



April 2023 - March 2024

Worcestershire Children First
ANNUAL REPORT

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1. FOREWORD FROM THE CHAIR AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Rob Morrison
Chair, Worcestershire
Children First



Adam Johnston
Interim Worcestershire
Children First Chief
Executive, including
statutory post of
Director of Children's
Services

Welcome to the annual report for 2023/24.

It has been a successful year - with external Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services achieving a judgment of overall "Good" for the first time in 15 years. We are proud of what has been achieved and want to first and foremost recognise the exceptional skills of the leadership team and our workforce for their commitment, passion and drive to achieve the best outcomes for children.

We have of course had our challenges, the most profound of which was the death of a child. The trauma and bereavement caused to the wider family, impact on the community and indeed the impact on professionals cannot be underestimated. We have spent a lot of time reviewing what we did, how we might work even better to support staff in this challenging field of work and how we can work together better with partners to improve the levels of support, guidance and training that we have in place, to enable us to continue our commitment to provide children and young people with the right support and protection they need.

In this past year we also very sadly experienced the death of our lead cabinet member Councillor Andy Roberts, his personal and professional skills, knowledge and commitment to our improvement journey significantly contributed to the success we have achieved, he is greatly missed.

We have recently seen the departure of Tina Russell from the position of Chief Executive for Worcestershire Children First (WCF) and Director of Children's Services from Worcestershire County Council. We would like to wish Tina well and thank her for the hard work and dedication in leading WCF on its journey of improvement to an Ofsted judgement of 'Good'.

During the five years we have been in Company, Worcestershire Children First has successfully worked in partnership with Worcestershire County Council, and we would like to thank the Council for the support they have provided. We would also like to thank the Board for their contribution.

As we embark on 2024/25, we look forward to the imminent reintegration of Worcestershire Children First to the County Council and to creating the "One Council" vision that seeks to make Worcestershire a place to achieve and thrive for all its residents.

As "One Council", despite the challenging financial climate within which we must make difficult decisions, we will continue to maintain our commitment and focus to work alongside the children and families of Worcestershire, supporting parents to care for their own children and taking decisive action to protect children from harm where necessary.

2. INTRODUCTION

About Worcestershire Children First

2023/24 was the fourth year of Worcestershire Children First (WCF) delivering children's services across the county of Worcestershire. These services include Early Help and Support to Children in Need, Children's Social Care and Safeguarding, Through Care Services for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, 0-25 All-Age Disability Services, SEND services and Education Improvement, Learning and Achievement services.

WCF has an independently registered Fostering Agency providing foster care placements to children in care and we have an independently registered Adoption and Permanency service that works alongside our regional adoption agency Adoption Central England (ACE), whose focus is to ensure we achieve timely permanency for children who have entered the care system.

The company is 100% owned by Worcestershire County Council and delivers its children's services on behalf of the local authority, working with partners across the county to ensure children, young people and families receive the best possible services.

Download: [WCF Business Plan 2023/24](#)



Our vision, mission and values

Our values reflect our Company wide focus on putting children at the heart of everything we do and our commitment to diversity and inclusion.

<h3>OUR VISION</h3> <p>Worcestershire to be a wonderful place for all children and young people to grow up.</p>	 <p>WORCESTERSHIRE CHILDREN FIRST</p>	<h3>OUR MISSION</h3> <p>Supporting children and young people to be happy, healthy and safe.</p>
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OUR VALUES



CHILDREN AT OUR HEART

We will keep children and young people at the heart of everything we do.



VALUE FAMILY LIFE

We will support and empower parents to care for their own children.



GOOD EDUCATION FOR ALL

We will value education as the best start in life for all children and young people.



PROTECTION FROM HARM

We will act in a professional and timely way to protect children from harm.



EMBRACE DIVERSITY

A progressive culture of championing equality, diversity and inclusion.



3. WCF COMPANY GOVERNANCE




Internal Governance

The board currently consists of 11 Executive and Non-Executive Directors with a wealth of public sector expertise in supporting families and communities.

Executive Directors are those employed by WCF to lead and manage delivery functions and teams, whilst Non-Executive Directors do not have responsibility for day-to-day operations but provide input and challenge via Board meetings and sub-board meetings throughout the year.

The governance structure is below:



-  (Pink) denotes Non-Executive Director;
-  (Blue) represents Executive Director.
-  (Purple) The Chairman of the Board is a DfE appointment

Recent changes to the board include the appointment of Adam Johnston as Interim Strategic Director of Children's Services in replacement of Tina Russell. The appointment of Ruth Hill as Interim Director of Child Protection and Through Care in replacement of Adam Johnston. The appointment of Daniela Carson as Director of 0-25 All-Age Disability in replacement of Melanie Barnett. The appointment of Cllr David Chambers following the departure of Cllr Tracey Onslow and Andrew Spice. Biographies of our board members are available [here](#).

To maintain rigour, WCF’s internal governance takes the form of monthly WCF Board meetings with an **Annual General Meeting**. Additionally, there are two sub-boards reporting into the Board of Directors focusing on improvement of services;



The Quality Assurance Board

The Quality Assurance Programme undertakes “deep dive” reviews of the quality and performance of our frontline Safeguarding and Education services in improving outcomes for children. This includes actively seeking the views and opinions of children and young people on the impact of our interventions and how we continuously learn and improve to be even better. The outcome reports are reported back to full board for scrutiny.

The Risk Governance and Audit Board

The Risk Governance and Audit Board typically meets three times a year and maintains an oversight of our governance, risk management, internal control and value for money framework. This Board ensures strategic compliance, management and performance of WCF with an unwavering focus on children and young people at the heart of our Company’s purpose.

Internally, the Executive Leadership Team (ELT), who are responsible on a day-to-day basis for running the business, meet regularly to ensure service improvement continues with momentum, and to ensure all areas of WCF have strategic oversight. Regular reporting and monitoring impacts positively on outcomes for children and young people and is the core and demonstrable Company purpose. Their ambition for Worcestershire Children First is to be rated as ‘Good’ in provision of services. This was achieved in May 2023 following a full Inspection of Children’s Services by Ofsted (ILACS), with WCF rated as ‘Good’ overall.

Each year we will share our company achievement and challenges through our public meetings. This will be an opportunity for our stakeholders, young people, staff and the public to feedback on company performance and inform services.

4. ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

Under the Strategic Director of Worcestershire Children First sit five specific service areas, underpinned by our workforce and quality assurance activity.

