

Agenda

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Date: **Tuesday 23 January 2024**

Time: **2.00 pm**

Place: **Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford,
HR4 0LE**

Notes: Please note the time, date and venue of the meeting.

For any further information please contact:

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Agenda for the meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Membership

Chairperson **Councillor Toni Fagan**
Vice- **Councillor Liz Harvey**
chairperson

Councillor Clare Davies
Councillor Robert Highfield
Councillor Jim Kenyon
Councillor Ben Proctor
Councillor Rob Williams

Co-optees

Sylvia Cockroft
Anna Eccleston
Jan Frances
Kate Joiner
Stuart Mitchell
Sam Pratley

Agenda

		Pages
1.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE</p> <p>To receive apologies for absence.</p>	
2.	<p>NAMED SUBSTITUTES</p> <p>To receive details of members nominated to attend the meeting in place of a member of the committee.</p>	
3.	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST</p> <p>To receive declarations of interests from members of the committee in respect of items on the agenda.</p>	
4.	<p>MINUTES</p> <p>To receive the minutes of the meeting held on 14 November 2023.</p>	9 - 16
<p style="text-align: center;">HOW TO SUBMIT QUESTIONS</p> <p>The deadline for the submission of questions for this meeting is 09.30am on Thursday 18 January 2024.</p> <p>Questions must be submitted to councillorservices@herefordshire.gov.uk. Questions sent to any other address may not be accepted.</p> <p>Accepted questions and the responses will be published as a supplement to the agenda papers prior to the meeting. Further information and guidance is available at www.herefordshire.gov.uk/getinvolved</p>		
5.	<p>QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC</p> <p>To receive any written questions from members of the public.</p>	
6.	<p>QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL</p> <p>To receive any written questions from members of the council.</p>	
7.	<p>SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN'S PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23</p> <p>For the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee to consider the 2022/23 annual report of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership (HSCP).</p>	17 - 58
8.	<p>REPORT OF THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMISSIONER IN HEREFORDSHIRE</p> <p>To consider the recently published progress report on Children's Services in Herefordshire, produced by the DfE appointed Commissioner, Eleanor Brazil.</p>	59 - 94
9.	<p>TASK AND FINISH GROUP - CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE DIRECTORATE BUDGET</p> <p>To provide the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee with the findings and recommendations of Scrutiny Management Board's task and</p>	

finish group tasked with scrutinising the current expenditure and future budget of the children and young people directorate.

[Papers to follow].

10. WORK PROGRAMME

To consider the work programme for the committee.

11. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 12 March 2024 2.00pm

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www.herefordshire.gov.uk/downloads/file/1597/hereford-city-bus-map-local-services-

The seven principles of public life

(Nolan Principles)

1. Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

2. Integrity

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

3. Objectivity

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

4. Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

5. Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

6. Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful.

7. Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour and treat others with respect. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Minutes of the meeting of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee held at Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Tuesday 14 November 2023 at 2.00 pm

Present: Councillor Toni Fagan (chairperson)
Councillor Liz Harvey (vice-chairperson)

Councillors: Ben Proctor, Frank Cornthwaite (substitute), Clare Davies, Jim Kenyon.

Co-Optees: Stuart Mitchell, Anna Eccleston (online), Sam Pratley (online) Kate Joiner

In attendance: Councillor Ivan Powell (Cabinet Member Children and Young People), Simon Cann (Clerk), Liz Farr (Service Director, Education, Skills and Learning), Darryl Freeman (Corporate Director - Children & Young People), Maria Hardy (Lead Commissioner Children, Young People & Maternity), Debbie Hobbs (Parent Carer Voice) Rosalind Pither (Head of Additional Needs), Dr Katie Powell (Consultant child and Adolescent Psychiatrist H&W NHS Health and Care Trust), Sonya Upton (Associate Director of children's services and specialist primary care H&W NHS Health and Care Trust), (Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer).

Officers:

162. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Robert Highfield and Jan Frances (Co-opted Families Representative).

163. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor Frank Cornthwaite substituted for Councillor Robert Highfield.

164. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Ben Proctor explained to the committee that in relation to item 7 (Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) Action Plan) on the agenda, he was married to the executive principle of the Royal National College of the Blind. The committee acknowledged this and felt it did not constitute a pecuniary interest and that Councillor Proctor could remain in the meeting during the item.

165. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

166. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Questions received and responses given are attached as Appendix 1 to the minutes.

167. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions were received from members of the council.

168. CO-OPTED MEMBER RECRUITMENT UPDATE

The statutory scrutiny officer introduced and gave an overview of the report.

The Statutory scrutiny officer explained that the chair's intent was that the co-opted members should become full participating members of the Committee and receive all of the support - in terms briefings and opportunities for personal development - that elected members would have within the context of the Committee.

The Committee voted unanimously in favour of the following recommendations:

Resolved

That the Committee:

a) Notes the recent activity to recruit co-opted members to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee; and

b) Recommends to full Council that the candidates in paragraphs 12 to 18 of this report should be appointed to the Committee; and

c) Agrees the suggested amendments and recommend to full Council to change the Constitution with regard to the recruitment of co-opted members.

169. CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

The Associate Director of Children's Services and Specialist Primary Care Herefordshire and & Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust introduced the report and gave a slide presentation to the Committee. The key considerations included:

- Understanding of children's emotional and mental health needs and services provided to meet these needs in our community
- Understanding of children's neurodiversity needs and services provided to meet these needs in our community
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) including current waiting times, demand, work with partner agencies and use of specialist inpatient hospital resource (Tier 4 beds)

Following the presentation the report was opened up to the Committee, the principle points of the discussion are summarised below.

1. The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People gave an assurance about the connectivity to the work that was taking place within the Children and Young People's Partnership Board and the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust. A meeting had been arranged between the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, and Elaine Cook-Tippins and Dr Katie Powell of the NHS Trust to discuss a range of issues.

2. The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People explained that they would like to hear more about support for children and families on waiting lists. A request to share more information about ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience) was made, with a view to opening up discussion about how trauma informed responses should be handled in future.
3. In response to a question from the Committee, the Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist from Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust explained that if a child was undertaken for a CAMHS appointment, the clinicians there were trained and skilled in what to screen for in terms of ACEs. The clinician team were also trained in how to put in a MARF (multi-agency referral form). If concerns about a child hit a threshold the team would communicate (with parental or child consent) with social care and other primary care services, but would not routinely link in with other services unless asked to.
4. In response to a question asked by the committee it was explained that mechanisms were in place to stop children falling through the gaps during long periods when they weren't at school and that CAMHS continued to promote its services at the end of school terms. The largest number of referrals came from GPs and it was noted that data demonstrated that the mental health and wellbeing of some children improved when they were away from school - as they were removed from bullying/hostile environments and had less anxiety around school work. However, many children with needsneurodiversity-related were found to struggle with the lack of routine.
5. The Associate Director confirmed to the Committee that Herefordshire had shorter waiting lists for referrals than Worcestershire.
6. The Committee discussed and highlighted the importance of pastoral care and good nutrition in relation to the mental wellbeing of young people.
7. The Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist highlighted the distinction between mental health and mental illness. A separate cohort of individuals with learning disabilities and neurodevelopmental needs was identified, these had specific needs that were not related to mental illness. It was pointed out that there was a general misunderstanding that those with mental health or neurodevelopmental difficulties needed to seek assistance from CAMHS and that changing this narrative would be extremely helpful. It was also noted that there was a lot that schools and universal providers could do to encourage good mental health/wellbeing to prevent people reaching the stage of mental illness.
8. The Committee raised concerns about people not knowing where to turn for support with their issues, especially the growing cohort of children with autism and ADHD who were on waiting lists for a diagnosis.
9. In response to a question from the Committee, the Assistant Director explained that the national target for assessment treatment was 18 weeks and that this figure was set by government. The Assistant Director pointed out whilst waiting, people were sent a letter with emergency contacts and signposting for online counselling and forums such as Kooth, which were accessible immediately.
10. It was explained that all referrals that came in were reviewed by a specialist mental health clinician and prioritised in relation to urgency. If urgent factors were identified then a child could be seen or parent contacted on the same day.
11. The Committee heard about the WEST (Wellbeing Education Support Teams) pilot scheme and the timelines, selection criteria and funding involved. It was

explained that 48% of schools in Herefordshire were involved in the scheme and that selection criteria had included areas of deprivation, education factors and sign up from schools. The initial aim was to target the most vulnerable children and young people and areas of need first. An announcement on extension funding for the pilot was anticipated after the next election.

12. In response to a question from the Committee the Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist explained that children with lower level depression and anxiety who attended schools where WEST wasn't in place would be referred by GPs, schools or CAMHS to [the CLD Trust](#). For children who were homebound there was an assessment service for mental illness, which would link up with social care to assist with family support and intervention where required.
13. A sharp and disproportionate (compared to boys) rise in the percentage of girls being recorded as having a probable mental disorder between the year 2017 and 2021 was largely attributed to an almost 400% increase in reported eating disorders over that period and these types of disorders tended to impact girls more than boys.
14. The general rise in recorded mental disorders during the period 2017-2021 was put down to factors around Covid, such as children being exposed to increased domestic violence and alcohol abuse, along with reduced access to traditional support networks such as friends, teachers, teaching assistants, youth centres and wider family care.
15. The Committee highlighted concerns about the general lack (especially in rural areas) of wider support networks, such as youth clubs and youth centres, available to children. It was noted that these had historically provided a 'pressure valve' for young people to speak with other young people and adults outside of the family and system.
16. The Committee highlighted the importance of ensuring the working partnership was utilising the strong family relationship and day-to-day connections that schools had with parents and children.
17. The Assistant Director explained that there was a mental health lead in each school and they worked very closely with social care in relation to the most vulnerable children.
18. The Lead Commissioner Children, Young People & Maternity NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire ICB explained to the Committee that each school had a public health school nurse, who was permanently attached to the school and was required to respond to needs identified in the school by young people, family members or teachers. The nurses provided one-to-one support to pupils and advice for teachers and parents in dealing with lower level anxiety and depression that might be influencing attendance and other areas of performance.
19. The Lead Commissioner Children, Young People & Maternity NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board explained to the Committee that an all-age autism strategy was currently being consulted on, which contained significant recommendations on redesigning the pathway to services.
20. The strategy would aim join up local authorities with health, education and voluntary sectors to support the delivery of the things those with neurodiversity related needs were saying were most important. In broad terms the strategy had six key priorities, it was all-age and covered areas including employment, housing and managing long term health needs rather than focusing on diagnosis. It was

noted that there were clearly times when an individual would require a diagnosis, but that a diagnosis alone would not help the individual to cope with autism. Therefore the strategy would focus on individuals developing skills that they would need to manage their lifelong circumstances, access to education, employment and leisure facilities.

21. The Committee heard that data relating to outcomes had been impacted and compromised by a recent cyber-attack on the NHS system, but going forward more detailed information would be available on outcomes.
22. It was explained that the assessment paperwork for the CAMHS service had been reviewed and developed so that at the point of assessment the young person could say what they want, why they were there and what their expected outcomes were.
23. It was explained local provisions had not changed specifically in relation to the needs of children experiencing gender dysphoria, although this could change as part of a newly commissioned under 19s national service.
24. The Corporate Director Children & Young People, stated that they would be happy to work with the Committee in terms of exploring how the strong relationships between schools and families could be fully utilised by the Council and agencies within the wider partnership.
25. The Statutory Scrutiny Officer suggested that a training session for the Committee members be put in place to sharpen their understanding in regards to youth provision and what the Council and the partnership could and were required to provide.

At the end of the discussion the Committee note a number of actions:

Action: To add the Autism Strategy and associated action plan to the Committee's work programme.

Action: For a training session around youth provision to be arranged.

170. SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND/OR DISABILITY (SEND) ACTION PLAN

The Service Director, Education, Skills and Learning introduced and gave an overview of the report, identifying a number of key issues.

The Service Director explained that the number of children with EHCPs was increasing at both a national and local level. Herefordshire's increase was slightly below the national average, but nevertheless EHCPs had risen by 10% in the last twelve months and 50% since 2017, with there now being approximately 1,400 children with EHCPs in the county.

It was explained that demand for specialist places had increased in Herefordshire. A number of specialist hubs in mainstream schools had recently been opened to increase the number of places available and plans were ongoing to open more of these hubs.

Following the presentation the report was opened up to the Committee, the principle points of the discussion are summarised below.

