

## **Minutes of the meeting of Children and young people scrutiny committee held at Online meeting only on Tuesday 19 January 2021 at 10.00 am**

**Present:** Councillor Carole Gandy (chairperson)  
Councillor Diana Toynbee (vice-chairperson)

**Councillors:** Kath Hey, Phillip Howells and Mike Jones

**Co-optees:** Andy James

**In attendance:** Councillors Jonathan Lester, Felicity Norman and Alan Seldon  
Sarah Kelly, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the HOPE family centre

**Officers:** Interim Head of Legal Services, Democratic services manager, Assistant Director Safeguarding and Family Support, Assistant Director Childrens Safeguarding Quality and Improvement and Assistant Director Education Development and Skills, Children's Joint Commissioning Manager, Head of Service Early Help, Children's Commissioning and Contacts Lead and Children's Centre Services Manager

### **23. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Graham Andrews, Councillor Paul Andrews and Mr Sam Pratley.

### **24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

A declaration of interest was raised by a member in attendance as a local member to the item at agenda item number six, provision of children centre service in Bromyard area: pre decision scrutiny. Councillor Jonathan Lester declared an other interest as his family had used the nursery at the HOPE centre and he had supported the work of the HOPE centre through involvement with local charities.

### **25. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Pages 7 - 12)**

A copy of the public questions received, responses provided and the supplementary questions is attached at appendix 1.

### **26. PROVISION OF CHILDREN CENTRE SERVICE IN BROMYARD AREA: PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY**

The committee considered a report by the Director Children and Families concerning pre-decision scrutiny of the decision regarding the provision of children centre services in the Bromyard area. The Children's Joint Commissioning Manager (CJCM) introduced the report and outlined the principal points below:

- The current contract with the HOPE centre provided for 11 hours work with families per week. It was recognised that the provider had exceeded the contract and provided an average 17.5 hours per week;

- No cuts to the service were proposed; the £25,000 cost of the contract with HOPE would continue to provide children's centre services;
- The proposal would see the integration of the contracted service in Bromyard into the service that operated across the county;
- The proposed change to the delivery of the service would be expected to increase capacity for direct work and enable a quick response to changing demand.

The Chairperson of the committee spoke and explained that it was important that when issues of local sensitivity were identified the scrutiny committee should be informed and have the opportunity to conduct scrutiny where appropriate.

The local member for Bromyard West read aloud a representation from Bromyard and Winslow Town Council. The Town Council explained that the proposal to bring the service in-house was not appropriate in the current circumstances, with particular reference to the pandemic.

The local member for Bromyard West read aloud a representation from the local member for Bromyard Bringsty. The representation noted that there was no criticism in the officer report of the service provided by HOPE and the proposal appeared to be for the sake of consistency. An alternative option could be to offer to HOPE the opportunity to run services across the county. There was no reference in the officer report to the outstanding Ofsted rating and there was no evidence in the report that HOPE had been approached to discuss a possible variation of the contract. The proposal was evidence of the marginalisation of Bromyard and the cabinet member was asked to reconsider the proposal.

The local member for Bromyard West spoke on the proposal and raised the principal points below:

- HOPE had been the centre of the community in Bromyard for 20 years.
- It had been acknowledged that the relationship with HOPE was important and valuable but the proposed decision would undermine that relationship.
- The decision was proposed as the service provided by the HOPE centre did not conform to the prevailing arrangements for children's centres across the county.
- Emotive language had emerged at the recent Town Council meeting and it was concerning that the proposals for children centre services in Bromyard had been perceived as an attack by some participants at the meeting.
- It was noted that the previous comprehensive consultation concerning the centre and service had been carried out in 2017.
- The service provided by the HOPE centre was an exemplar of good practice and should be rolled-out across the county.

The local member for Three Crosses spoke on the proposal and raised the principal points below:

- The HOPE centre had been part of the Bromyard community for a significant time and provided a haven for young families.
- In respect of the services provided by the HOPE centre it was important to consider whether Bromyard was already being catered for and more statistics should be provided as evidence.
- The committee should question whether the service provided by the HOPE centre was the best way to deliver children's centre service. It should be considered as such.

- The withdrawal of funding would undermine an organisation which had benefited the local community in Bromyard. The HOPE centre provided a high level of support and a vital safety net for families and children.
- The council was encouraged to undertake more evaluation of the HOPE centre service and its benefit to the local community before a decision was made.

