been successfully matched to a suitable alternative position they wish to pursue where their experience and skills are directly transferable. The service areas they will redeploy to are Early Help, the Outreach Team and Vale Lodge children's home.

39. Compulsory redundancies have successfully been avoided.

40. Implementation of identified redeployment positions will not commence until the one remaining young person at the Riddings children's home has successfully transitioned. It is anticipated this will be just before the end of the year.

Conclusion

41. This report, which should be read in conjunction with the Sufficiency Strategy 2021 – see Appendix A and WCF Business Plan 2022/23 – see Appendix B, outlines the success of the care prevention strategy whilst recognising that residential care will always be needed for some young people within a national climate that is under resourced. That said, WCF seeks to employ strategies to minimise the need for residential care wherever possible.

42. With the development of the All-Age Disability agenda, services to support young people with SEND to remain at home and support their independent living experience and transition to adulthood are well underway.

43. Existing strategies to prevent the breakdown of foster placements are being enhanced with dedicated workers to support, practically guide, advise and assist carers.

44. Recruitment strategies for WCF's fostering service have been broadened to recruit to 'buddy carers' to support those carers looking after teenage young people whose behaviours and presentation are often more challenging and complex.

45. There remains a continued focus on the promotion of Special Guardianship arrangements where young people are enabled to permanently remain within their families.

46. Support, assessment and risk management is appropriately undertaken to enable young people to exit foster and residential care and reside with their parents under Placement with Parent arrangements wherever it is safe to do so.

47. DFE grant funding is being utilised to develop a one bed children's crisis residential home which will be opened in 2023. Matching difficulties, as experienced at the Riddings's, will not be applicable and the home will assist in the avoidance of placing children in unregulated settings following unavoidable placement breakdown.

48. Accordingly, the proposal to close the Riddings children's home has been carefully considered within this context.

Legal, Financial and Human Resources Implications

Human Resources

49. The staff implications of the closure of The Riddings as a Children's Home would require a change management approach with a comprehensive approach to consultation. Detailed staff consultation, in line with formal Worcestershire Children First procedures, will be initiated with our recognised Trade Unions and the staff who were appointed to posts in the Home affected by these proposals. These staff are valued members of the WCF Residential Service, and the intention is to redeploy them into suitable vacancies that exist in our other residential units and family support services and avoid any compulsory redundancies from the closure.

Financial Impact

50. The financial impact of the proposal will release ongoing revenue funding of £0.6m per year, as staff will be redeployed elsewhere in WCF, it is anticipated that there will be no cost of change. In 2022/23 due to the restriction of placing children there will be minimal cost once the final young person transitions to their new setting. It is proposed that the ongoing savings from closure will be re-invested in the All-Age Disability Service to add resource to improve the Council's offer to children with SEND. Once the building (owned by WCC) has been vacated it will be deemed surplus to operational requirements once the usual Corporate Landlord processes have been followed. A subsequent decision will be made on the asset at a later date.

Legal

51. There is no statutory duty to consult and a common law duty to consult will only arise if a promise to consult has been given previously, otherwise, any duty to consult would be limited. The closure of a 4-bed residential children's home is unlikely to have any effect on the public at large, or the local inhabitants, for a consultation of the public to arise. The home will not close until the residents have moved on and close liaison is taking place with the relevant social work team and the resident about progress in this regard.

52. A holistic approach must be taken to ensure, if this establishment is lost, WCF can still fulfil its "sufficiency" duty under s22G of the 1989 Act to ensure that there is sufficient accommodation within County to meet the needs of looked after children. That requires not only sufficient beds but also a range of type of accommodation to meet the specific needs of those children.

Joint Equality, Public Health, Data Protection and Sustainability Impact Assessments

The JIA screening did not identify any potential considerations requiring further assessment during implementation.

Supporting Information

- Appendix A Sufficiency Report April 2021
- Appendix B WCF Business Plan 2022/23
- Appendix C JIA Project Screening, Equality & Public Health, Data Protection and Environment
- Appendix D Supporting Families First May 2021 – April 2022

Contact Points

Specific Contact Points for this report

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director for Children's Services) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

Cabinet Paper – 'Children's Homes and Semi-Independent Accommodation' 24 June 2021