Early Help, Children in Need and Family Front Door

- Family Front Door and Partnerships (Contact / Referral and Assessment: MASH)
- Targeted Family Support
- Get Safe Exploitation Team
- Emergency Duty Team
- Supporting Families First: Children in Need
- PoP Student Programme

Child Protection and Through Care

- Locality Safeguarding (planning for children in need of support and protection)
- Through Care: Children Looked After and Care Leavers
- Supervised Family Time Service
- Residential, Supported Living and Outreach Services
- Children and Young People Participation
- Worcestershire Family Safeguarding

Education and Early Years

- Forecasting and planning to ensure enough good education places for children
- Admissions, Governor Services and supporting School Improvement
- Supporting schools, education and early years settings to promote welfare and safeguard children
- Vulnerable Learners – virtual school for looked after children and inclusion services to support and prevent children from missing education

0-25 All Age Disability Service including SEND

- Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) assessment, planning, review and support services
- Children with Disability services children's social care
- Young Adult services for children with disabilities and additional needs

Resources

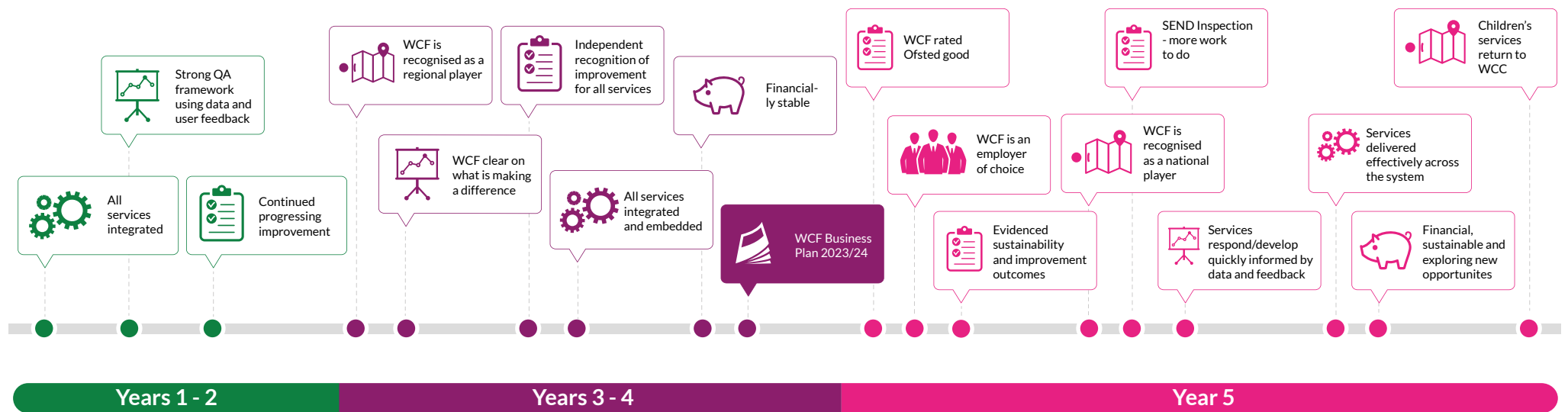
- Human Resources & Organisational Design
- Funding and policy for Worcestershire Schools and management of Schools Forum
- Financial Management for WCF and Schools
- Commissioning Hub
- IT and management information
- Business Development
- Traded Services for Education

Quality Assurance & Workforce

- WCF lead for Quality Assurance
- Diversity and Inclusion Group
- Workforce Board
- Case Progression and Permanency Team
- Principal Social Worker
- Independent Chairs for Looked After Children and Child Protection

5. STRATEGIC GOALS - FIVE YEAR PLAN

Our ambition is to make a positive and sustained difference to the lives of children, young people and families and to be able to provide a wide range of evidence to support this achievement. The diagram on this page provides a visual representation of our plan to develop and improve our services for children, young people and their families over five years since the launch of the Company and has guided our work in 2023/24 (our fourth full year in operation).



Years 1 and 2

- Increasing co-creation with children, young people and families
- Working under WCF Brand
- Building stable and productive teams, culture and behaviours
- Social care rated requires improvement (at point of transfer)
- Commissioner/provider separation
- Support services tested and operational
- Demonstrate credentials with existing parties and children, young people and families