The Chair of the Board of Trustees of the HOPE Family Centre spoke and raised the principal points below:

- The HOPE centre was established in the late 1990's and is currently located in purpose built accommodation and delivers a range of integrated services to local families, including a nursery for 80 children, an outreach service to families and children in Bromyard and area, other support services including a contact centre funded by CAF/CASS, training and support and advice to parents.
- Council staff have said that demands for early help in Bromyard are lower than elsewhere which HOPE believes is a result of their integrated and effective approach.
- The HOPE centre had linked the provision of a statutory service with its own services to provide a holistic approach.
- Three qualified and experienced staff are employed at the centre who jointly provide 37.5 hours of work to fulfil the contract though it only pays for 11 hours, and the proposal risks losing their services and experience.
- The process to develop the proposal had been rushed. There had not been proper consultation with the HOPE centre or the local community.
- The timing of the change to the provision of the service during the pandemic was not appropriate.
- The council was encouraged to undertake a longer consultation, after the pandemic, to consider the proposals in greater depth and to then change the model if necessary.

During the debate the committee raised the principal points below:

- The lack of referrals for Early Help was raised and it was queried whether other providers had made referrals. *The CJCM explained that, while records showed that some Early Help Assessments had been undertaken, there had been no evidence of claims for families achieving sustainable change arising from cases that involved children's centre services in the Bromyard area.*
- The lack of a consultation and evaluation of alternative options was queried. There was concern that the process followed to develop the proposal was not sufficiently rigorous. *The CJCM explained that the development of the proposals had followed corporate guidelines. A consultation would have been useful but due to limited resources this had not been possible.*
- The impact of the proposal on the staff at the centre was raised. There was concern about the uncertainty caused to staff and service users at the centre and there needed to be greater consideration of such impacts in the proposal. The Chair of the HOPE Family Centre was asked if staff would be willing to transfer under TUPE. *The CJCM explained that the council would work with the centre to explore the possibility of TUPE for existing staff employed through the contract. The Chair of the HOPE Family Centre explained that the staff were not employed fulltime on the contract and carried out other work at the Centre and HOPE would lose their services if they transferred to Herefordshire Council under TUPE. In any case, none of the staff wanted to transfer. The Children's Centre Services Manager explained that there were sufficient resources at the council to cover those early help cases that were currently active.*
- The proposal concerned a change in the delivery of service. The financial and resource implications may not be significant but it was felt that the potential

impact on the delivery of a council service necessitated the involvement of scrutiny.

- It was queried why there was not a tendering exercise at an early stage in the development of the proposal to examine alternative options and determine what HOPE or other providers could offer. *The Children's Commissioning and Contracts Leads (CCCL) explained that it was necessary to determine the preferred delivery model, and whether this would be an in-house or commissioned service, before a potential tendering exercise took place to award a contract, and that the decision to be made was a choice between in-house or external delivery rather than whether an incumbent provider should be recontracted.*
- The performance of children's centres in other areas of the county was raised. The take up rates of children's centres demonstrated that delivery of service by the council was not a guarantee of a successful service.
- It was felt that greater consultation with the centre and service users was required before a decision could be taken and the timing of the decision during the current pandemic was considered to be a risk.
- The extension of the current contract with HOPE, for a period up to 12 months, was queried to enable an evaluation of the service provided by HOPE, more extensive consultation and an examination of alternative options. *The CCCL explained that there was the potential for a short extension. The interim Head of Legal Services explained that a longer term extension would require a variation of the current contract and involve consultation with HOPE.*
- It was felt that detail concerning the obsolescence of the Council's database system used at the HOPE centre was an important detail that should be included in the report. *The CJCM explained that this detail would be included in the decision report.*
- The uniqueness of the HOPE centre and its understanding of the Bromyard area was felt to be key to its success. Rather than ensuring consistency across the county, the provision of a service should consider what was best for the local community. Greater evidence was required that an in house service would match the service provided by the HOPE centre.
- The committee understood that the decision concerning the proposal was scheduled to take place in January but it was felt that a deferral of the decision should be considered by the cabinet member to allow for additional work to take place on the proposal.