1. The Committee heard that additional demands had placed SEND case workers and educational psychologists under increased pressure, but they had prioritised workloads to ensure that families were not kept waiting for plans. The SEND team continued to perform well regarding issuing plans within the statutory 20 week timescale. Nationally the figure for hitting this target was approximately 49%, whereas Herefordshire consistently sat somewhere between 78-95 % month-on-month.
2. It was explained that all children in Herefordshire with significant needs had an offer of a school place, which wasn't always the case in other authorities, where some children with plans could wait years to secure an offer of a school place that met their needs.
3. The Head of Additional Needs explained that in order to mitigate against pressure from rising demands, the SEND team had restructured internally, looked at role descriptions, and worked more tightly on the triage systems with health partners and social care colleagues.
4. It was explained that one casualty of the increased demand was a reduction in some of the early intervention and prevention work that educational psychologists had historically done with schools, such as whole school relational practice and trauma response strategies. However, they were still involved in emotionally-based school avoidance training and the virtual school was still active in that space.
5. The Service Director, Education, Skills and Learning explained that it was too early to measure the impact of cuts to early interventions, but they had been noted as a risk. However different ways of maximising resources and working with schools were being implemented to mitigate the impact. Herefordshire was also part of a programme, working with regional colleagues, to test DFE (Department for Education) reforms over the next few years.
6. The Committee heard that head teacher termly conferences provided insight about what worked well in schools and the directorate had been working with colleagues in Bedford, which had enabled them to focus on the network of specialist needs coordinators. Furthermore a network of three schools had been set up to peer review one another.
7. The Corporate Director, Children & Young People pointed out that significant work had been done as a partnership to embrace the peer review from last year. It was also suggested that scrutiny could achieve a lot through working with agencies and political supporters to reduce the need for EHCPs and make it easier for families to access services without having to go through what was a lengthy process.
8. In response to a question from the Committee the Lead Commissioner Children, Young People & Maternity stated that one of the most effective way to support families was to get to them very early on in family life. Providing and signposting support during the first thousand and one days of childhood would reap great benefits for children and parents in relation to positive mental wellbeing. It was important to set a direction where families would be empowered to help themselves, but that additional targeted support was available when required.
9. The Committee heard that government reforms introduced in 2014 had had the unintended effect of increasing the number of EHCPs being put in place. It was hoped that a child readiness project encouraging multi-agency working with

families to provide intense support in early years would help meet needs and stop them from escalating to a point where an EHCP was required.

10. The Committee stressed the importance of pastoral care in schools and it was explained that recruitment in these relatively low paid roles was proving problematic.
11. The Committee praised the report, but expressed disappointment at the omission of detailed dashboard information within it. It was acknowledged that detailed data may not sit well in public information documents, but was vitally important for scrutiny to be able to carry out its role properly. More detailed information was promised in future reports of this nature.
12. The Committee stressed the importance of working on ways to enable and encourage people to access services, support and advice. It was noted that providing families with the tools to support themselves and their children would potentially lead to a reduction in requests for EHCPs.
13. The online Parent Carer Voice Early Years information booklet that had been coproduced with input from Herefordshire Council and other agencies was praised by the Committee.
14. A discussion around funding for early intervention remaining a council priority took place and the Committee voted by majority to make the following recommendation to the executive:

Recommendation

That:

- a) **The executive ensure that early intervention in schools is funded adequately in Herefordshire Council's 2024-2025 budget.**

171. CHAIR'S UPDATE

The chair thanked co-opted member Kate Joiner for attending the LGA webinar on youth vaping.

The chair explained that the service director for improvement had advised that a briefing on restorative practice was being prepared and that elected members had had a briefing on the latest Ofsted monitoring visit.

A request had been made to the Scrutiny Management Board for a task and finish group to consider the forecast overspend and escalating costs of children's services and the potential risks they posed to the 2024/25 budget.

172. WORK PROGRAMME

No changes or updates. The statutory scrutiny officer pointed out that any issues regarding the work programme could be picked up and discussed during scheduled pre meetings.

173. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 23 January 2024 2pm.

174. APPENDIX 1 - PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Pages 9 - 30)

The meeting ended at Time Not Specified

Chairperson



Title of report: Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership Annual Report

Meeting: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date: Tuesday 23 January 2024

**Report by: Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership,
Independent Chair and Scrutineer**

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

For the Children's and Young People Scrutiny Committee to consider the 2022/23 annual report of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership (HSCP).

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) The annual report and effectiveness of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership (HSCP) be considered;**
 - **noting the progress of the multi-agency safeguarding partnership arrangements in Herefordshire during this period.**
- b) The committee determine any recommendations it wishes to make to relevant bodies to secure further improvement in safeguarding children and young people in Herefordshire.**

Alternative options

1. There are no alternative recommendations.

Key considerations

2. The vision of Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership remains to work together to create a place where all children and young people in Herefordshire are safe, free from abuse and neglect and supported to live happy and healthy lives.
3. The activity of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership is a critical element of the ongoing multi-agency approach to keep children and young people safe from harm.
4. The purpose of the safeguarding arrangements, as set out in Chapter 2: Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 is to support and enable local organisation and agencies to work together in a system where:
 - a) Children are safeguarded and their welfare promoted,
 - b) Partner organisations and agencies collaborate, share and co-own the vision for how to achieve improved outcomes for vulnerable children,
 - c) Organisations and agencies challenge appropriately and hold one another to account effectively,
 - d) There is early identification and analysis of new safeguarding issues and emerging threats,
 - e) Learning is promoted and embedded in a way that local services for children and families can become more reflective and implement changes to practice,
 - f) Information is shared effectively to facilitate more accurate and timely decision making for children and families.
5. The annual report presents the work that the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership and the organisations that make up the HSCP have undertaken to keep children and young people safe. The report covers the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.
6. The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership is made up of the three statutory safeguarding partner organisations - West Mercia Police, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board and Herefordshire Council and continues to be supported by a range of relevant agencies, which include:
 - a) Wye Valley NHS Trust
 - b) Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust
 - c) Herefordshire and Worcestershire Fire and Rescue Service
 - d) West Mercia Youth Justice Service
7. The statutory partner members have joint and equal responsibility for the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA). The partnership understand the absolute dependence on each other and on relevant agencies to make a difference to the work with children, young people and families in Herefordshire.
8. During the course of this reporting year, the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership underwent a review of its multiagency safeguarding arrangements. The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership substructure changed to reflect the new arrangements and ambition to strengthen strategic and operational activity and improve safeguarding for the children and young people of Herefordshire. A revised safeguarding arrangements document was published on the 1 December 2023 and is available on the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership website [Herefordshire Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements 2023 - Herefordshire Safeguarding Boards and Partnerships](#).
9. The 2022/23 annual report details what Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership has achieved as a result of the safeguarding arrangements in place over the past year, and how effective these arrangements have been in practice, with particular focus on agreed priorities.
10. The report provides an overview of the effectiveness of the partnership including:
 - a) Partnership arrangements

- b) Communication and Engagement
- c) Safeguarding Effectiveness and Scrutiny
- d) Safeguarding Practice Reviews
- e) Learning and Improvement
- f) Neglect

11. The annual report aims to illustrate how the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership continues to develop an integrated approach to safeguarding children and young people with equal accountability between the three statutory partners, together with our wider agencies and in co-operation with children, their families, significant others and residents.
12. 2022 to 2023 has been an opportunity to reinvigorate the ambitions of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership and to explore smarter ways of working to improve engagement, and incorporate learning from reviews to develop our working practices with children and their families.

Independent Scrutiny (IS)

13. The partnership appoints a suitably qualified and experienced individual to review the effectiveness of the partnership arrangements in keeping children and young people safe.
14. The Annual report contains a statement by the IS which concludes for 22/23:
15. 'Overall I have to conclude that in 22/23 that the HSCP was not fully effective but that there has been improvement in some key aspects of the partnership work. Much planning has been completed to improve matters in 23/24, which indicates that more progress will be made next year.'
16. Given however that it is ten months since the period covered by the Annual Report 22/23 it is appropriate to report that in that time more progress has been made which gives greater assurance that HSCP is developing as an improved partnership.
17. A Section 11 audit has been completed which is a self-assessment of each agencies compliance with their safeguarding responsibilities. These have been subject to a 'challenge' session with partners holding each other to account. This provides also an opportunity for partners to identify what is working well and what needs to be improved. Agencies taking part in the challenge session included, Herefordshire Council, West Mercia Police, Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board, Wye Valley NHS Trust and Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust. The overall conclusion of this audit is that as individual agencies the key partners are compliant with the requirements of Working Together (2018) and other legislation. A further "challenge" session will be held with the following agencies; including the Fire and Rescue Service, Probation, Sexual Health services, Turning Point and West Midlands Ambulance Service.
18. A self-assessment 'health check' exercise is underway with the Department for Education to benchmark readiness for implementing Working Together 2023 (published in December 2023).
19. The working relationship between the HSCP and the Children's Services Improvement Board is clearly set out in a HSCP delivery plan. Progress is regularly monitored and challenged at the Improvement Board and key impact measures have also been agreed. The partnership is working at increasing the pace at which some of this work is delivered but progress had been made over recent months.
20. Performance data remains a challenge though HSCP now has an improved data set, however police data needs to be provided.

21. Multi-agency audits are now underway and the partnership continues to comply with its requirement to hold Rapid Reviews and Local Child Protection Safeguarding Reviews (LSCPR). The National Panel has approved all Rapid Reviews and the Local Safeguarding Child Practice Review completed in 2023 which will be published on the HSCP website shortly.
22. The HSCP Business Plan and the delivery plans for each of the HSCP sub groups are more focussed and are used by the Strategic Partnership Board to monitor progress in delivering the functions of the partnership.
23. Much of the above will be reflected in the Annual Report for 23/24 which will be published in September 2024 as required by Working Together 2023. The partnership acknowledges that there is much more that needs to be done for the partnership to meet the aspiration set out in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Arrangements.
24. In the view of the Independent Scrutineer there is greater knowledge and understanding of what needs to be progressed and greater self-awareness of strengths and areas that require development as a result of activity of the ten months since the period covered by the Annual report 22/23.
25. The further challenge for the Partnership will be in maintaining progress through a time of policy change arising out of the recently published Working Together 2023

Community impact

26. The activity of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership has both a direct and indirect effect on the lives of both current and future children and families in Herefordshire.

Environmental Impact

27. There is no direct environmental impact arising out of this report.

Equality duty

28. The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership policies and function has been developed to be inclusive. We will embrace diversity, equity and inclusion so that our strategies and the work we do recognises and relates to every individual fairly.
29. The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership monitors protected characteristics within our rapid review and child safeguarding practice review processes which take place when a child dies or is seriously harmed, and abuse or neglect is known or suspected.
30. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to –

- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;

- c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Resource implications

31. There are no resource implications for consideration with this report. The work of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children’s Partnership is supported by the three statutory partners and other relevant agencies as highlighted in the report.

Legal implications

32. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

Risk management

33. The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children’s Partnership maintains its own risk register and takes action as required to mitigate any identified risk.

Consultees

34. There has been no public consultation on this report.

Appendices

35. HSCP-Annual Report 2022-23

Background papers

None identified

Report Reviewers Used for appraising this report:

Please note this section must be completed before the report can be published		
Governance	John Coleman	Date 12/01/2024
Finance	Karen Morris	Date 15/01/2024
Legal	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date
Communications	Michala Lee	Date 12/01/2024
Equality Duty	Harriet Yellin	Date 15/01/2024
Procurement	Lee Robertson	Date 12/01/2024
Risk	Elizabeth Freedland	Date 10/01/2024
Approved by	Victoria Gibbs	Date 15/01/2024



Herefordshire Safeguarding
Children Partnership

Annual Review of Effectiveness Report 2022 -2023



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1. About the Annual Report

Working Together 2018 requires each Local Authority Area to establish local arrangements for safeguarding children and young people.

The purpose of these local arrangements is to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and to work together to identify and respond to the needs of children in the area.

The statutory guidance states that the responsibility for these arrangements is between the Herefordshire Council, West Mercia Police and NHS Integrated Care Board (Herefordshire and Worcestershire). Other 'relevant' agencies also have a duty to safeguard children and young people under Working Together 2018.

The Herefordshire safeguarding arrangements are reviewed annually and can be found within Multiagency Safeguarding Arrangement (MASA) published on the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) website.