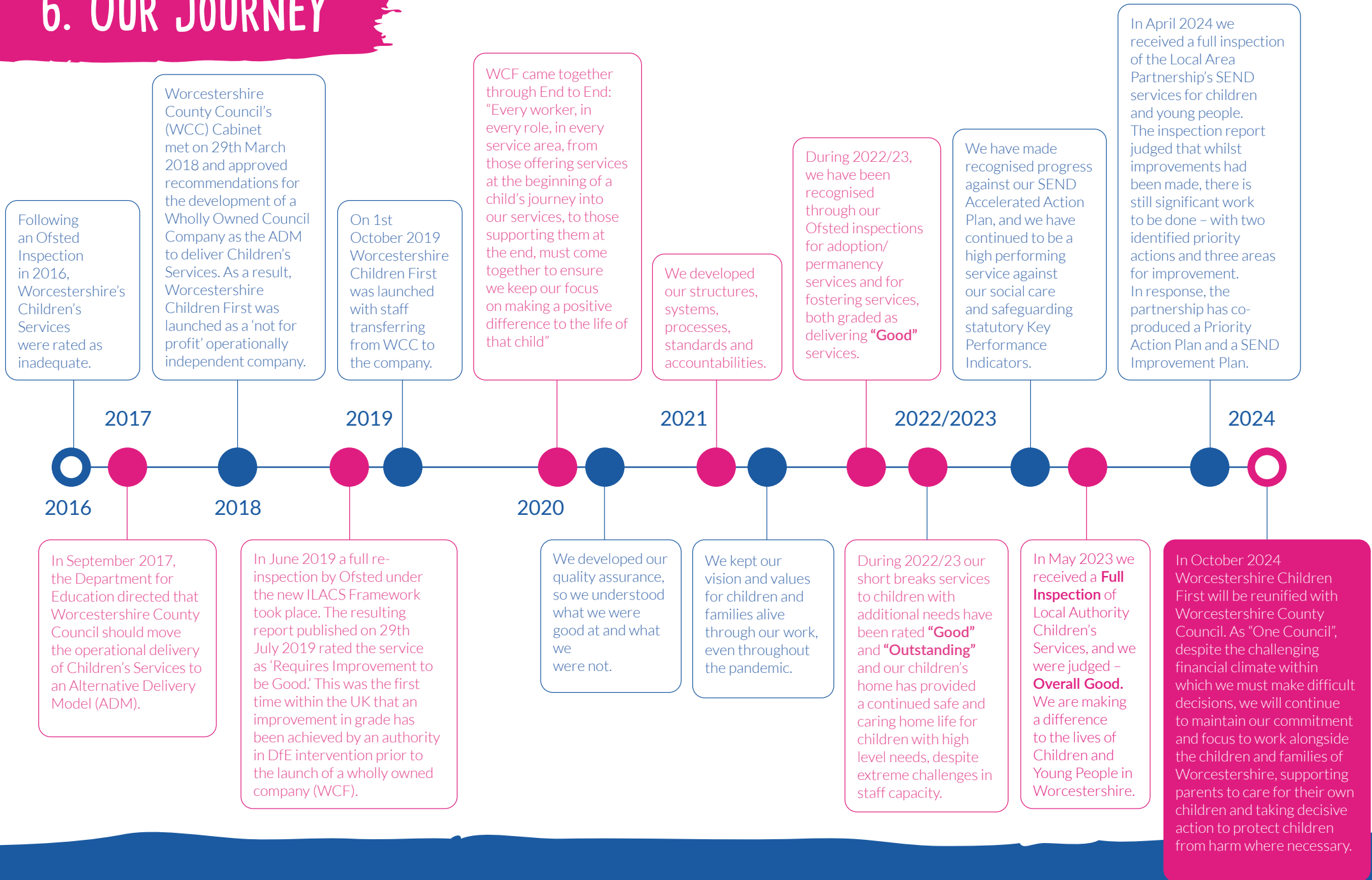
Years 3 and 4

- Increasing co-creation with children, young people and families
- Work effectively and efficiently within financial envelope
- Evidence of sustained outcomes
- Embedding new culture
- Review opportunities for growth within existing services
- Wider strategic relationships
- Gain independent recognition of improvement and performance

Year 5

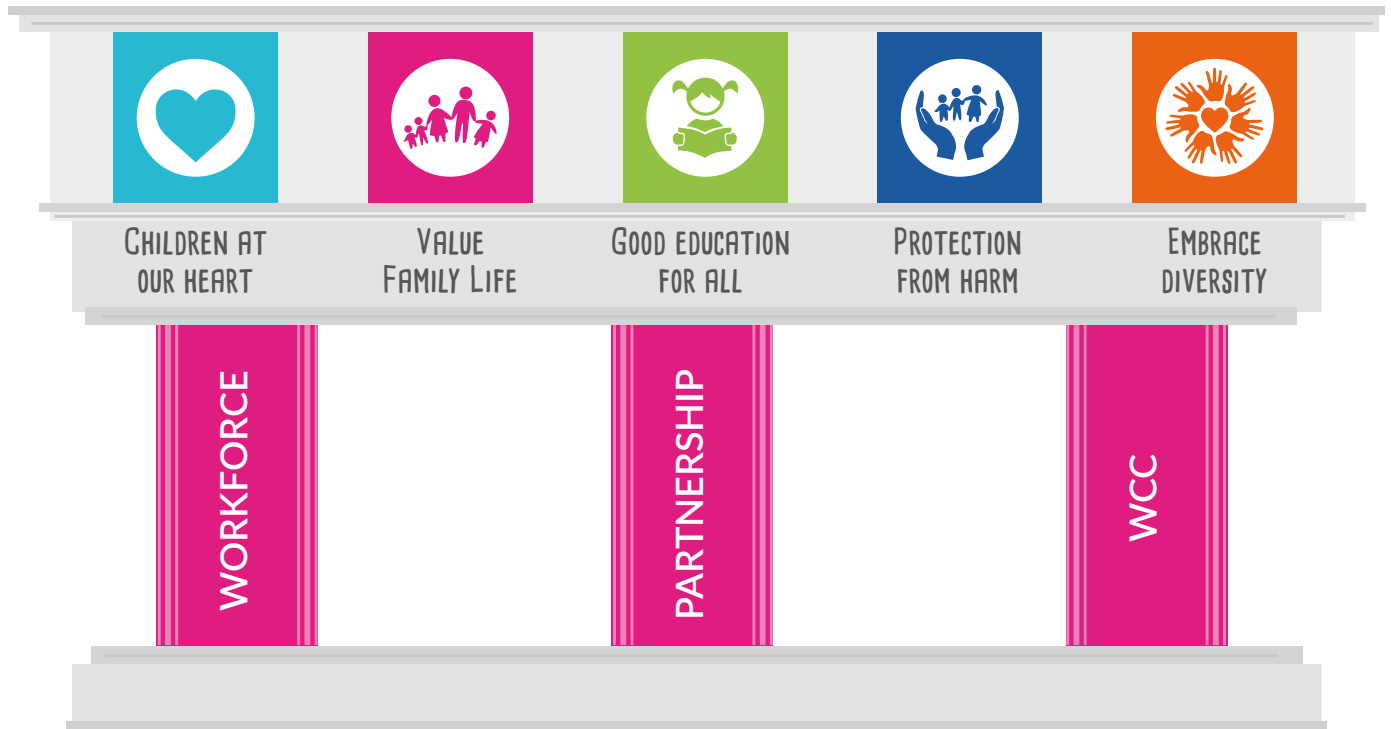
- Achieve sustainability and potentially explore new commercial opportunities
- Improved and evidenced outcomes
- Effective and responsive development
- Council and community proud of WCF
- Begin review of commissioning intentions
- Integrated and effective partnership working across system
- Support services sourced effectively and provide value for money

6. OUR JOURNEY



7. THREE PILLARS OF SUCCESS

Our Values



Working with our Workforce

Our Workforce is our first pillar to the success of our services.

Our workforce is our most valuable asset in successfully delivering services that make a positive difference for our children and families in Worcestershire. We strive to be the ‘employer of choice’ for children’s services staff, and we approach this through a culture that values the impact that our staff have in improving children’s lives. We have high expectations and we have created the conditions where professional expertise is valued, risk management is well supported at appropriate levels through the organisation and there is a comprehensive learning and development programme in place.

“Making a difference” is our aim;
“High support and high challenge” is our approach;
“Children at the heart” is our objective

Our Workforce Strategy is underpinned by our annual Social Work Health Check and the Annual Voice of the Workforce Survey, which includes the whole of Worcestershire Children First. This system “health check” is a barometer of our services to find out staff’s views on our strengths and areas of development/focus. The survey questions have been developed and aligned to the five pillars of the Workforce Strategy; these are:

- Health and Wellbeing.
- Recruitment and Retention.
- Diversity and Culture.
- Leadership and Management.
- Building Skills for Future Workforce.

We structure our service planning using an End-to-End approach; this ensures we think whole service, ensuring all staff across our teams and service areas are included and outcomes for children are prioritised, wherever they are in their journey through our services.