The Cabinet Member Children and Families spoke on the debate and raised those principal points below:

- The committee was thanked for the debate and its comments.
- All involved in the debate and decision-making wanted what was best for local children and families.
- The cabinet member had attended the meeting of the Town Council that had debated the matter and understood the local sensitivity.
- The Cabinet Member paid tribute to the service provided by HOPE and the wide range of opportunities for children and families at the centre.
- The issues raised during the debate and the recommendations agreed would be considered.

Councillor Carole Gandy proposed and Councillor Phillip Howells seconded the recommendations below which were agreed unanimously.

**RESOLVED: That the committee:**

- 1) **Has significant concerns about the timing of the proposed decision during the current pandemic and the implications for services users. The committee recommends deferral of the decision and extension of the current contract up to 12 months to enable:**
  - **A comprehensive consultation with the local community, service users and voluntary sector organisations;**
  - **Engagement with the HOPE Family Centre to ensure that the Council has necessary evidence to conduct a full and detailed evaluation of the service provided by the HOPE Family Centre and how it compares to the in-house service;**
  - **Greater exploration of alternative options including a potential tendering exercise for a commissioned service;**
  - **Work to ascertain what staffing arrangements would be put in place to ensure existing HOPE Family Centre staff have a greater degree of understanding about their future roles within the service; and**
  - **The committee to undertake a detailed scrutiny exercise on the proposal involving evidence from service users.**
  
- 2) **Recommends that in future the committee is made aware of issues of a sensitive and emotive concern to local communities as potential items for scrutiny.**

The meeting ended at 12.15 pm

**Chairperson**



Supplement – schedule of questions received for meeting of children and young people scrutiny committee – 19 January 2021

Agenda item no. 4 - Questions from members of the public

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
PQ 1	Dr Whalley, Hereford	<p>Herefordshire has a centre in Bromyard of which it should be proud. The Hope centre, established through highly effective local entrepreneurial activity, via Europe and government funding, has a proven track record, over two decades, of powerful work across a rural community. It successfully engages the most challenged children and their parents. Recent research from Nuffield Foundation states whilst, " The funding environment for early years services is tough ...we should be looking at the opportunity to offer wrap-around and integrated services in ECEC settings..cohesive services for children and families... ,with key workers they trust".</p> <p>The Hope Centre is just such a service; these poorly justified proposed cuts will significantly destabilise the provision. Officers argue for a centralised Hereford based model; how could this possibly be as effective as the seamless service currently offered, in which local families have such confidence?</p>	Cabinet Member Children and Families

**Response:**

There is a high regard for the Hope Family Centre and the wider role that it fulfils in the Bromyard area, and the Council wishes to continue its positive working relationship with Hope for Children & Their Families Limited to enable effective partnership working throughout the local community.

The proposals are that a contracted service, valued at £25,000 per annum, is integrated with the service that is provided for the rest of Herefordshire. It is not proposed to make any cuts to the resource, and it is intended that the change will deliver more direct support for vulnerable children and families.

Providers that are contracted by the Council for a wide variety of services are aware that contract funding is agreed for a fixed period and are encouraged and expected to make long-term plans for the end of a contract so that their other activities may continue. Similar planning is also necessary when charitable or grant funding can end.

Only the senior management of the in-house service is centralised. Operational teams, including early years support workers and community connectors work in areas covering the north and south of the county, and can work flexibly from office bases, community settings or home. They have developed local knowledge and networks over several years, with strong partnership working with the local health visitors, midwives, GPs, early years settings, schools and community organisations to identify and support children and families that might need some additional Early Help.

This county-wide approach has successfully delivered sustainable change for many vulnerable families in line with the National Troubled Families Programme. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Herefordshire has achieved second and first quartile rankings compared to nationwide local authorities in achieving positive outcomes for vulnerable families and is the second highest performing area in the West Midlands.

In line with the national troubled families programme, where sustainable change has been achieved for families (through EHA interventions) it is possible to claim funding under payment by results arrangements. Since October 2018, 135 successful claims have been made for families solely or partially supported by Children’s Centre Services of which none were recorded for the Bromyard Reach area.