HSCP is responsible for Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPR's). This includes arrangements to identify serious child safeguarding cases, which raise issues of importance in relation to the area, and for those cases to be reviewed under the supervision of the safeguarding partners. CSPR's are published on the HSCP website unless to do so will pose a risk to an individual.

At least once in every 12 month period, the safeguarding partners must prepare and publish a report on what the safeguarding partners and relevant agencies for the local authority area have done as a result of the arrangements, and outline how effective the arrangements have been in practice.

This Annual Report covers and reports on activity between 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023

The Annual Report provides information about the structures in place that support the HSCP to undertake its functions effectively.

2. Foreword – By SPB Partners

This is the annual report from the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership. The report covers the period from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023. The report provides information about the work and effectiveness of our local safeguarding children arrangements during this period.

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and for services to be effective each citizen, practitioner and organisation should play their part. In Herefordshire, all our partners are committed to working together so that every child and young person in Herefordshire is safe, well and able to reach their full potential.

This annual report highlights the collective endeavour that takes place across our partnership, to keep our most vulnerable children safe, and to make sure that they can be as healthy as possible.

In 2022/23 Partners recognised the need to make changes to improve the effectiveness of the HSCP given the outcome of the Ofsted Inspection of children's services. This report recognises the progress that the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership has made throughout the year.

As the HSCP Safeguarding Partners Board (SPB), we reviewed the arrangements of our Partnership to ensure they are right, taking opportunities to review processes and structures where appropriate. We have considered our model of independent scrutiny, case review process, Section 11-audit, and priorities, with a view to ensuring a positive impact for children and families in Herefordshire

We have also listened to feedback from our partners and the strong desire that exists to contribute to the direction of the Partnership. As we move forward, we are clear that we want to be assured that our role as the Partnership makes a difference to outcomes for children and young people. To do this we are increasingly focused on understanding the impact of the Partnership and our work. Where possible this is reflected in this report, but we are building our approach to data and reporting to enhance this.

We are also absolutely committed to learning from Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, ensuring that learning is acted upon, with better oversight of implementation and impact. As a board, we are able to lend our strategic leadership to ensure that reoccurring and difficult issues are addressed.

We as a partnership accepted the Ofsted judgment of our Children Services as Inadequate in July 2022. In order to address some areas highlighted in the Ofsted Inspection Report and of the other pressures linked to increased levels of referrals, we recognised the need to review the front door arrangements in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). This work reflected on the capacity and capability within the MASH, the commitment and resource input from partners and resulted in recommendations regarding call screening, better pathways, training, resourcing, systems, and an enhanced analytical capability such as the MASH dashboard.

The action plan to implement these recommendations is now well underway, for example:

- Partners have worked together to ensure there are no barriers to safeguarding children and young people in a timely and informed way.
- Effective systems have been established to gather information to decide the right level of support to offer children and young people.
- Parental consent is routinely obtained for undertaking agency checks.
- Multi-agency Information Sharing Protocols and issues of consent have been reviewed to establish shared ways of working to strengthen decision making and management oversight in response to children and young people at risk of harm and/ or requiring support as Children in Need .

We are disappointed that we have not yet been able to produce a performance dashboard, which remains an ambition. Despite the best efforts of the Partnership Business Team and the Quality and Effectiveness subgroup, the right data has not yet been provided by partners to enable the development of a dashboard. However, there is optimism that this can be delivered in 2023/24 following renewed support from the statutory partners.

While the Partnership has developed positively over the past year, it is still struggling to evidence the impact of the considerable amount of activity it undertakes. In the coming year, we aim to place a greater emphasis on demonstrating outcomes and impact from our work. Early signs of improvements were noted by Ofsted in the first monitoring visit (March 2023), which focused on the effectiveness of the MASH.

It is clear that the Partnership has made significant steps forward in the twelve months since the previous annual report, and we continue to build on our achievements to learn and to seek to improve the safeguarding children system where needed.

3. Herefordshire Context

According to the 2021 Census there are 33,846 children and young people aged 0-17 in Herefordshire. The total population of the county is 187,000, growing by 1.9% in the past 10 years. The population is ageing and the proportion of people aged 19 and under in the county has fallen in the past decade from 21.8% to 19.8%. Herefordshire is less diverse than the country as a whole – 96.9% report their ethnicity as 'white'. 84.5% of the local population were born in England – the next most common country of birth was Wales (5.3%) and Poland (1.8%).

As of 2021, Herefordshire is the least densely populated of the West Midlands' 30 local authority areas, and the fourth least densely populated amongst English Upper Tier Authorities.

Early Help

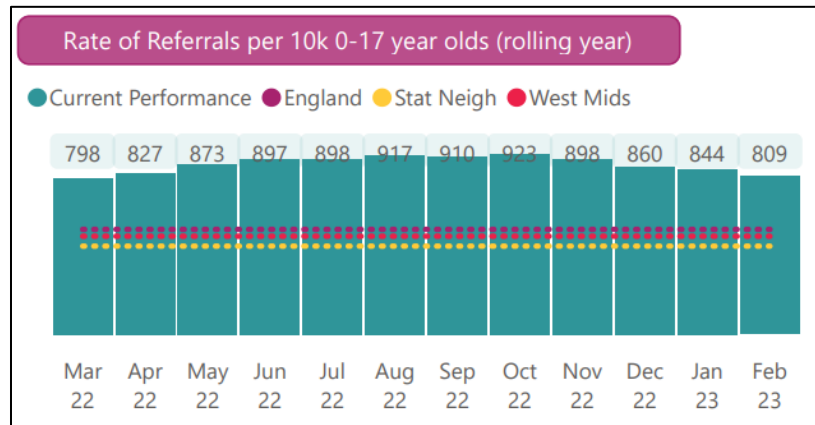
Early Help received between 205 and 368 contacts each month in the year 2022-23. The majority (over 80%) were screened within 72 hours, which allowed timely sign posting and support to children and families.

There is good engagement from partners with Early Help Assessment Plans, with a large proportion of Early Help Assessments being completed by partner agencies.

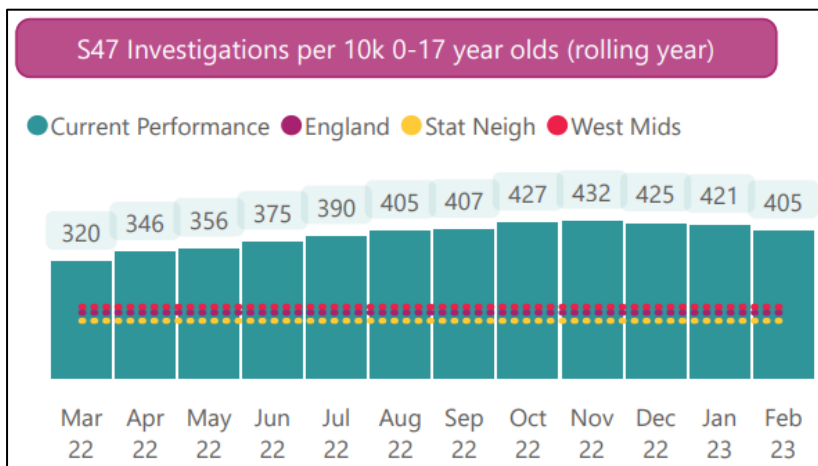
MASH Contacts and Referrals

The Rate of Referrals to the MASH has ranged somewhat between 798 per 10K 0-17 year olds, and 923.

The rate of referrals remains high when compared with our statistical neighbours.



Section 47 Investigations

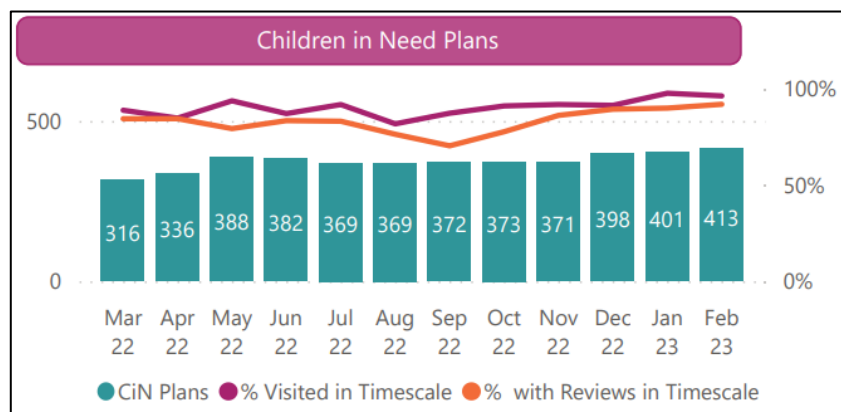


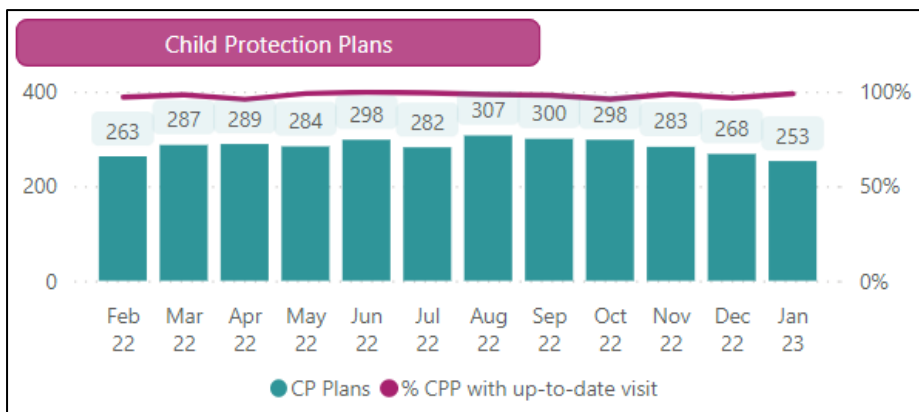
The number of s47 investigations peaked in November 2022, but has stabilised later in the year. The rate of s47 investigations is much higher than that of statistical neighbours.

Although only one in five (20.4%) of S47 Enquiries in February ended in an Initial Child Protection Conference; the year-to-date figure for this is 29.4%. This is not dissimilar that that of our statistical neighbours (31.9%).

Children in Need and Child Protection

The number of children in need increased during the year, and this is mainly driven by an increased number of children and young people being stepped down from Child Protection.

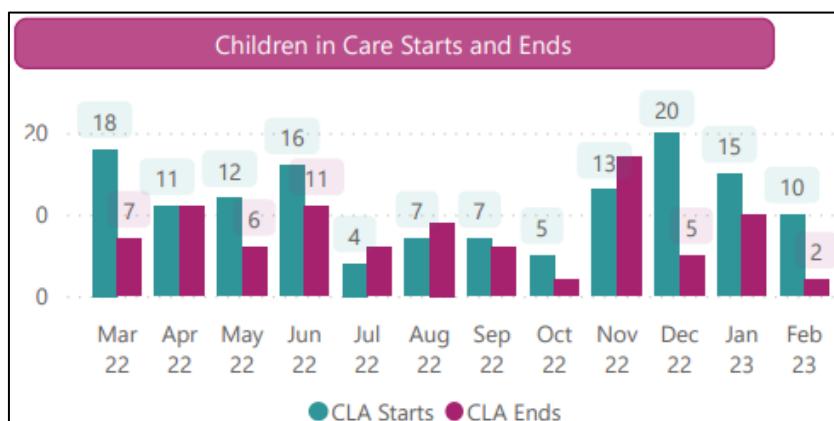




The number of children in on Child Protection Plans was at its highest in August 2022, and has since steadily decreased in the following months.

Children in Care and Leaving Care

The number of children coming into care increased slightly during the year due to the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) who arrived through the national transfer scheme, and a number of sibling groups being accommodated. Children in care reviews remained in the 90% – which is positive. We need to do more to ensure children and young people attend their reviews as their voice needs to be heard.



4. Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership

The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) was put in place in response to the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and Working Together 2018 and replaced Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs). The safeguarding partnership is held to account by the Safeguarding Partners’ Board, which is formed of the three statutory safeguarding partners: the Police; the Local Authority; and the Integrated Care Board (ICB).

The HSCP is a statutory, multi-organisation partnership coordinated by the Partnership Team, which oversees and leads children’s safeguarding across Herefordshire. The main objective of

the HSCP is to gain assurance that local safeguarding arrangements, comprised of partner organisations, are working effectively, individually and together, to support and safeguard children in its area who are at risk of abuse and neglect and promote their welfare.