Our aim is to build a workforce which has personal and collective resilience with physical and emotional health and wellbeing at the centre of everything we do. There is a dedicated Health & Wellbeing Hub where staff can access information, resources, and services which include mindfulness, mental health first aiders, bereavement support and carer support.

We ensure all staff have a performance and wellbeing review each year and for some mid-year. This is an opportunity to both review and reflect on performance but also individuals’ emotional, physical, and mental wellbeing to ensure the right support is available to all staff. The 2023-24 mid-year staff performance review cycle saw 92% of employees reporting they are managing their wellbeing either very or quite effectively.

In October 2023 we held our third whole company staff conference; the conference was held in-person with 300 delegates in attendance; the event started with a WCF Service Market Place, promoting all our individual teams, achievements and promoting service connective and building relationships.

The Diversity and Inclusion Collective meet regularly and have an open invitation to all staff across WCF with a mixed representation from across the different service areas that attend the meetings. The aim of the group is to promote anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices, disability awareness and sharing of information.

Worcestershire County Council (WCC) learning and development team provide learning solutions and work in partnership with WCF, to manage the delivery of a training plan derived from the annual learning needs analysis. We have a core offer we present through our learning & development brochure.



“Our aim is to build a workforce which has personal and collective resilience with physical and emotional health and wellbeing at the centre of everything we do”

Working with our Partners

This is the second pillar key to our company achieving success.

Whether it is partnerships with children and young people, their parents and carers, or the wide-ranging agency partnerships; we know how valuable and essential it is for us to work together, to share experiences, learning and best practice.

The following are the priority formal partnerships led or attended by Worcestershire Children First: Local Partnerships

- **Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership (WSCP)** – Director of Children’s Services (DCS) is member of the Executive Board with Get Safe and Quality Assurance Practices and Procedures (QAPP) subgroups led by WCF
- **Health and Wellbeing Board (HWBB) and all associated Integrated Care System (ICS) partnership forums** – DCS and Director membership at all groups
- **Children & Young People Partnership** – subgroups Early Help Partnership / All Age Disability (previously SEND) and Emotional Health and Wellbeing Collaborative – WCF Executive leadership representation at all groups
- **Local Family Justice Board (LFJB)** – DCS and AD for Care Proceedings and Permanency Regional Partnerships Worcestershire Children First is a fully engaged member of the regional DCS group with committed membership through the range of subgroups and the regional improvement alliance.
- **Early Help** – Co-Chair WCF Director of CIN, Early Help and Family Front Door
- **Assistant Directors for Children’s Services (ADCS), link to family hub and troubled families** - Co-Chair WCF Director of CIN, Early Help and Family Front Door. The regional ADCS group which has both the Family Hub model and Supporting Families agenda as its key priorities. This forum looks at service delivery and models of practice across the West Midlands region; how these influence and shape the services that our children and young people receive, developing best practice delivery across the region but also here in Worcestershire.
- **Quality, Policy & Procedures Group (QPPG)** – WCF Directors of CIN and Through Care
- **Education and SEND** – WCF Director of Education
- **Principal Social Work Network** – WCF Principal Social Worker
- **Strategic Performance Network** – WCF DCS sponsor and WCF Senior Data analyst
- **Safe Centre** – Worcestershire tri member representative LA
- **Workforce Regional Group** - WCF Principal Social Worker.

Working with WCC

Working in Partnership with WCC (Worcestershire County Council) continues to be one of the pillars to success of our Company.

We recognise in our plan, not just our own priorities and vision for what we want to achieve for children and families, but how important it is for people to see those children and families as members of the Worcestershire community.

The WCC priorities:

- Open for Business
- Children and Families
- The Environment
- Health and Wellbeing

These are as important for the children and families that we work with as they are part of the whole Worcestershire community.


To thrive, our children and their families need to have access to economic opportunity, accessible education and employment, to live in an environment that is a good place to live and grow up as a family and the physical and health and wellbeing of this younger generation is what is key to reducing need and demand in any long-term plan.

As a Council wholly owned Company, WCF and WCC have had an interdependent relationship through the contractual delivery of children's services by the Company and 'bought back' services from the Council.

We acknowledge WCC Priorities in our Business Planning to ensure we align with core areas of focus and access opportunities available for collaboration with our key stakeholders. WCF also have service delivery links with the People Directorate in terms of adult social care, community development and public health.

We demonstrate our wider commitment to multi-agency working via membership at other strategic partnership groups including:

- Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership
- Health and Wellbeing Board and its Children and Young People Strategic Partnership
- Integrated Care Board
- Worcestershire County Domestic Abuse Forum
- All Age Disability Partnership
- Education Partnerships



“To thrive, our children and their families need to have access to economic opportunity, accessible education and employment”

8. WCF QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

Worcestershire Children First has developed a Quality Assurance programme, which is applied across all service areas - Social Care & Safeguarding, Early Help and All-Age Disability Services.

Our Quality Assurance Framework has three dimensions:

- **Key Performance Indicators (KPI):** Analysis of our business and performance information on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual basis – this enables us to understand how much we are doing and how timely we manage this work.
- **Feedback from children, young people and families:** We are committed to understanding the experiences of our work and services directly from children and families; we strive to learn from these experiences and build it into our future practice. We bring this learning together from compliments and complaints, but we also have a programme of quarterly feedback mechanisms to hear about children and families' experiences – this supports us to understand the impact of our work and the difference we are making.
- **Audit activity:** Completion of case file audits (using a peer and moderation approach) and targeted audits; each area of the service has a programme of quarterly audits – this supports us to know the quality of our practice.

Our multi-agency Quality Assurance is also a key area of our work, where regular multi-agency auditing, feedback and KPI analysis is undertaken, to learn about the effectiveness of our multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, this work is driven through the Safeguarding Partnership and the Quality Assurance Practice & Procedures Group (QAPP).



VOICE OF THE CHILD 2023/24

Across 2023/24 we have heard from 1265 children, young people, and care leavers and 1884 parents and carers, this totals 2989 individual pieces of feedback. Our range of methods have been effective in gaining the views and experience across of services throughout the year.

Our key achievements and learning messages – What we have done because of this feedback.

Children in need of help & protection, their parents & carers:

- We have seen consistency in what families tell us, with key messages being:
 - Parent feedback tells us that we have sustained and continue to improve good quality services that are relationship based; we listen and respond to parents.
 - Parent tell us that we make a positive difference to both them and their children.
 - Parent where their children have a Child Protection Plan, are supported to understand the worries we have for their children and what they need to do, to keep their children safe – this has been sustained.
 - Most children & young people feel listened to and supported.
 - Ensuring copies of assessments and plans are provided has been a priority, this is an improving area of practice.