**Supplementary Question:**

Confused by the response to my question, paragraph 2 states that there are no cuts proposed but the proposal to scrutiny is precisely to cut the £25,000 council contribution to the HOPE centre budget. The response to my question focuses on the national troubled families' programme. This was set up as a response to inner city riots providing interventions for the 400,000 most vulnerable families mostly with school age children. Focusing on the most vulnerable misses out on the preventative work designed to prevent families in Herefordshire becoming the most vulnerable. This is precisely the work in which the HOPE centre excels and for which it has received national and local recognition. At the least a proper independent review should be undertaken with an equality assessment and a community consultation to compare the effectiveness of the HOPE centre services and other council services. Now in the middle of a pandemic is not the time for the council to drop the ball.

**Response from Cabinet Member Children and Families:**

A written response would be provided to the points raised. Cuts were not contemplated but a different way of delivering the service; there would be no lessening of the service offered. On troubled families a response will be provided by officers involved in the delivery of the programme. The notion of early help informed the work of HOPE and others across the county; to anticipate and address issues at an early stage before a greater level of support is required and to improve outcome for children and families.

Written response provided – 12 March:

*There is a wide range of universally available early help and preventative work that is provided by organisations and communities across the county. Such work provides tremendous support to children, young people and families throughout Herefordshire. This includes activities like those that are offered by Hope for Children & Their Families Limited, that are provided without the direct involvement or funding of the council.*

*It has not been proposed to cut the level of investment in children's centre services. It is important to also understand that the £25,000 resource is not a contribution to an organisations budget, it is a contractual transaction between a purchaser and a provider, and as such a provider should be prepared for the end of a contract.*

*The council, along with other statutory partners, seek to ensure that there is effective targeted early help available when children, young people and families begin to experience additional needs so that they can get their lives back on track and achieve a sustained change. The national Troubled Families programme supports families across the country, and not only those that live in inner-city areas. Locally, the Troubled Families programme, which is known as Families First in Herefordshire, has supported over 2,400 families with a broad range of problems including poor school attendance, youth crime, antisocial behaviour, unemployment, domestic violence and physical or mental health needs.*

PQ 2	Dr Stevens, Hereford	Would the council agree that good management of the Children's Centre service can just as easily be maintained through modern contract management, working in partnership with an acclaimed and validated provider like the HOPE Centre, as through an in-house service?	Cabinet Member Children and Families
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**Response:**

Externally provided services are overseen by good contract management arrangements, with good partnership working between the Council and the Provider being a key element. The current arrangements, whereby children's centre services are managed and delivered across most of the county by the



Council and by an external provider in only the Bromyard area, mean that there is some duplication of overhead costs that the in-house service would be able to absorb.

PQ 3	Ms Tait, Bromyard	Would the Council agree that without full costings for the proposed new centralized delivery of Children's Centre services in the Bromyard Area, it is difficult to evaluate if this will be a saving?	Cabinet Member Children and Families
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**Response:**  
The proposed changes aren't intended to achieve a cost saving, but are expected to achieve additional efficiencies. For the same price of the contract, the council will be able to deliver more direct work to vulnerable families than has been provided. The council will be able to provide added value by absorbing the overheads, such as accommodation, administration and management alongside the services that are delivered in other parts of the county and without the need for any additional budget.

Integrating the £25,000 resource into the council service will provide a full-time post that will deliver at least 20 hours of direct work to families per week, increasing from the 11 hours required by the contract and the average 17.5 hours that have been provided. The operational team can also provide further direct work through its early help information and signposting officers and community connectors.

**Supplementary Question:**  
If changes are made to the delivery of Children's Services for Bromyard and its Reach area, there will need to be assurances that this service will be available to serve local families for the 20 hours of direct work with families per week as stated, rather than the hours be taken up by staff travelling from a remote base. Notwithstanding the pandemic, which has necessitated virtual working, there is still going to be a need for close and face to face working with families. Is the Council able to provide this assurance?

The pandemic has exposed the stark inequalities in our society and the community needs to be reassured that these will not be further widened by this proposed change.

**Response from Cabinet Member Children and Families:**  
The Council had continued to work with families which included virtual meetings. The service would not be remote but staff would be locally- focused and flexible. Detail in response to the question would be provided in writing following the meeting.

**Response from Head of Service, Early Help:**  
There had been no reduction in direct work with families. The key work of early help was to undertake work with families in their family home and realise change in behaviour. During the pandemic switched to mainly virtual working and children's centre services have done that through video calls, produced instructional videos for families online, Some face to face work was still being undertaken in family homes in accordance with guidance including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE); 38 face to face visits had taken place at the start of the lockdown.