The partnership governance arrangements are detailed in the [Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements](#) for the HSCP. The Safeguarding Partners are committed to the HSCP Pledge:

Our role is to keep children safe and give them a voice

Our commitment is to make sure everything we do works for children

We will make sure that children are at the heart of what we do

Quality assurance remains our key driver across all the subgroups, using frameworks that will measure the impact of subgroup activities, challenge those working in the safeguarding arena, and provide oversight of frontline activity. We also continued to ensure that our policies and procedures are embedded in the work we carry out, that toolkits, guidance and procedures draw on the knowledge of subject experts locally and nationally to inform them, and that we can demonstrate the impact of learning that has taken place.

In 2022/23, the issues affecting children the most and, therefore, our priority areas remained:

- Right Help, Right Time
- Child exploitation
- Neglect
- Leadership & Accountability - Commitment to a high-level improvement plan.

The Board was supported by seven subgroups that carry out the day-to-day work in order to help deliver the Board's objectives and Strategic Plan.

Key Roles and Relationships

The Independent Scrutineer

Liz Murphy was the Independent Scrutineer and Independent Chair of the HSCP until June 2022 when she left the role. The then Superintendent of West Mercia Police, Edward Williams, took up the Chair function for the board after Liz's departure.

Kevin Crompton was appointed as the new Partnership's Independent Scrutineer and commenced in October 2022. The role of the HSCP Independent Scrutineer is set out in our Multi-Agency Arrangements to Safeguard Children.

The Independent Scrutineer provides a rigorous and transparent assessment of the extent to which appropriate and effective systems and processes are in place in all partner agencies so as to fulfil their statutory duties and ensure that children are protected and that appropriate safeguarding strategies are developed and embedded.

Key to this is the facilitation of a working culture of transparency, challenge and improvement across all partners with regards to their safeguarding arrangements. The Scrutineer is accountable to the Chief Executive of the Herefordshire Council. He has retained a 'right to roam', challenging the statutory safeguarding partners and all relevant partners and agencies listed in our multi-agency arrangements.

HSCP Partnership Team

The HSCP is supported by the Partnership Team made up of Partnership Manager, a Deputy Manager, 2 Partnership Officers and 1.5 Business Support Officers. They ensure the smooth running of the Partnership's day-to-day business. The Partnership Team also supports the Herefordshire Safeguarding Adults Board (HSAB) and Herefordshire Community Safety Partnership.

Designated Professionals

The Designated Doctor and Designated Nurse for Safeguarding take a strategic and professional lead on all aspects of the health service contribution to safeguarding children. Designated professionals are a vital source of professional expertise. The Designated Doctor and Nurse have continued to demonstrate their value by offering challenge and support to partners.

Partner Agencies

All partner agencies across Herefordshire are committed to ensuring the effective operation of the HSCP. This is supported by the MASA that defines the fundamental principles through which the HSCP is governed. Members of the Partnership hold a strategic role within their organisations and are able to speak with authority, commit to matters of policy and hold their organisation to account.

Whilst being unable to direct organisations, the HSCP does have the power to influence and hold agencies to account for their role in safeguarding. This influence can touch on matters relating to both local and national arrangements.

5. Relationship with Other Strategic Boards

The HSCP does not operate in isolation, and there are a range of other multi agency partnership arrangements, which contribute significantly to the children's and adults safeguarding agenda and their respective priorities in order to influence the effective development and commissioning of services for the benefit of children, young people families and vulnerable adults. The HSCP recognises that it needs to strengthen its links with the other local boards and partnerships as we share many common themes, such as serious violence, domestic abuse and exploitation. There are clear benefits to children young people, families and vulnerable adults coordinating specific areas of business cross partnership. The Partnership's new independent scrutineer recognised this and in his preliminary findings to the board in January 23, whilst providing "some assurance" flagged up areas where there is a strong need to strengthen governance arrangements by enhancing the understanding of the partnership's roles and inter dependencies with other boards across the system. To further this ambition, the Safeguarding Partnership in 2023 will develop close structural relationships with the Health and Well-being Board, HSAB and Herefordshire Community Safety Partnership.

6. Governance and Membership

Governance

The HSCP, with the three statutory safeguarding partners, are supported by a range of relevant agencies, which include:

- Wye Valley NHS trust
- Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust
- Herefordshire and Worcestershire Fire and Rescue
- Herefordshire Voluntary Organisation Support Service (HVOSS)
- West Mercia Youth Justice service
- Early Years and Education providers

The Statutory Partner members have joint and equal responsibility for the success of its multi-agency safeguarding arrangements (MASA). The partnership understand the absolute dependence on each other and on relevant agencies to make a difference to the work with children young people and families in Herefordshire.

During the course of this reporting year, the HSCP underwent a review of its multiagency safeguarding arrangements, resulting in some revisions of the subgroups structure and remits. The HSCP new structural arrangement will come into being from 1st April 2023. The multiagency safeguarding arrangement (MASA) will be updated to reflect the new arrangements and the board's ambition to strengthen strategic and operational activity and improve effectiveness for the children and young people of Herefordshire.

Further information with regard to the HSCPs multiagency safeguarding arrangements is available on the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership's [website](#)

HSCP Board

The children's safeguarding partnership is held accountable by the Safeguarding Partners Board. The Board meetings are chaired by the Independent Scrutineer who also undertakes the Independent Chair function. The Board is attended by the three statutory safeguarding partners as defined in Working Together 2018, and their deputies. Locally the three board members with delegated responsibility are:

- West Mercia Police – represented by the Superintendent Local Policing Commander for Herefordshire.
- Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board (ICB) – represented by the Chief Nurse
- Herefordshire Council (Children's Services) – represented by the Corporate Director Children and Young People and Statutory DCS. Director of Children's Social Care.

The Board's purpose is to:

- hold the Partnership to account for the performance in ensuring vulnerable children and young people are safe.

- allow discussion of priorities and commitment of resource amongst partners to promote safeguarding.
- identify any major concerns or areas for further investigation by the Partnership.
- agree funding arrangements and budgets for the HSCP.

The Board has met seven times over the course of the year:

21/04/2022	16/06/2022	08/09/2022	15/11/2022	16/12/2022	19/01/2023	15/03/2023
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In addition to the scheduled board meetings, there have been three Safeguarding Partners Extraordinary meetings:

Extraordinary Meeting 05/10/2022	Safeguarding Partners Board /Executive Support Group Development Session 16/06/2022	Leadership Development Day 03/02/2023
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These were convened to address emerging concerns and to provide leadership and traction to areas of the strategic plan, which had stalled.

Impact

The Board have made a number of key decisions during 2022 -23 including:

- Approving the HSCP Annual Report 2021-22;
- Approving the HSCP Training Programme 2022 – 23;
- Approving Child Safeguarding Review Reports for CSPR Peer on Peer, training slides and briefing notes;
- Approving the HSCP Strategic Business Plan 2021-2023;
- Approving Herefordshire Child Safeguarding Practice Review Practice Guidance and templates
- Appointing the Independent Scrutineer to Chair the HSCP Safeguarding Partners Board in October 2022

Executive Support Group (ESG)

The Executive support group is the partnership's engine room. It is held accountable by the HSCP and has a membership made up of representatives from all statutory partners as well as a range of key health, probation, education and community representatives. The group oversees the work of the subgroups which meet between the quarterly board meetings and scrutinises agency reports from across the Partnership. The agenda offers opportunities for information sharing and discussion, but also encourages questioning and challenge. The HSCP captures all challenges raised by the Independent Scrutineer/Chair and partners inside and outside of group meetings in a Risk Log. ESG regularly reviews performance through reference to its risk register, self-assessment process and partner agency updates submitted to each meeting.

There has been fluctuations around attendance, sometimes associated with changes of staff within agencies, which severely impacted on the group's quoracy and effectiveness for the greater part of the year. This led to a lack of momentum in the group being able to meet its objectives. In September 2022, following the inadequate grading outcome of Children Service's Ofsted Inspection, the Safeguarding Partner's Board decided to pause the Executive Support Group and to temporarily absorb the group's remit and function, in particular for subgroup chairs to report directly to the Board. This ensured clearer lines of accountability for the work of the subgroups. The new arrangement has had a positive impact on strengthening the links between the subgroups and the board.

7. HSCP Sub-Group Reports

Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership is structured to provide collaboration, scrutiny and assurance, and to drive and enable coordination of safeguarding activity. Each sub-group has clear terms of reference and an annual work plan, which aligns with the strategic priorities for the partnership. Each work plan demonstrates golden threads to priority areas and impact on the lives of children and young people. Agendas and facilitative discussions at all meetings focus on safeguarding practice, impact and improvement. The Partnership Business Support Unit undertake the management and support function of the partnership. Task and Finish Groups are established as necessary.

Below is an outline of each subgroup, its priorities, and its achievements over the last year.

Joint Case Review Group

Heather Manning - Chair

Terms of reference - The Joint Case Review Sub Group (JCR) is accountable to the Herefordshire Safeguarding Partners, Herefordshire Safeguarding Adults Board and Herefordshire Community Safety Partnership.

HSCP have a legal duty to undertake reviews of serious child safeguarding cases (Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews LCSPR's) where children have died or suffered serious harm, the criteria for such reviews is set out in Working Together 2018.

Herefordshire Safeguarding Adults Board. The Care Act 2014 states that Safeguarding Adult Boards (SABs) must arrange a Safeguarding Adult Review (SAR) when an adult with needs for care and support in its area dies as a result of abuse or neglect, whether known or suspected, or is still alive but has experienced serious abuse or neglect, and there is reasonable cause for concern about how agencies worked together to safeguarding the adult. The criteria for such reviews is set out in the Care Act 2014 (See Care Act Guidance 2016). The Chair of HSAB has the responsibility for final decision making about whether to conduct a review in individual cases.

Overall responsibility for establishing Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHR) rests with the local Community Safety Partnership (CSP), under section 9(3) of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 (the 2004 Act)

Some agencies work across more than one local authority area and work with different safeguarding adult boards, community safety partnerships and safeguarding children partnerships. Partner Agencies represented at JCR, have responsibilities in respect of Safeguarding Adult Reviews (SARs), Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs). It is important that the Partnerships and Boards were cited on the overall themes from all reviews and any cross-cutting learning or issues within the system in Herefordshire. Therefore, the JCR Chair, with agreement of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Adult Board (HSAB), Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) and Herefordshire Community Safety Partnerships (CSP), provides one report per quarter on behalf of the JCR Subgroup.

Safeguarding Children

During reporting period 1st April 2022-to 31st March 2023, the Joint Case Review Group (JCR) received two referrals for Rapid Review scoping, however the meetings were both held in Q1 2023-2024.

There have not been any child safeguarding practice reviews commissioned during this reporting period.

One statutory review was published during this period however this was a Serious Case Review and not a Child Safeguarding Practice Review as it was originally commissioned under Working Together 2015 guidance. There was some delay in completion and publication of this SCR due to parallel processes. Due to the timeframe involved in publishing the report and to reduce the risk of re-traumatising the family, the Herefordshire Safeguarding Partners are publishing an Executive Summary of the report only

SCR Louise – published November 2022

Serious injuries, which were sustained by Louise in June 2019, who was 18 months old at the time. The injuries caused had a life changing impact on Louise. When the injuries occurred, Louise was being cared for by her mother's partner at the mother's address. Prior to the incident, there were concerns about domestic abuse and child neglect.

Identified Learning Opportunities –

- Framework of need and pathways – To ensure that there is a joint understanding and agreement in the application of thresholds of all levels of need and that referral pathways are clear and understood. That both Child in Need and Child Protection Plans and processes are robust, outcome focused and clearly understood and owned by all agencies.
- Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub – to develop one access point, that there is robust and consistent management oversight. That the functions are collaborative and there is a clear and understood collective responsibility. To ensure that information is

effectively shared to make effective and safe decisions including in domestic abuse cases.

- Neglect – The multi-agency responsibility to identify and respond to all aspects of neglect. To include educational and emotional neglect and the effects of nondependent alcohol use by parents and the impact of these on children.

Key areas of partnership activity that HSCP should seek assurance on –

- Application of thresholds, to be undertaken by multi-agency audit.
- Escalation and professional disagreement policy.
- Neglect.
- Safeguarding of children in mental health services.

Further considerations –

- Training on the cycle of change and motivational interviewing.
- Escalation and professional disagreement.
- Recognition and prevention of abusive head injury in infants.