Children looked after, their parents & carers:

- We have seen consistency in strengths from children's feedback, telling us:
 - They are supported to keep in touch with people who are important to them.
 - We have support them with their education.
 - They have trusted adults in their networks to support them and who they can talk to.
 - The majority of our children feel happy, healthy, and safe.
- Parents feeling they can contribute to children's plans is an area that is improving every quarter in comparison to last year's reporting but remains an area of focus.
- Parents are sharing improving experiences of family time arrangements and the quality of care provided to their children – these remain key strengths and continue to improve.
- Foster Carers report several strengths regarding their experiences, we see consistency in access to support, relationships with professionals, regular supervision, working with other professionals and workers being good advocates for children.
- Focus is on matching and preparation for placements – this is an area that has dipped in % points from the previous reporting period.
- We have seen a reduction in the volume of feedback sought by the fostering service across Quarter 3 & Quarter 4, this is a priority into year 2024/25.

Experiences of Care Leavers

- Our messages from Care Leavers remain consistent from the previous reporting period, these are:
 - Across the feedback we see strengths and improvements in young people telling us that they feel they are listened to, included in Pathway Plans and Plans reflecting their views – these are consistent messages from the previous quarter.
 - Young people share that they feel safe where they live, and they report that they feel happy with their life experiences day to day – these are new questions, and we see strengths in these areas.
 - Feeling able to contact their Personal Advisor is another area of focus as this has reduced by 10% cumulatively from the previous year – this is a small reduction from the previous quarter and is an area of focus for the service.
 - Ensuring young people have copies of their Pathway Plans is also an area of focus and this remains from previous feedback shared with us by young people – although this is improving, remains a priority.

“Living at Nanny & Grandads
is amazing”

“They are kind and friendly, they help me. They moved to a larger house so we could keep living with them long term. I feel happy and safe there”

“If I was worried about anything I would talk to her (the Social Worker)”

“He came to talk to me about the reasons why I went missing and what could be done for me not to want to do that again.”

“It has been so nice talking about autism, I have learned my lesson, it was great. I would like to say I am proud of myself for being able to independently do this work. I have never been this happy in so long.” (child)

“To my social worker, Ben and other support network I want to say a big thankyou to you too, I believe you all have gone above and beyond to help me and for that I am really grateful, and I do really appreciate it”

“We just wanted to say how much our family appreciates all the hard work and effort (you and your team) have put in on our behalf to secure a good outcome for X”
(Parent)

9. BUSINESS PLANNING 2023/24

The following pages provide an overview of our areas of priority and the achievements and progress made during 2023/24.

Sustain stability within the workforce, deliver high support and challenge and be the employer of choice

Priorities	What we achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Engagement of future social care workforce ■ Management and leadership development and training ■ Care review five-year framework ■ WCF social care workforce development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ We developed and launched an engagement with our Future Workforce Events. We have undertaken three sessions with our Local College to Health & Social Care Students; we have delivered this to 69 students during 2023/24. These events are to promote Social Work careers and provide an enhanced training opportunity. ■ The level of permanent staff in social work management positions has remained above 95% and overall permanency within Social Care & Safeguarding above 85%. ■ Within Social Care & Safeguarding we are undertaking a range of activities and initiatives to support recruitment & retention into social work practice, this includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Social Work Apprenticeship Programme: we currently have 10 SW Apprentice's and have been successful in a regional bid for funding to support this, we are currently recruiting to our 2024 cohort of SW Apprentice's. ■ 2023 saw 4 Step-Up to Social Work Students complete their course and we launched our next cohort in January 2024. ■ 2024 has seen us partner with Frontline and are now planning to have our first practice hub of a Consultant Social Worker and 5 Students from September 2024. ■ We have continued with our Positive Outcome Project (POP) Team, with dedicated Practice Educators supporting cohorts of students from traditional Social Work qualifying programmes at our local HEIs. ■ We have developed and launched our Evolve Programme, this is additional training and support for Social Workers in year 2 and year 3 post-qualifying. ■ We continue to be a partner within the West Midlands Teaching Partnership, supporting student placements, practice educators and access to additional CPD for practitioners and managers. ■ We are attending an annual programme of events to promote Social Work Careers and WCF as an employer, in 2023 this included: three skills & career shows, a recruitment fair and Compass Job's Fair. ■ Management & Leadership Courses including new managers training, aspiring managers training and advancing managers offer. <p>Ofsted 2023 said "There is a comprehensive development offer for social workers and managers in WCF".</p>

Prevent risk and need escalating for vulnerable children and those who are “Children in Need” of support

Priorities	What we achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Access and attendance in education ■ Raise attainment and meet emotional health and wellbeing needs ■ Trauma informed schools ■ Delivery of our multi-disciplinary Supporting Families First: Care Review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ For Children In Need attendance, 4% increase seen last year has been sustained (2020-21 = 74%, / increased to 2021-22 = 78%, / 2022-23 = 77%). ■ For those subject to a Child Protection Plan attendance has decreased by 2% on last academic year (2020-21 = 80%, / 2021-22 = 80%, / 2022-23 = 78%). ■ The NHS Wellbeing and Emotional Support Teams (WEST) in schools service is designed to help children and young people ages 5-18 years access early mental health and wellbeing support in educational settings. WEST currently supports 79 schools in Worcestershire. ■ For all children, to the end of Spring Term 2023/24 there is a projected reduced rate of children excluded from the WEST supported schools (79 for 2022/23 full academic year, down to 46 as at 2023/24 Spring term end). The number of WEST schools who have excluded has also reduced from 34% (27/79) in academic year 2022/23 to 24% (19/79) thus far in academic year 2023/24 (up to end of Spring Term). There are 9 schools that have seen a significant reduction in the number of permanent exclusions for academic year 2023/24. <p>Specifically for children in need and children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan there is also a projected reduction in exclusions at WEST supported schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Children in Need: reduced from 6 in full academic year 2022/23 to 2 thus far in 2023/24 (up to end of Spring Term). ■ Children subject to a Child Protection Plan: reduced from 7 in full academic year 2022/23 to 2 thus far in 2023/24 (up to end of Spring Term). ■ WVS continues to promote the TIAAS programme (Trauma Informed & Attachment Aware Settings.) The TIS (UK) diploma has reached 63% of all Worcestershire schools by the end of the Spring Term 2023/24, exceeding the academic year target of 60% (July 2022: 44%, July 2023: 51%). <p>Ofsted 2023 said:</p> <p><i>“Children in need benefit from the Supporting Families First service. This multi-agency service is led by advanced social work practitioners and includes money mentors, family support workers, youth workers, substance misuse workers and outreach workers who support children and families in the way that families identify will help them. This service is very effective and results in concerns reducing and most children being successfully diverted from care and able to remain living with their families”.</i></p>