Written response provided – 12 March:

*The proposals seek to further reduce any inequalities by ensuring that the emerging needs of a child or family that requires early help are identified, assessed and met so that they can evidence sustained change. Children Centre services complete the majority of their work with families on a one to one basis or small groups. This is in the family home or a community venue. This would continue to be the delivery model in Bromyard. During the pandemic there has been a requirement to reassess whether face to face work can continue depending on the national or tiered restrictions. Where in-person contact is necessary, support workers follow the appropriate guidance in the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Direct support to families can be delivered virtually (e.g. WhatsApp video or by phone), and physically with workers dropping off resources and food parcels to families and working with them in outdoor space when appropriate. Bromyard casework would be completed by an identified Early Years Support Worker with support from colleagues as required e.g. to cover annual leave.*

PQ 4	Ms Falconer, Hereford	Given the state of deprivation in Herefordshire in general, exacerbated by the pandemic, would the Council agree that the excellent service provided by HOPE to the Bromyard community for excellent value for money is something that the Council might learn from, rather than subtract its commitment to?	Cabinet Member Children and Families
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**Response:**  
 The Council continues to acknowledge the wider value that the Hope Centre provides to the local community, and the high regard with which local people have for it. The Council is committed to continuing to work in partnership with the Hope Centre and other local services, as we do in all parts of the County and we will also continue to learn from the best practice developed in other areas.

The proposed changes relate to the provision of a contracted service. As a fixed-term contract, there has been no commitment given or implied that funding would continue into the future. It is intended that the proposed changes will increase the capacity for direct work with vulnerable families in response to an Early Help Assessment (EHA), and that such work can be provided wherever it emerges across the county including in those areas that may be more deprived.

The countywide EHA approach has successfully delivered sustainable change for many vulnerable families as part of the National Troubled Families Programme. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Herefordshire has achieved second and first quartile rankings compared to nationwide local authorities in achieving positive outcomes for vulnerable families and is the second highest performing area in the West Midlands.

In line with the national troubled families programme, where sustainable change is achieved for families (through EHA interventions) it is possible to draw-down funding under payment by results arrangements. Since October 2018, 135 successful claims have been made for families solely or partially supported by Children’s Centre Services, of which 39 have been achieved during the coronavirus pandemic (since April 2020). None of these claims were for families supported in the Bromyard Reach area.

**Supplementary Question:**  
 You say Herefordshire has made 135 successful claims under the national troubled families programme, none of which were for the Bromyard reach area. I find this disingenuous. Given that Bromyard, and Bromyard Central in particular, is one of the most deprived areas in the whole country, it is not for lack of need that the Council has made no claims here. Is it worth considering that a) HOPE’s holistic interventions with Bromyard’s most vulnerable families is related to the fact that the Council has not made applications and/or b) that this measure does not relate to the need and deprivation on the ground, but to whether families fit the relevant eligibility criteria? Moreover, you do not address whether the Council might have something to learn from the HOPE approach to the whole family.

Clearly these Council contracts are for fixed terms and no provider should rely on them indefinitely. However, what is also clear is that the Council proposes to end a contract with a very successful model, at a couple of months' notice, leaving those who rely on HOPE's services with NO idea of what the alternative is to be in a few week's time, during the middle of a pandemic when the need is critical.

**Response from Cabinet Member Children and Families:**

The council was open to learning from HOPE and anywhere good practice was demonstrated. The relationship with HOPE was valuable and the council would seek to sustain a relationship with the organisation. The end date of the contract had been widely known and it was clear what the alternative would be. This may not have been what HOPE would like and it may be something that would be varied but it was broadly known what proposal would be contained in the review. The alternatives had been discussed with HOPE several months previously.

**Response from Head of Service, Early Help:**

The Early Help service works with a wide range of families, these 135 successful claims under the troubled families were just for families with children under 5. The council Early Help Family Support service support families in the Bromyard area and are working closely with three schools: Queen Elizabeth, St Peter's and Bredenbury by identifying an EH FSW to be a link worker who will spend time in the schools, support staff to identify families requiring support and have a caseload of work from the Bromyard area. This is likely to increase the number of families with under 5 year children requiring support as there will be younger siblings.