Positives and further implementation –

- The engagement of agencies in this review has been very positive; there has been a real demonstration of agency reflection to enable learning.
- The GP practice have held two internal learning events as a result of this case and their engagement in the discussion events for this process was excellent. As a result of internal discussion, they have introduced a template of safeguarding prompt questions, which are asked when any adult presents with low mood, depression or is prescribed anti-depressant medication. This was recognised as good practice and should be communicated to other GP practices.

Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHR)

During reporting period 1st April 2022-to 31st March 2023, JCR has received one referral for a DHR, which is currently undergoing a scoping exercise, work has concluded or continued for five open reviews.

Two DHR's completed in the previous year have now been approved by the Home Office. All recommendations have been completed. Two DHR's have been completed and sent to the Home Office following sign off at the Community Safety Partnership (CSP). Recommendations have been approved and action plans are in place to address these. The remaining review is awaiting the outcome of the court proceedings prior to completion and presentation to the CSP.

Safeguarding Adults Reviews (SARs)

During reporting period 1st April 2022-to 31st March 2023, the Joint Case Review Group (JCR) has received 7 referrals for Rapid Review scoping. Whilst none have met the Care Act 2014 criteria for a full Safeguarding Adult Review (SAR), learning and recommendations have been drawn from the scoping returns and rapid review meetings.

Examples of learning identified are -

- consideration for professionals recognising carers' and offering carer's assessments
- professional curiosity continue to be lacking in many practitioner/professional interactions with adults who do, or may have, care and support needs
- recognition of domestic abuse in relation to older people and their families and a lack of community awareness
- ensuring that the right people are invited to multi-agency meetings

SAR Dorothy was a Worcestershire review published in March 2023. 'Dorothy' had previously been a Herefordshire resident so Herefordshire services were part of this review.

Dorothy was 77 years old when she sadly died following a fall that occurred in the care home where she lived in Worcestershire. The fall was as a result of an altercation with another resident.

The admission to a care home and the incident took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and it was recognised that the impact of the pandemic was significant in finding a care home for Dorothy.

Points for strengthening practice, and recommendations were made and included agencies across both Herefordshire and Worcestershire, particularly in relation to commissioning out of area care and support services.

Oversight and follow on from last year

Extensive multi-agency work has been undertaken to ensure all the learning, both single, and multi-agency, from Rapid Reviews and case reviews, has been brought together to ensure recommendations have clear SMART actions assigned, and that all agencies are clear on the learning required within their own agency.

Learning briefings, and presentations have been shared at the Practitioner Forums to raise awareness of the learning recognised at all Rapid Reviews and full case reviews.

Evidence for the effectiveness of learning from reviews remains a challenge. Performance data, audit activity and scrutiny from the Independent Scrutineer is now more robust. The Quality and Effectiveness sub-group (HSCP) and the Performance and Quality Assurance sub-group (HSAB) are working towards a resolution regarding the data and audit activity in 2023-2024.

(Please note that all names used in this report are pseudonyms and not the true names of the individual)

Child Exploitation and Missing Subgroup

Rachael Gillott - Chair

To oversee and be assured that there is an effective response to child exploitation (CE) and other associated risks by partner agencies responsible for the management and delivery of services in Herefordshire. Other areas of risk and exploitation that this group will oversee will

be children missing from home or care, trafficking for the purposes of criminal exploitation, County Lines, modern day slavery, e-safety, and effective transitions between children's services to adult services

What has been achieved in the year?

For the year April 2022 to the end of March 2023 the Child Exploitation and Missing priority, sub group has seen a strengthening of commitment and engagement with renewed focus on ensuring Herefordshire's response to children and young people is effective.

Following the Ofsted Inspection in July there has been a review of the Multi Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) arrangements, the response to missing and identification of a contextual safeguarding model. After discussions with neighbouring authorities, it was agreed that HCC would move towards an adaptation of the Get Safe Model successfully used in Worcestershire. It was agreed this model would be adapted to include young people who were subject to a child protection plan due to being exploited, being offered a different plan termed a 'Get Safe plus'. This model would ensure a more tailored specific, young person focused plan, which would not stigmatise parents.

During the year, the Strategic Group met on 5 occasions, with a good level of attendance and engagement from Partners. This was initially led by the Service Director in Children's Services but after good engagement in September 2022, the group saw a change of Chair and Vice Chair. Key roles are filled with permanent staff and this means the agenda can be given focus by the right staff at the right level, for progress to be sustained.

Get Safe

The Get Safe programme commenced implementation in late 2022 with project management resource and a task and finish group meeting fortnightly with a clear implementation plan. This is mostly on track to fully launch the initiative in January 2024 following training in 2023.

A multi-agency exploitation conference will be launched in early November. Prior to the launch, multi-agency training will be delivered by the Local Authority and Partners to professionals around the completion of the Get Safe risk assessment and the process. The opportunity will also be taken to raise awareness around the Prevent agenda.

Get Safe will be a multi-agency approach to triage, assess and reduce the risk to young people from being exploited. Get Safe has been running effectively in Worcestershire and Herefordshire sub group members wanted to implement this initiative in Herefordshire. Get Safe is a contextual method of working, assessing the risk factors outside the family home that influence and impact on young people. The contextual approach enables practitioners to understand the full holistic picture of risk. A contextual approach will be demonstrated in Get Safe+ (once implemented) for young people that are assessed at Level 4 and would normally follow a standard child protection pathway. Get Safe+ will mirror child protection arrangements but will appreciate the contextual picture and will utilise a more proportionate, relational and restorative approach when the young person is being targeted and groomed by external factors due to matters beyond the control of the family. The family may have relentlessly been trying to keep their child safe. Get Safe and Get Safe+, when

implemented, will provide a complete pathway of support along the Right Help Right Time, Level of Need continuum.

The Herefordshire weekly exploitation meeting and our monthly Prevent and Disrupt group continued to meet during 2022/23. These meetings were reviewed earlier in the year and was initially found to work but over the year, the terms were found to be confusing and not used nationally. This has now been resolved.

MACE 1 is our weekly multi-agency exploitation meeting chaired by the Social Care Team Manager for the Safe Team. We have reviewed the terms of reference with the main focus being on the needs of children/young people, recognising they have a right to be safeguarded from exploitation and to discuss children/young people who are frequently missing.

MACE 2, previously Prevent and Disrupt is our monthly multi-agency exploitation meeting chaired by the police. The terms of reference have also been updated. This meeting identifies hotspots, perpetrators and groups of vulnerable children/young people.

The governance arrangements in place is Mace reporting into our CE and Missing sub group.

Task and finish group meetings took place in Quarter 4 of 22/23 to review the procedures and provision to ensure that young adults are kept safe when they transition from statutory child protection and early help support at 18 years, to no support/or support from statutory adult services only. Our current response is not yet fully coordinated or supported by partners. The next steps require wider strategic review of this as there is still much to do to keep young adults safe.

On a wider Partnership perspective, members of the Child Exploitation and Missing Group have contributed to the Herefordshire Community Safety Partnership (HCSP) Safer Streets campaign, which allocated grant funding in 22/23 to raise the awareness of child exploitation, inappropriate behaviour and vulnerability. During 2022/23 additional CCTV and street lighting was installed in CE hotspot areas and night time economy staff have been trained to support people that are at risk in Hereford at night.

In Quarter 4, the HCSP drafted the Herefordshire Sexual Violence Strategy (agreed in April 2023) incorporating reducing the exploitation risk to young people. Members of the CE and Missing sub group sat on the task and finish subgroup to inform and develop the 2023/27 Sexual Violence Strategy. The impact of this Strategy will be evaluated at a later date.

What are the challenges?

The challenges facing Herefordshire include establishing effective transitioning arrangements and support for young adults leaving children's social care support aged 18 to prevent them from being exploited.

The implementation of the new process has faced challenges due to capacity of staff and multi-agency partners, challenges around recording of data while trying to mirror Worcestershire practises. The implementation of Get Safe and Get Safe+ and establishing a new way of working with contextual safeguarding will be challenging over the next 12 months. It will need commitment to training and implementing the more restorative way of

working with young people and their families. This will need to be embedded across all partners and their response to this form of child protection. However, the Child Exploitation and Missing Sub group are confident the new approach will be effectively implemented.

A fast paced, strong and effective child safeguarding improvement plan for Herefordshire places demands on resources and personnel. Effective intelligence and information sharing, and case conference arrangements have been developed for 2023/24.

The data is currently primarily coming from within Children's Services and there is no up to date Risk profile for Exploitation with the last one done in 2019. The multi-agency data sets are also in place to support wider conversations.

What are we doing?

Get Safe and Get Safe+ will be implemented in 2023/24, training on Get Safe and Get Safe+ for all Partners and personnel in Herefordshire is programmed to start in November 2023. Multi-Agency Child Exploitation 1 and 2 (MACE 1 and MACE 2) terminology will be fully adopted aligning the Herefordshire system to other child exploitation approaches across the country. This include monitoring and responding to children who go missing.

What difference have we made?

It is difficult to evidence the impact of fast-paced change to the Herefordshire child protection framework and especially to keep young people safe from exploitation. Outcomes will appear over time. We now review all young people over 18 who are long term missing and this includes our response to unaccompanied asylum seeking children, UASC. We completed a review of all the young people who were on CP plans for contextually safeguarding and these were appropriately closed.

Comparative data from the Herefordshire Council Child Exploitation Team for the years 21/22 and 22/23 shows that more return home interviews have been carried out in 2022/23 and more children have been identified as vulnerable during that year. Risk exploitation and risk exploitation reviews have remained the same with only a slight increase in review meetings.

To strengthen this impact the focus is on gaining multi-agency data sets and impact.

Quality and Effectiveness Subgroup

Heather Manning - Chair

This group is central to changing and improving quality and effectiveness of multi-agency frontline practice. It will scrutinise the work and performance of the safeguarding partner agencies and other relevant agencies in delivering their statutory safeguarding responsibilities and in addressing any local safeguarding priorities identified.

The subgroup has endeavoured to remain active through a challenging period, which brought about some loss of continuity and organisational memory. Significantly, memberships at meetings declined due to changing personnel's within organisations (e.g. the group has had three Chairpersons).

Emphasis on multi-agency perspective has been encouraged and is evident in the recent activities of the group. Accomplishments include the 2022 Section 11 Audit to ensure partner agencies are fulfilling their responsibilities to safeguard children and promote their welfare, specifically picking up themes from recent serious case reviews.

The group has oversight of multi-agency and single agency audits, in order to analyse performance data consisting of quantitative information relevant to safeguarding children. The group has now absorbed the Multi-agency audit group functions into its remit to provide more leadership and accountability for this area of work.

Performance Data

There have been on-going and determined efforts from partners to develop a meaningful dataset to inform the group. The aim is to improve analysis capacity so that the partnership receives a multi-agency picture of activity related to the agreed priorities. Development of a partnership data set has continued to be challenging. Following changes in chair through 2022, it has now been agreed to start with a very small data set which is held by the local authority but which does contain multi-agency information. This will be kept under review. The work to improve the Q& E dataset will enable partners to have a more holistic view of safeguarding performance and support more meaningful discussion during the meeting. The review of the dataset will ensure that the performance data from across the partnership is available for scrutiny. This supports partners in understanding safeguarding effectiveness, and in identifying any gaps in safeguarding provision so that we are clear on where to target improvement activity.

These initial data strands have been agreed as –

- Contact by source and referral by source to include the conversion rate per agency
- Strategy discussion by agency involvement,
- Strategy discussion resulting in s47 enquires
- Assessment outcome - CIN, accommodation, and No Further Action
- Child Protection Plan – total figures and category

Initial data discussion has started but it is noted that further detail is required to ensure data is accurate and can therefore effect system change. The members will all have sight and input into the performance dashboard to capture the key performance indicators of each service and intervention they provide. Moving forward, there will be specific meetings focusing solely on the narrative of this data in the aim of capturing what is or isn't working well and why. This will thus inform the directive for the group to explore. The group has continued with its multi-agency audit plan by employing regular health checks as a standing agenda item. This means agencies provide internal audit briefings to the subgroup via diary invitations to partner agencies for them to present. This has proved useful in highlighting any concerns in the aim to assist with good practice.

What has been achieved in the year?

- The audit group has now been subsumed into the QE subgroup.
- The regional audit tool for Sec 11 and The Care Act was finalised and has been completed by all relevant agencies.