Progress to achieve our vision for our 0-25 All Age Disability Service

Priorities	What we achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ SEND Improvement Plan ■ 0-25 Development of Practice Standards ■ 0-25 Development of outcome measures ■ Development of All Age transition pathways ■ Implement our Delivering Better Value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In September 2023, following a review by the Department for Education of our Accelerated Progress Plan; DfE recognised significant progress had been made in “the variation in the skills and commitment of some mainstream schools to provide effective support for children who have SEND.” And therefore, closed this workstream. ■ However, in a full Local Area Partnership Inspection of SEND services in April 2024, inspectors identified two areas where priority action is required and a further three areas for improvement. The partnership has coproduced a Priority Action Plan and Improvement Plan detailing how these areas will be addressed which will be published on the Local Offer. ■ Through the Delivering Better Value programme, we have three workstreams which are focused on transition, Early Years, Primary to Secondary and Post 16 with a focus on families feeling supported and their voice valued in the inclusive transition process with practitioners having an increased skill and knowledge base to meet the needs of Children and Young People. We have a lead in place to drive each workstream forward with regular reporting to the DfE on progress.



Support, guide and enable schools and education providers to deliver high quality, inclusive education provision

Priorities	What we achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reorganisation of education services ■ Raising attainment of disadvantaged children programme ■ Quality assurance intervention programme for those schools identified as requiring improvement of declining 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Establishment of children who cannot attend school panel. ■ WVS has also offered all schools fully funded access to the RADY Project (Raising Attainment for Disadvantaged Youngsters). The RADY project is a long-term approach over two phases, helping schools to become equitable in all aspects of the education they provide, making sure that those learners who need it most get the additional support they need to help them. Disadvantaged pupils are identified as having untapped potential and the project aims to close the gap in attainment between them and their non-disadvantaged peers, as early as possible. Programme 1 is a lighter-touch, online resource, with Programme 2 being a more intensive, in-school intervention. ■ Worcestershire Virtual School continues to promote knowledge and awareness relating to Educational Neglect, working alongside the Director of CP & Through Care and Group Manager – A quality assurance exercise was undertaken to ensure that educational neglect is appropriately challenged by social care and education colleagues. The impact of this advice and support can be evidenced through the audit of CIN and CP plans, which initially (Mar 2023) found no school attendance targets were included in any of the CIN/CP audited plans. Repeating the audit in August 2023 showed that all the identified plans had attendance targets identified where attendance of the children and young people was a concern. A school attendance plan template to support individuals was developed and shared with social care colleagues and schools, to support work in this area. The next step is to ensure appropriate actions to gain a positive impact for these targets.



Make effective use of child protection processes to bring about timely and sustained change for children

Priorities	What we achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Revise impact of application of Child Protection Thresholds to ensure we are providing support and interventions at appropriate levels to meet our duties to support and protect. ■ Engagement of all stakeholders to join this journey. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ We continue to see a rise in our Child Protection numbers although % in each category relatively stable – Neglect and Emotional abuse being our highest categories. We are also seeing children remaining on CP plans for longer; a reflection of the needs being assessed in our 3 highest risk factors Parent and Child Mental health both being much harder issue to change and a lack of therapeutic health services for children who don't meet the CAMHS threshold and waiting times for those that do impacts on our ability to reduce risk sufficiently in the lives of these children. ■ Repeat CP's within 2yrs remain low at 12% reflecting sustained outcomes achieved for these children and Repeat CP's at any point in time at 24% is in line with the England /SN averages, a positive reduction in last year's data where we saw an increase following re-emergence of child protection issues in families post covid. ■ 33% of our section 47 enquiries are progressing to an ICPC which is an increase on 32% from last year and is more in line the England averages. NB This is 2022/23 data and not therefore a real time comparison. 93% of ICPC's result in a plan. The small % that result in no plan is expected where the value of the professional information sharing can result in an agreed decision to work with the family on a lower level of intervention. However, we are conscious to ensure we do not enter CP unless it is absolutely necessary, promoting early support through children in need where it is possible and safe to do so. Review of outcome for children in Supporting Families First and a locality CIN service will inform future service design. ■ 74% of children have ceased a plan following successful outcome a rise from 68% last year. 16% of child protection cases have ceased due to the child having a looked after status consistent with last year's figures. Other outcomes include, left the area, attained 18yrs, died, became subject to legal status but not in our care e.g. SGO. ■ Our conferences are held in a hybrid approach, the conference chair, family, and social worker meet in person with partner-agencies joining online. We invested early in technology such as wide-screen televisions, sound bars, and cameras to make these meetings effective. 98% (consistent with the previous year) of our child protection conferences are quorate. We have strong attendance and contributions by partners in these key multi-agency meetings.

Ensure looked after children have high quality, stable placements and timely outcomes for permanency

Priorities	What we achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Target recruitment of foster carers & kinship support ■ New Children's Home ■ Regional Safe Centre ■ Virtual School and 16+ pilot ■ Develop UASC services and engagement in NTS ■ Special team for long term stable looked after children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Whilst we have had a very slight increase in enquires this year associated with both media coverage and the launch of our specialist foster carer role, the rate of conversion to assessments is low and does not keep pace with the rate of carer's ceasing to be foster carers, most frequently retiring. ■ Following a successful bid for DfE funding to open a one bed children home, refurbishment has been completed to provide a "high need crisis" resource for one child. Communications have taken place with local members and neighbours. However, we have yet to be able to start the Ofsted registration process as we have to date been unsuccessful in our attempts to recruit a Registered Manager. ■ The RSC the West Midlands project group is continuing. There is an independent project manager in post, the site has been confirmed in Birmingham, a range of workstreams are in place to progress the project and the Worcestershire DCS sits on the Project Board as one of three DCS representative of the regional group. A decision on whether Worcestershire sign up to this regional development will be required Sept 2024. ■ Hillview is our eight bed dedicated UASC supported living provision which has proven successful with a cohort of stable and well supported young people. Dedicated UASC support via UASC social worker and virtual school is in place at this provision. The average days to get an unaccompanied child on school roll has reduced to 34 days from previous years average of 88 days. ■ Flash Academy is now available to all UASC to develop their English skills and Online EAL sessions via TUTE are also available to all UASC. Placement stability for unaccompanied children is good with only 10% of the current cohort experiencing 3 or more placement moves. ■ The development of our pod service in Through Care to enable children in long term stable placements to have a relationship-based worker, reducing change.