- The walk the floor proposal and proforma for reporting were finalised and some visits have taken place.
- The HSCP Escalation process is robust and QE subgroup members have oversight of all escalations and outcomes to ensure any themes are acted upon

What are the challenges?

- Procurement of a permanent chair and vice chair
- Agency attendance has been variable and inconsistent at times.
- Robust multi-agency data set to include analysis and narrative.
- Delays in completing the Neglect Task and Finish group work – this has now been subsumed into the work of other subgroups.
- The Interim Neglect strategy is required to be finalised to become a 3 year Neglect Strategy.
- The merging of the audit subgroup with Q & E has been a challenge in terms of agenda size and limitations of time
- Time to spend understanding and analysing information in relation to QA activity and performance data has been challenging.

What are we doing?

- From 2023, a permanent chair is in place with a permanent vice chair. This will enable clear and consistent work to take place, which includes data set analysis, audit work and analysis and evidencing impact.
- The dataset will be grown to include information, as relevant, from partner agencies.
- A work plan of audits is in place for 2023-2024

What difference have we made?

The safeguarding partnership has historically had a lack of multiagency dataset and strategic analysis. We are almost underwhelmed with data, despite the knowledge of how much data individual agencies collate. The request will be made in 23/24 for a dedicated safeguarding children analyst to provides a richer interpretation of intelligence to safeguarding partners by way of producing succinct, timely strategic threat assessments that will strengthen decision making, improve the scrutiny of front-line safeguarding practice and enhance tactical decision making, which will in turn impact on front line practice. This will ensure we are able to fully understand and analysis the impact the partnership is having on the lives of children and their families across Herefordshire. There has been a journey around how performance is reported and analysed with a multi-agency lens. This led to further discussions around multi-agency audits and it's inter connection with the Q & E group. This partly informed the decision for the audit subgroup to merge with Q & E.

Neglect Task and Finish Group

Jez Newell - Chair

Neglect has been a priority for the Safeguarding Children Partnership for the past 2 years. We know we need to do more to identify child neglect, ensure that children have their needs met by their parents or carers, and provide support where this is not the case.

The interim Child Neglect Strategy and a delivery plan were launched in December 2022. These set out the strategic aims of the partnership: to improve the recognition of neglect in families;

to improve agencies' responses to enhance the approach to child neglect across Herefordshire, and to ultimately improve positive outcomes for children, young people and families.

Herefordshire is a Graded Care Profile (GCP2) implementation local area. GCP2 is an assessment tool, developed and licensed by the NSPCC, to help identify and measure risk of neglect. Herefordshire began rolling-out GCP2 in 2017. Under the auspices of the neglect subgroup, an internal review of GCP2 implementation was undertaken. The purpose of this review was to understand how the GCP2 is used in Herefordshire, and what impact it is having on improving outcomes for children and families.

This review considered:

- GCP2 training between 2017-2022
- Online survey of GCP2-trained practitioners (160 practitioners contacted)
- GCP2 Mosaic case records up until Feb 15, 2023
- Dip sample of 10 cases from 2022 where Mosaic records showed that GCP2 had been completed

Findings from the review, whilst encouraging, recognised that more needed to be done to strengthen its use and evidence impact. From a peak in 2021 of training attendance and case records with GCP2 recorded, training and usage has since dropped. This could be in part due to training being delivered virtually after the first Covid lockdown in 2020 (some courses have now returned to in-person), and due to staff turnover.

There is evidence of GCP2 being used and having a positive impact for children in Herefordshire; however, this is not consistently embedded. Practitioners identified that the tool helps to focus the concerns around neglect and helps the parent/carer to understand those concerns, the impact that it is having on the child, and what needs to change. Application of GCP2 is, however, inconsistent and vulnerable to staff turnover. GCP2s are sometimes completed in isolation, with no evidence that the findings informed plans for the child or that the GCP2 was reviewed later in the child's journey. GCP2 trainers and practitioners who responded to the survey identified a need for refresher training to improve the quality of GCP2 application.

Some professionals reported not using GCP2 because their role does not involve direct work with families or visiting the family home. Education professionals who completed GCP2 training, in particular, reported this as an issue. GCP2 trainers explained that they suggest professionals in similar roles can complete a desktop GCP2 to help with their analysis/screening of neglect concerns, however this does not appear to be a widely used approach based on survey responses. In light of these findings, an action plan is now in place, which will be completed in 2023, overseen by the Development and Practice Group. This adopts the recommendations that were identified to strengthen the impact of GCP2 in Herefordshire. Briefings to report on the findings and recommendations have been done aimed at improving understanding across all agencies of the potential impact on children and young people who may suffer from, or be at risk of, neglect.

Examination of data on neglect, both locally and nationally, remains a work in progress. The clarity of the current data availability remains poor and further multi agency work is required to improve this.

The Neglect task and finish was concluded in March 2023 with ongoing work on finalising the Child Neglect Strategy, and neglect dataset being picked up by the Quality and Effectiveness Group and the Development and Practice Group taking on neglect training and tools. For a significant part of the year, there was a considerable lack of momentum in progressing the neglect task and finish group's work plan. This was primarily due to poor attendance and commitment at sub- groups. Key partners do not attend or are unable to attend (due to capacity). Other key partners attend and support the work; however, without the required consistent quoracy input from Children's Social Care and Public Health work is unable to be progressed. A 'back to basics' workshop is planned for June 23 which will address some of these issues of attendance and effectiveness of sub groups.

Audit Subgroup

Bec Haywood-Tibbett - Chair

The Audit sub-group is a sub section of the Quality and Effectiveness group. There was an auditor's reflective development session held on the 23rd of June 2022 to strengthen the group's effectiveness. The aim was primarily to provide a robust and consistent approach to assessing the quality of multiagency or single agency practice of case records and particularly in relation to safeguarding practice. This was a good attendance and engagement from group members.

However, no multi-agency audit was undertaken following on from this. As the audit subgroup was dormant for the majority of 2022 until it merged with the Quality and Effectiveness group in September 2022. Consistent agency commitment and engagement with the work plan from the group has been a challenge. This inertia was plagued primarily by capacity issues within all agencies to attend meetings consistently whilst meeting the demands of own organisations. Members when they do attend engage well with the subgroup priorities.

Mash Strategic Group

Rachael Gillott - Chair

The key priorities for this group were

- That the service has a strong, robust front door aligning to partnership 'Right Help Right Time' agenda.
- The development of an integrated effective and efficient MASH is a key priority for the partnership in response to recent evidence of the need to refresh the current provision
- To drive the work priorities for the MASH operational group which oversees monitoring of implementation for threshold and use of RHRT
- Drive the agenda for an integrated MASH with new operating procedures, review of RHRT and training delivery across the partnership

- Commission the operational group to undertake audits of strategy meetings/ section 47 as part of its quality assurance function
- The group will oversee the re-launch of the new RHRT/MARF
- Ensure capacity and appropriate timely response to safeguarding

What has been achieved in the year?

- Co-location and working - The work to move all key departments into Wilson House took place during the Ofsted Inspection in July. There was immediate recruitment for two social workers and an additional team manager. At the same time, the assessment team duty social worker, their manager and exploitation team also co-located. The additional staff and the number of partners within Wilson House working face to face, proved problematic, the strategy room was not sufficient to meet need noise and heat levels were significant, and there was no available breakout space. It was agreed by all partners that MASH would return to Plough Lane with a dedicated space provided by HCC with a large strategy room. Subsequently additional staffing in health and other partners has enabled the MASH team to grow. In September, the police were also able to relocate with increased capacity. This decision although difficult at the time, has already evidenced improving relationships, with a more cohesive and productive atmosphere.
- A Management Action Note was issued advising that all Strategy Meetings should be completed, within 2 days and any that were over 3 days should be notified to senior managers. Police colleagues committed to attendance and capacity. A RAG rating scheme with timescales was introduced for all contacts and referrals and then these were latterly linked to the Power BI dashboards to ensure staff and managers had a clear timely response and oversight to risk.
- A Quality Assurance Framework for the MASH was put in place including regular audits to ensure assurance at all levels. There were initially weekly 'learning reviews' of all children where a decision has been changed, those subject to 3 or more referrals and any escalations. To support relationships, restorative conversations took place to understand decisions and to encourage a learning and curious environment across partners.
- Bi weekly meetings are in place with key operational leads to review all escalations and any issues and learning from these are shared with staff and the Strategic Group
- Practice Development Leads were assigned to work alongside MASH to support reflection and review . This included dip sampling the following areas of practice to measure decision-making, quality of practice and impact for the child:
 - Contacts
 - Strategy discussions
 - S47 enquiries
 - Voice of the Child within assessments
 - Supervision

They were able to see evidence of improvement and the findings are included within the ongoing improvement plan. There was learning across all partners.

- Dip sampling and review has been a key part of the development with Dip sampling throughout Quarter 3 and a full diagnostic in Feb 23, it identified that:

"There is evidence of good working relationships between MASH and the Child Help & Advice Team (Early Help). If there is disagreement in terms of threshold decisions, there will be direct conversations and escalation to Service Managers if required. Consent is clearly evidenced in records, and if this not been gained by other professionals, this will be followed up first. Outcome letters are sent to referrers and parents/carers. Thresholds are appropriately applied with rationale clearly evidenced against the threshold document 'Right Help Right Time levels of need'

Record keeping (EH Contact Form) is comprehensive and of a high standard with clear evidence of the issues. Information from MASH is well considered, and there is evidence of agencies being contacted (where relevant), with parents/cares spoken with. There is clear and detailed management direction to the screeners, with a good summary of the issues, analysis, and recommendations, evidenced against the threshold document"

- The Children's Help & Advice line (CHAT) went live in January 2023 and has been well received. 60 calls were made in the first month, resulting in 35% Early Help Contacts. Strategy meetings are improving in timeliness and convened appropriately, and the threshold for section 47s is correctly applied.

"Most responses are timely and visits to children mostly take place the same day; medicals and police action are also expedited in a timely way. All children are considered individually by the strategy meeting and the section 47".

There was learning including quality of assessment, some lack of analysis, chronologies and response to Domestic Abuse, history of missed opportunities. Overall within the first Ofsted monitoring visit (March 2023), Ofsted noted that we knew ourselves well and concurred with the findings. The dip sampling continues and diagnostics will continue to be run 6/8 monthly to ensure that standards continue to improve.

- The Pre Birth Pathway was reviewed to ensure that the multi-agency response to women who were deemed vulnerable was implemented. This is now in place and identifies concerns and support needed at the earliest opportunity.
- The Professional Differences Protocol was reviewed and relaunched. The early escalations are brought to the Operational Group and any Stage 3's to the Strategic Group. One was raised to the Partnership. All have been resolved.
- Significant work was completed on enabling the sharing of data but specifically a MASH Dashboard. This is now in place although there is still ongoing work to refine

and expand this. A screen displays the current timescales for all work for MASH colleagues on a daily basis.

- Additional resource was placed within the MASH to support joint work on referrals with Early Help. A pilot was introduced to joint visits after screening .After 2 months this was reviewed and was not felt to have had the impact needed. Subsequently a CHAT line was put in place to support professionals and families being able to contact and get support at the earliest opportunity.
- The Standard Operating Procedures and the Multi Agency Referral Form were reviewed .There was considerable delay in this due to differences regarding the implementation of consent on referrals. This was agreed in December 2022.
- Herefordshire's joint protocol for 16/17-year-olds who may be homeless or threatened with homelessness was commenced and due to be implemented on the 1st May 2023. The overall aim is to reduce homelessness among 16/17 year olds and to provide a timely, same day joint response. There will be ongoing review and evaluation. It is envisaged the protocol will strengthen partnership working and improve relationships. The next steps following the launch is to ensure the workforce practice delivery aligns with our Joint Protocol for homeless 16/17 year olds, through training, inductions, refreshers and operational oversight to test out compliance. This has been scheduled for Autumn 23.
- Best Practice examples of Safety planning was shared across the Service. Safety Planning expectations and templates were reviewed with two versions being tested across the Service. This is due for review by Social Worker, Independent Reviewing Officer, Child Protection Chairs and partners in September 23.

Challenges

- Statistically we remain consistently and significantly an outlier for contacts and referrals for our population and there is management and partnership focus on this to understand this well. Work has been completed to understand this across partners. Initial reviews into Health referrals showed the ambulance service with 66%, 10% A&E and the rest from midwives health visitors etc. Families were informed of referrals rather than working with them and supporting them to give consent. Work was done to support the understanding of consent. Work has been undertaken to support more appropriate referrals with consent at the front door.
- Police remain the biggest referrer for contacts with the lowest outturn for referrals. There has been work across neighbours to understand this with areas of good practice noted in Telford and Wrekin. Internally we are looking to follow this model to ensure that contacts are screened by police for appropriateness and threshold prior to submitting to MASH.
- Re referrals have been dip sampled and some reductions were seen, currently the data is noted to be incorrect and action is being taken by the Management Information Team.

- The response to UASC has been identified as an area, which needs strengthening. This was initially due to the lack of expertise and the increase in the year of referrals. This is the subject of current work by the Heads of Service for Mash and Corporate Parenting and the Practice Development Leads
- Police capacity has significantly improved with no delays noted at Strategy discussions but there remains some challenges for attendance at key risk meetings.
- There remains some challenges with the Children's Operating System and the ability for Partners to have a single view access. This had led to a significant number of professional's being given access to Mosaic, which had caused some challenges including two data breaches, Mosaic records can still be viewed by Partners but is limited now to key people to ensure appropriateness of access and information gathering. This also encourages better information sharing in MASH

What difference have we made?

Quality Assurance work has been ongoing throughout the year. This has included Practice Development Leads completing a Review in December 22. They found that there had been significant improvement against recommendations. Core training had been completed across MASH, Management Oversight was improved, and Strategy Meetings were tracked and appropriately escalated. All Team Managers have access to Power BI Timeliness of responses and decision making on contacts into MASH have improved, the timeliness of assessments of children has improved, and timeliness of strategy meetings within MASH has improved.

Strategy meetings are being held in line with Working Together and overall we have good agency compliance, timeliness and recording.

We had our first monitoring visit on the 29th and 30th March. The feedback was balanced and positive. Ofsted did comment that we know ourselves. The strengths were recognised as well as areas for development.

At the end of March 23, referrals had dropped per month from 959 in October to 679.

Per 10,000 children ,statistically there is a gradual improvement in the data from October to the end of March:

- S47 enquiries had dropped from 480 to 266
- Rate of children starting a CP plan from 80 (raising to 120 in Nov) dropped to 47
- Open CP plans from 90 to 70 (although this still remains higher than statistical neighbours)

The co-location of staff in an appropriate workspace has enabled relationships to grow and with this comes appropriate challenge and curiosity to resolve any challenges. The MASH continues to grow with representatives able to sit within it from Housing and Domestic Abuse services. The exploitation team being co-located has also enabled more awareness and sensitivity to the response to exploitation. . Auditing evidences better decision making with fewer escalations. Services work together in a more cohesive way resolving differences at the first point. The Education and CHAT lines have improved communication with MASH. A

Permanent Head of Service and recent permanent Service Manager appointment continues to strengthen management oversight.

Data enables us to identify timeliness and issues for review.

Following a review of a number of children after the inspection the rate of re-referrals rose from 17 to 36, a rate of 21.5% in the 6 months as those children who had previously been closed were reviewed and re-referred. Children starting a CIN plan dropped from 849 to 683. Work continues across the Partnership to ensure the right response at the right time to families at the earliest opportunity to avoid escalation into Statutory Services.

Development and Practice Subgroup

Kerry Oddy - Chair

Development and Practice Group's overall purpose is to: "Develop and deliver the professional practice and development framework to support effective safeguarding of children in Herefordshire." (from D&P Terms of Reference)

More specifically, the group:

- ensures that local and regional **multi-agency policies and procedures** are developed, shared, and kept up to date,
- is responsible for the **HSCP learning and development offer**, including the training programme
- oversees the HSCP **website and other communication/dissemination** channels.

More recently, "**engagement**" with children, young people, their families, and practitioners was added to D&P's remit.

What has been achieved in the year?

Engagement and communications:

- The new Safeguarding Partnerships website was launched September 2022. Feedback has been positive, saying that the new website is more visually engaging and easier to navigate to find information. The website is averaging 1800 – 2000 visits per month, with the most popular pages being "Safeguarding Children Partnership" and "Concerned about a Child."
- The children's "Youth Hub" pages of the partnership website were published in March 2023. The Youth Hub focuses on topics that young people said were important to them, and topics that they previously struggled to find information about. After the launch, there have been approximately 1-20 visits to the Youth Hub every day. See Youth Hub overview video – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9zbWULqG5o>

- The Voice of the Child Toolkit was published, and Voice of the Child Conference held in June 2022, with 60 professionals from a range of agencies attending. [Voice of the Child Participation Toolkit](#)
- The bi-weekly Partnership Bulletin is used consistently as a means to disseminate news and information. The mailing list has grown by 30% in the last year, to over 900 subscribers.

Learning dissemination

- Three Practitioner Forums were held (24 June 2022, 22 November 2022, 24 March 2023). 60-80 practitioners from a range of agencies and voluntary organisations attended each event. Themes covered at Practitioner Forums were:
 - Findings from the National Panel into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson,
 - Recognising and responding to child to adult abuse,
 - An introduction to the sibling sexual abuse project,
 - Briefing on County Lines Exploitation in Herefordshire,
 - Trauma-informed Care: Overview of approach and how professionals can be more trauma-informed in their practice,
 - Raising Awareness of Hate Crime and Services by Victim Support,
 - Private Fostering – raising awareness

Feedback from a Practitioner Forum delegates:

"Very clear, concise and informative. I like that the Multi-Agency approach brings more diverse knowledge and input."

"This was very informative and there were short sections that worked well for me."

- A broad safeguarding training programme is in place that is well attended by multi-agency professionals, with over 1324 course spaces attended. Some courses have returned to in-person delivery. See table below of courses run and attendance numbers.
- Six learning briefings were published in response to learning from case reviews: Professional Curiosity; ACES/Trauma-Informed Practice; Child Neglect; Routine DA Enquiries; SCR Matthew; Peer on Peer Abuse; Professional Differences.

Policies and procedures

Local Herefordshire multi-agency policy reviews completed:

- Professional Differences Policy – reviewed and published September 2022. Alongside this, we introduced a new process for logging and reporting escalations at Stage 2 or higher to the Q&E and MASH Strategic Groups. There has subsequently been an increase in reporting of escalations to the HSCP, and the escalations log has enabled tracking of escalations and there is potential to identify themes.

- Pre-birth handbook reviewed and published, with new pre-birth panel introduced (January 2023)
- Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) Professionals Guidance reviewed and published to reflect that the ICPC Chair holds the final decision on next steps (Jan 2023)

Governance, strategy and meetings

- HSCP Learning and Development Strategy (2023-25) drafted and endorsed by Development & Practice Group. Pending sign-off by SPB. The new strategy strengthens quality assurance of courses and evidencing impact. It is also more specific about training requirements for different staff roles, and course levels for HSCP courses.
- Development & Practice Group ToR and membership revised to reflect additional work on engagement. New members joined from Talk Community, and participation/ engagement officers from different agencies.
- Attendance and engagement at Development & Practice Group meetings has been good, with representation from a range of organisations, although not always consistent and members do not all contribute to discussions.

What are we working on?

- Mechanisms are not fully in place to evidence the impact of training. There is some evidence from course evaluations (“How will you apply the learning from this course in your practice?”). Post-course evaluations are being built into the training evaluations to gain a greater understanding of impact.

Participation and engagement work with children, young people, families, and practitioners, is underdeveloped – this will be expanded in 2023/24.

What difference have we made?

Course attendance: 1324 training spaces were attended on multi-agency safeguarding courses in 2022-23.

Courses Evaluation feedback

“The training really helped me to identify the different levels of need and use the indicators in the RHRT document to help me. It also helped me know who to liaise with when I have concerns and how to approach families when having any queries/concerns regarding the child's safeguarding.” (Right Help Right Time)

“I have not yet done scaling as part of an assessment and have learnt how to from the session. I also was able to identify the components of a good assessment.” (Early Help Assessment)

“Updated knowledge and given me the skills to ask questions. Has been a useful refresh for many in the office this morning just talking about the course.” (Curiosity Saves Lives – Domestic Abuse Multi-Agency Training)

"I intend to have a better understanding when working with children experiencing neglect. I will also use the assessment tools and knowledge from the training to aid my ability to carry out a graded care profile with a family I am working with. It will support me to identify the family's strengths and arrears in which they need support." (GCP2)

"Will focus more on family's strengths and positives and will work towards empowering families to see solutions to the concerns for which their children have been referred into department." (Signs of Safety)

"Learnt how YP talk about abuse, and that they don't always recognise the term DA. I will change and expand my use of language in clinical practice." Feedback on "Domestic Abuse and Young People's Relationships" (Feb 2023) from a Sexual Health Nurse

8. Funding and Support

The three Statutory Partner agencies contributed to the HSCP's budget for 2022-23, which funds the work of the HSCP, HSAB, and Herefordshire Community Safety Partnership. In addition, a range of agencies have provided a variety of resources, such as their staff time and support for the HSCP Team (HR, IT and legal). The three statutory partners' agencies financial contributions totalled £412,319.

The HSCP continues to be supported by the Partnerships Support Team. In June 2021 Herefordshire council commissioned an Independent Strategic Partnerships Advisor to undertake a review of the partnerships effectiveness and its business support arrangements.

The Partnerships team provides logistical support, administration and development support to the HSCP and the Herefordshire Safeguarding Adults Board and Community Safety Partnership. The review concluded in December 2021 and the findings identified that the Partnership Team did not have sufficient staff and resource to meet demand arising from the partnerships day to day function and that there was a need for additional partnership contribution to reconfigure the support arrangements. In addition, the review highlighted the need for greater leadership, a change of culture and practice of HSCP and a need to promote greater engagement and accountability of members for the work of the partnership. Further work is to be undertaken through 2022-2023 to address the issues raised.

Contributions			Category	Expenditure £
Agency	22-23 Contribution £	%	Salary Costs	345,877
Children's Wellbeing	143,519	0.35	Transport costs	28
Adults Wellbeing	108,150	0.26	Independent chair/ Consultancy Costs	60,039
CCG, now ICB	95,550	0.23	Training expenses	0
Police	65,100	0.16	Office expenses	39,293
			Additional Income	-12,279
Total	412,319	100%	Total	432,958

9. Communication

HSCP communicates with partner agencies and Herefordshire residents primarily via the HSCP website. We also produce briefings for the children's workforce in Herefordshire which include a series of short videos

HSCP Website

The new Partnership website was published in September 2022 and the Children's information pages went live in March 2023.

The HSCP website includes separate sections for people working with children, for parents and carers, and for children and young people. Issues including Exploitation, Online Harm, Gangs and Child Criminal Exploitation, Harmful Practices, Radicalisation, Emotional Health and Wellbeing; Domestic Abuse, Bullying, Substance and Alcohol Misuse and Sexual Health have their own sections of the website with advice, signposting to resources, tips and information tailored to the specific audience. There are specific pages for young carers, children in care, licensed premises, and educational establishments. We have videos embedded, a news section and a live Twitter feed. The HSCP multi-agency training programme is accessed through the website and the Training and Resources section is a rich source of learning from audits, reviews and partnership events.

HSCP Youth Hub Web Pages

When we consulted young people in August 2022, they said that they struggled to find information about support that is available locally and they have spent frustrating hours navigating online content, trying to find the best resources and support. The Youth Hub web

pages were therefore designed with this in mind, with main purpose of the children's pages is to provide links to local and national support and resources on safeguarding topics that children said were important issues for them.

The Youth Hub Web pages were delivered for children and young people in Herefordshire in March 2023, so that they will have a platform to find local information and support to help keep them safe.

Following extensive consultation, the topics that were identified by professionals and young people as important to them, and which are featured on the initial pages are:

- Children's Rights
- Being safe at home (abuse and neglect)
- Child exploitation and trafficking
- Mental health and Risky Behaviour
- Exploitation and Criminal Activity
- Bullying and Hate Crime
- Neurodiversity
- Gender identity and sexuality
- Care experienced young people
- Who's Who and What's What – glossary of safeguarding terms and professional roles
- See screen shots below of a selection of pages. If requested, we can provide a demo of the pages.

10. Self-Assessment (interim)

Herefordshire assesses the effectiveness of local safeguarding arrangements in various ways, including Section 11 safeguarding self-assessments. The Section 11 Self-Assessment is carried out in a two-year cycle but it is noted that Herefordshire has not undertaken a Section 11 Self-Assessment since its inception in 2019.