Ensure we make progress against our school place sufficiency to meet short and longer term demand

Priorities	What we achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Progress Worcestershire Secondary School Build ■ Progress our new ASD special school build programme ■ Ensure foundations are in place to meet our five-year school organisation sufficiency plan, including Alternative and Special Provision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Following Cabinet decision March 2024, delivery date moved to September 2028, budget increase to £59.9m. Joint planning application submitted with NHS/Prime to support finalizing purchase of land. ■ Department for Education confirmed school to be delivered in 2027 (was 2026). DfE leading site surveys and feasibility. LA Officers meeting with DfE and appointed Academy Trust monthly. ■ Workshop sessions with Finance, Planning, Transport, Early Years and SEND took place to review how the Five Year Plan needed to be updated and reflect new policy positions. A review of other fundamental Policies is also taking place e.g. S106 Education Planning Obligations Policy. Annual Sufficiency reports for Mainstream and SEND Provision were reported to Cabinet in March 2024.

Ensure our Care Leavers have the best start for independence

Priorities	What we achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Access to comfortable and safe housing ■ Access to education, employment and training ■ Early matching to a Personal Adviser ■ Delivery of ASDAN with care providers ■ Deliver against our Virtual School 16+ pilot ■ Launch our Connect programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The number of Care leavers open to the service has steadily increased as children are growing up and leaving our Care. Those “in touch” continues to grow and this is reflecting of the level of complexity of need these young people still have in their older years, the positive is that they feel they are getting the contact and support they need from the Care Leaver service, as was reflected in the Ofsted inspection where Care Leavers received a “Good” judgement outcome. ■ We are seeing a concerning reduction in the number of Care Leavers in employment, education and training, averaging now 49%. However, it is important to note the national growth in YP not engaging in education following Covid and the previous year England averages may change when we see 2023/24 data and can make real time comparisons. ■ What we do know though is that these children are a relatively stable group of hard to reach children, but work is required to sustain efforts to engage these young people in employment, education and training, and the Care Leaver service works closely with the skills service in WCC and Virtual School to target these young people and the hard to reach 16/17yr old to prevent this cohort growing further. ■ There are currently 102 YP 18yrs - 20yrs and 41 YP 21yrs who have care leaver status not in EET. The service has been working with procurement around social value in contracts and we now have some solid offers from businesses

10. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

Finance, Performance and Governance

Our financial resources, performance and governance arrangements are overseen by the Interim Director of Resources, Chris Bird. The Interim Director of Resources and team have successfully guided the company through its fourth year of trading returning a very small profit. In 2023/24 the company's turnover for the period was £148M making a small profit of £1.

The company is an admitted body to the Worcestershire Pension Fund. The cost of pensions in 2023/24 was £5.909M and the contribution rate was 17.1%. The financial statements were approved by the Board of Directors on 13 August 2024, an extract is included in this report.

Worcestershire Children First Support Services (ICT, human resources, payroll and facilities management services etc) are provided by Worcestershire County Council. The value of these contracts was £7.5M for the 2023/24. The table below breaks down the £148m turnover by different funding sources.

	2022-23 (£)	2023-24 (£)
Income from WCC for main contract	137,098,300	129,438,200
Income from WCC for 2021/22 Pay Award paid in March 2022	1,670,888	0
Income from WCC for 2022/23 Pay Award above budgeted 1.25%	0	521,000
Income from WCC for HTST Contribution September 2022	1,045,355	0
Income from WCC to cover overspend in 2022/23	6,601,364	0
Income from WCC to cover overspend in 2023//24	0	14,907,368
Income from WCC to cover costs of voluntary redundancies	0	1,119,544
Other Income	3,632,077	2,284,496
Total	150,047,985	148,270,608

Financial Information Summary

Profit and Loss Account and Other Comprehensive Income	2022-23 (£)	2023-24 (£)
Turnover	150,047,985	148,270,608
Cost of sales	(142,972,812)	(141,709,637)
Gross profit	7,075,173	6,560,971
Other operating expenses	(7,454,200)	(7,454,200)
Operating profit / (loss)	(379,027)	(893,229)
Interest Receivable	379,028	893,230
Profit before taxation	1	1
Tax on profit on ordinary activities	-	-
Profit for the financial year	1	1

Worcestershire Children First - Balance Sheet 31st March 2023	2022-23 (£)	2023-24 (£)
Current Assets		
Debtors	4,357,371	7,255,776
Cash at bank and in hand	11,277,018	10,873,327
Total Assets	15,634,389	18,129,103
Liabilities		
Creditors; amounts falling due within one year	(14,494,662)	(16,989,376)
Total Liabilities	(14,494,662)	(16,989,376)
Net Assets / (Liabilities)	1,139,727	1,139,728
Capital Reserves		
Retained Earnings	1,139,727	1,139,728
Equity	1,139,727	1,139,728

Company Secretary: Chris Bird

Auditors: Grant Thornton

Company Number: 11447965

11. RISK

Risk Management and Business Continuity Planning are a vital part of the Company's success to consider and mitigate (where possible) inherent (unmanaged) and residual (managed) risk.

This involves an informed understanding of the effectiveness of controls and actions in place subject to ORCT principles (Objective, Risks, Controls, Tests). WCF are representatives at Worcestershire County Council's (WCC) Chief Officer Group (COG) who are responsible for the Corporate Risk Management and Business Continuity arrangements for critical services across all aspects of the Council's activities.

WCF maintains the Company risk register, which will be scrutinised at the Risk, Governance and Audit Board:

- Serious harm or death of a child/young person
- Reputational risk as a result of receiving a poor Ofsted inspection rating
- Failure to act in the interests of children and young people - keeping them safe or planning for permanence
- Financial pressure on resources due to increased demand on Children's Placements
- Business continuity failure in critical services
- Insufficient staff capacity, capability and productivity - recruitment and retention
- Education for all children in Worcestershire including school financial pressures, home to school transport costs, management of the Dedicated Schools Grant on behalf of the Council, changes to school organisation and SEND
- Future government strategy around SEND and High Needs Funding arrangements (managed on behalf of council)
- Additionally, risks are captured as part of transformational projects.

Our risk management and business continuity framework, alongside our performance monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms, support our commitment to provide rigorous quality services, improving outcomes for our children and young people in Worcestershire.

12. CHILDREN'S SERVICES PRIORITIES 2024/25

Priorities	Summary of challenges and changes	Measures of success
Business As Usual and Workforce	Children's services by their nature are complex organisations which day to day require high level risk management. It is essential to recognise the importance of sustaining our "good" practice that is our business as usual. Workforce are fundamental to the delivery of good services – keeping our staff supported, challenged and ensuring systems, process and tools enable them to deliver. Good practice remains a priority.	QA programme: KPI/Audit and Service User feedback will continue to tell a story of timely, good quality services making a difference.
WCF – WCC Relocation	The transition of Worcestershire Children First back to Worcestershire County Council to become 'one council' is a priority for 2024/25. We have in addition this year faced challenges with RACC which is forcing a change in the use of our county hall base for children's services, so smooth relocation of our staffing services is a priority	Our workforce survey will tell us staff continue to feel valued and workforce permanency rates will remain above 85%
SEND inspection outcome action plan, DBV and Change programme	The SEND inspection of April 2024 resulted in a disappointing grade of Level 3, identifying systemic failures within our system and partnership. We are driven with passion and commitment to address the challenges identified and improve the timeliness, quality and early identification of needs to support children with additional needs and EHCP's. Alongside our SEND priority action plan and improvement plan, we will continue to contribute to Delivering Better Value and the SEND and AP Change Programme.	We will receive positive reports in our SEND progress and evaluation sessions. Our SEND QA and child parent carer survey for EHCP will continue in a positive trajectory
Implement new legislation practice standards, policy and procedures	Implementing new legislation and the continuous development of our practice standards, procedures & policies to reflect both new legislation and learning from our own self-assessment and QA is a priority, if we are to ensure we continue to be a children's service working to best practice. We have a full partnership programme through WSCP to implement Working Together 2024 and we will continue our service wide quality assurance programme that covers KPI's/Audit and Service User feedback to know the difference we are making to the lives of children and families.	We will have in place a Safeguarding Board structure and governance and our practice standards and procedures will reflect developed practice in Working Together 2024

Priorities	Summary of challenges and changes	Measures of success
<p>Early Years Sufficiency / School Place Planning, Attendance and Inclusion of Vulnerable Children</p>	<p>These key areas of work have multi-faceted impact across Children’s Services and the Local Authority partnership. These fundamental blocks are necessary to have in place as we work to ensure children in Worcestershire receive a good education and receive help and protection at the right time. There are full programmes of activity in each area under the responsibility of the Director of Education and the Children’s Executive Leadership team, who work together to ensure the work and its impact is supported, co-ordinated and understood so that we can make the best difference to children.</p>	<p>Providers and parents will tell us they have provision they need. Our data will show inclusion and attendance improving and disadvantaged children’s education outcomes improving</p>
<p>Keeping the service responsive to new and changing needs of children and families and being dynamic in seeking opportunities for change</p>	<p>We are driven to keep our services innovative and dynamic, responding to any changing needs and what works. 2023/24 saw:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The creation of our Child in Need team to support children stepping down from child protection, to have a longer period of intervention to help sustain changes. ■ The development of our pod service in Through Care to enable children in long term stable placements to have a relationship-based worker, reducing change. ■ Review by DfE and commission of Impower to work in our fostering services to enable us to drive forward our recruitment and maximise foster care capacity. ■ Development of a reunification team. We will drive all of these forwards to implementation and evaluation. 	<p>Repeat Child protection rates will remain lower than SN/Eng. CIN Children will have positive outcomes; low escalation to CP/Care and repeat assessments. We will have more children in foster care placements</p>

13. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Worcestershire Children First – Company Key Performance Indicators Month September 2023 to July 2024

Children Looked After

At Month End



Subject of Child Protection Plan

At Month End



Children in Need

At Month End



Children and YP with an EHCP

At Month End



Indicator	Target	Mar 22	Jun 22	Sep 22	Dec 22	Mar 23
A: (KPI-SC1) Referrals - Level 4 decision within 24 hours	52.3	●	●	●	●	●
B: (KPI-SC2) S17 Assessments completed within 45 days	75.6	●	●	●	●	●
C: (KPI-SC3) Proportion of Children Subject to CP Plan with Plan in Place	80	●	●	●	●	●
D: (KPI-SC4) ICPCs completed within 15 days	67.8	●	●	●	●	●
E: (KPI-SC5) Proportion of children who became the subject of a Child Protection Plan for a second or subsequent time within 2 years	27.3	●	●	●	●	●
F: (KPI-SC6) RCPCs completed within timescale	87.9	●	●	●	●	●
G: (KPI-SC7) Proportion of children subject to a Child Protection Plan seen within 20 days	77	●	●	●	●	●
H: (KPI-SC8) % Children Looked After Reviews in timescale	80.9	●	●	●	●	●
I: (KPI-SC9) Looked After Children with up to date Care Plan/Pathway Plan	73	●	●	●	●	●
J: (KPI-SC10) % Looked After Children who had a visit (in person) within timescale (30 days/60 days)	85	●	●	●	●	●
K: (KPI-SC11) % Children Open for assessment or plan without an allocated worker for 5 days	1	●	●	●	●	●
L: (KPI-SC12) % of Care Leavers open to services with an up to date pathway plan (age 18-25)	52.4	●	●	●	●	●
M: (KPI-EH1) % of annual target reached for successful claims under the "Troubled Families" programme	100	●	●	●	●	●
N: (KPI-ED1) Percentage of EHCP requests received where review decisions have been made within 6 weeks	80	●	●	●	●	●
O: (KPI-ED2) Percentage of Education Health and Care Plan decisions made within 16 weeks	60	●	●	●	●	●
P: (KPI-ED3) Percentage of Education Health and Care Plans completed within 20 weeks	60	●	●	●	●	●
Q: (KPI-ED4) Percentage of Statutory Advice Reports (all types) for EHCP Needs Assessment submitted within 6 weeks of request sent	80	●	●	●	●	●
R: (KPI-ED6) Percentage of looked after children of school age with an up to date Personal Education Plan	80	●	●	●	●	●

Key to KPI Status

- Green - KPI is at or above target
- Amber - KPI is below target, but not for three consecutive months, so action plan not triggered
- Red - KPI is below target and has been for three consecutive months, triggering action plan

Worcestershire Children First is the company responsible for delivering children's services across the county of Worcestershire. Our vision is for Worcestershire to be a wonderful place for all children and young people to grow up.

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**CHILDREN AT
OUR HEART**



**VALUE
FAMILY LIFE**



**GOOD EDUCATION
FOR ALL**



**PROTECTION
FROM HARM**



**EMBRACE
DIVERSITY**