In 2022, the partnership undertook a "mini" interim self-assessment, to gain assurance from agencies on their effectiveness in safeguarding children and young people. A limited number of partner agencies were asked to participate:

- Wye Valley NHS TRUST
- Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust
- NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire Clinical Commissioning Group now ICB
- West Mercia Police
- West Mercia Youth Justice
- Herefordshire County Council
- National Probation Service

The audit was overall positive, with responding partners reporting good adherence to requirements and able in provided narrative to give site examples of good practice. However only one agency, Wye Valley Trust submitted actual evidence attached to the audit template. Even the lowest scoring areas are identified as areas for development scored well, with a

number of partners able to identify good practice or the changes they intend to make to improve the way they work. No single area came out as 'inadequate' across the audit as a whole, evidencing generally a good standard of work with children and families in Herefordshire.

The key pattern identified in this audit was that partners are clearly confident in their systemic and strategic work and planning; policies and procedures were by far the highest scoring criteria across the partnership. The weakest scores (comparatively; the lowest score was still relatively high) were visible in person-centred areas of work such as partners incorporating the voice of the child into their work. This suggests that all partners have strong frameworks within which their work is undertaken, and that future development should focus on ensuring staff, children and young people are able to shape and influence partnership culture and practice.

It was hard to validate the assurances from the agencies who have responded to the S11 request based on the simplified returns and lack of evidence. However, it was noted that there was no evidence of any immediate risk to any child or young person as a result of poor organisational performance, and nothing of immediacy for the partnership or Board to seek to action at this time.

11. Priorities going forward

The partnership remains committed to the HSCP Strategic Plan and within that framework has set the following priorities for 23/24.

- Plan a 'back to basics' workshop to review governance and improve the effectiveness of the Board and Sub Groups
- Continue the development of HSCP performance data set and analysis
- Complete the work to finalise a Neglect Strategy and Plan
- Align the work of HSCP with relevant sections of the Children's Services Improvement Plan and the Improvement Board
- Deliver Get Safe as our new multi-agency approach to child exploitation
- Deliver a programme of multi-agency audits
- Continue with the effective arrangements for Rapid Reviews and Local Child Safeguarding Practice reviews through the Joint Case Review Group
- Focus on embedding the learning from case reviews
- Complete the section 11 and section 175 audits of partners and schools compliance with safeguarding guidance and responsibilities
- Continue improvements in MASH and the 'front door' arrangements
- Resolve the structure and purpose of the Business Unit/Partnership Team post 2024

12. Key messages from the Independent Scrutineer

As noted in last year's annual report, 22/23 was always going to be a challenging year for the HSCP given the Ofsted judgement and subsequent establishment of a re-focused Improvement Board and the requirement to comply with the statutory improvement notice issued by the DfE.

I started work as the Independent Scrutineer for the HSCP in October 2022. In November 2022 I set out some preliminary thoughts on the partnership and made four specific recommendations in light of the Ofsted judgement that Herefordshire Children's Services was inadequate and that partnership working was not effective:

1. That Partners needed to ensure that the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub was resourced and managed to provide a more effective 'front line' for safeguarding children and young people.
2. That Partners should complete the review of the Safeguarding Business Unit.
3. That HSCP needed to develop a clear relationship with the Children's Services Improvement Board and other partnerships such as the Children and Young People's Partnership.
4. That HSCP should align the annual business plan with those areas identified as needing improvement within the Children's services Improvement Plan to ensure those partnership elements will be delivered.

With regard to these recommendations, the sub group report on the MASH within this annual report outlines the real progress that has been made by HSCP in this area. It is pleasing to note that in the Ofsted letter, following the first monitoring visit in March 2023, the inspectors made positive comments about progress in the MASH:

'Since the last inspection when services were judged to be inadequate, protective responses through the MASH have been improved, meaning that most children's needs are now promptly identified and responded to at the point when referrals and contacts are made. This has been achieved through increased capacity, and partnership changes, combined with clear and helpful management oversight.' (Ofsted letter May 2023 – published by Herefordshire Council).

Positive comments were also made about the improvement in Early Help provided to families, which has a high level of partnership engagement as noted in this annual report.

Nevertheless, partners recognise there is more to do given the high number of contacts received by the MASH that do not result in any "Level 4" statutory intervention. This indicates that further work is required to ensure that the application of thresholds set out in Right help Right Time still varies considerably amongst partners. This also means that some families may be subject to assessment when other pathways might have been more appropriate.

It is important to note that partners are aware of the need to address such issues and strengthen effectiveness of the MASH.

The review of the Business Unit was not completed but was paused to allow some key new appointments to be made. Plans have been made to conclude this review in 23/24.

More progress was made to align the HSCP Business Plan with the Improvement Plan and whilst a new business plan was not finally agreed until after March 23, good progress was made. There is now clarity around what the partnership needs to deliver in relation to those areas for improvement identified by the Improvement Board. Progress against these priorities does, however remain slower than anticipated but, as parts of this report show, staff capacity and churn, given the extent of the improvement programme, is a challenge for the HSCP.

In my November analysis, I also identified that the partnership suffered from 'inertia' in that action against key decisions did not appear to happen quickly enough between meetings of the Board. I am pleased to report that a considerable amount of effort has been made by partners to re-vitalise and re-focus the work of the HSCP sub groups, much of this completed after March 23 but beginning to have impact as we move into the 23/24 year.

Similarly, HSCP moved to agree four key priorities for the sub groups this year, going into 2023/24:

- Review and implement a Neglect Strategy
- Continue to Improve the MASH
- Review the approach to child exploitation by adopting the Get Safe model
- Implement a trauma informed approach across the partnership

To deliver the above, partners have identified the need to ensure they have good multi agency data and analysis; good multi agency and single agency audits; a learning and development strategy and menu to support staff across the partnership.

As outlined in this report the sub groups have made some progress during the latter half of 22/23 but a lot of the work is planned to be delivered and begin to have impact in 23/24.

The absence of reliable and regular multi agency data remains a challenge and this undermines the effectiveness of partnership working. Some key data, for example the problem profile for child exploitation, is not up to date. The Child Exploitation profile was last completed in 2019. Again, partners are aware of this and have set plans in place to address the data issues during 23/24. Some key decisions were made in 22/23 to support this work e.g. agreement to a small number of performance indicators to allow the partnership to grow its ability to deliver and use data to inform the work of the HSCP. This annual report for example does not contain the breadth of multi-agency data that characterises more effective partnerships.

A more positive area is the work of the Joint Case Review sub group, which has good processes in place to consider cases for Rapid Review. As noted in this report decisions to undertake Rapid Reviews and LSCPRs were made by the sub group in 22/23 but the completion of these reviews will be in the 23/24 year. The partnership still has work to do; however, to comply with

the timescales required by the National Panel and Working Together 2018 for full LCSPRs, but there have been mitigating factors impacting on timescales.

There is evidence to suggest that escalation is now being used more effectively with many issues handled at the informal stage, particularly in the MASH. This is another area for review during 23/24 and it is monitored by the Quality & Effectiveness Group.

There are, though, some key challenges to be managed in 23/24. Attendance of key agencies in meetings that are essential to good safeguarding and meeting children's needs is not consistent and is under review.

The partnership has also needs to develop a better relationship with schools and other education settings who are under-represented in partnership sub groups and the Board. This is despite strong relationships existing between the Education service and schools including support for safeguarding. Partners are working on addressing this in 23/24.

Overall I have to conclude that in 22/23 that the HSCP was not fully effective but that there has been improvement in some key aspects of the partnership work. Much planning has been completed to improve matters in 23/24, which indicates that more progress will be made next year.

Kevin Crompton
Independent Scrutineer



Title of report: Report of the Children's Services Commissioner in Herefordshire.

Meeting: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date: Tuesday 23 January 2024

Report by: Corporate Director - Children & Young People

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

To consider the recently published progress report on Children's Services in Herefordshire, produced by the DfE appointed Commissioner, Eleanor Brazil.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) **The Children and Young People consider the Commissioner's report and indicate how it might want to be updated on progress in the future, and**
- b) **The committee invite the Commissioner to suggest areas for inclusion in the committee work programme.**

Alternative options

1. Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee could choose not to review information contained in this report; this is not recommended as the Children's Improvement Plan is one of the council's priorities.

Key considerations

2. Children's Services were judged to be inadequate during the Ofsted inspection conducted in July 2022. The inspection report was published on 21 September 2022 on the Ofsted [website](#).
3. Following the Ofsted judgement a [Statutory Direction](#) was issued to Herefordshire Council on 21 September 2022 in relation to children's services.
4. The Statutory Direction was the mechanism for the appointment of a Commissioner for Children's Services in Herefordshire (Eleanor Brazil) and set out the Terms of Reference to the direction.
5. The Commissioner undertook a review of the Council's capacity and capability to improve services within a reasonable timeframe and her report to the Minister was published on 1 March 2023 on the Department for Education [website](#).
6. The report made five recommendations, one of which was to review progress after six months and that if the level and trajectory of progress that is required is not achieved within that timescale, consideration should be given to whether an alternative delivery model is required
7. The Minister accepted the recommendations and a revised [Statutory Direction](#) was issued.
8. A meeting to review progress was held on 6 November 2023, following which the Commissioner submitted a progress report to the Minister of State (Appendix 1). This has been published on the 13 December 2023 - [Progress report of the children's services commissioner in Herefordshire](#)
9. In her progress report the Commissioner notes a number of key developments in the last 6 months:
 - a. Formal agreement to 18 months programme of support with Leeds
 - b. Commission to listen to Families held and report published
 - c. Change in political administration
 - d. First 3 Monitoring Visits conducted by Ofsted
 - e. Planned support from other Local Authorities negotiated and partly delivered
 - f. Improvements in SEND and quality of support for disabled children
 - g. Progress in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub
 - h. Limited progress in other parts of children's social care.
10. Progress and improvement is observed and reported in a number of areas of performance and service delivery. Progress has been made against each of the recommendations for practice improvement made in the original report, published earlier in the year.
11. The report concludes that whilst the pace of change is too slow, there have been positive developments and that there should not be any further consideration of an alternative delivery model as it remains the view of the Commissioner that supporting the council and its partners to deliver quicker and better improvements is the best way forward.

12. Progress will be reviewed again, six months after publication of the Commissioner's report published by the Department of Education. The Commissioner is working with officers and the council's partners to determine the specific areas against which progress will be measured and improvements will be made.
13. The report was presented to Cabinet on [21 December 2023](#).
14. Since publication, the Commissioner has met with the Corporate Director and his Leadership Team and agreed the following as further evidence of progress expected to be seen at the next review:
 - a) Increased parent and children satisfaction and involvement in service developments evidenced by increased proportion of complaints resolved at Stage 1, fewer Stage 2 complaints, feedback from parents and children.
 - b) Fewer children in care, alongside increase in Special Guardianship numbers, timely and appropriate use of Public Law Outline and Family Group conferences
 - c) Improved quality of support for children and families, evidenced by reduction in numbers of children experiencing high numbers of social workers, implementation of CAMHS pathway for children in care, reduction in Child Protection numbers
 - d) Locality arrangements developed and implemented with increased evidence of local early help multi-agency working linked to locally responsive social care
 - e) Continuing trajectory of increase in permanent recruitment of social workers and team managers with corresponding reduction in numbers of agency workers.
 - f) Improved joint working with partners evidenced by successful joint commissioning with health for SEND, and in the management of referrals at the front door.

Community impact

15. The Ofsted inspection judgement of 'Inadequate' has a direct and indirect effect on the lives of both current and future children and families in Herefordshire.
16. The County Plan 2020–2024 includes the ambition to 'strengthen communities to ensure everyone lives well and safely together' and more specifically, the council aims to:
 - a. Ensure all children are healthy, safe, and inspired to achieve;
 - b. Ensure that children in care, and moving on from care, are well supported and make good life choices.

Environmental Impact

17. There are no specific environmental impacts arising from this report.
18. Ongoing transformation activity will be undertaken with consideration to minimise waste and resource in line with the Council's Environmental Policy.

Equality duty

19. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:
- A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to –
- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
20. In particular, the council must have due regard to the public sector equality duty when taking any decisions on service changes.
21. As our projects and service delivery progresses, and changes are designed, equality impact assessment will be undertaken where necessary.

Resource implications

22. There are no new or additional resource implications arising from this monitoring visit and report.

Legal implications

23. It is a function of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee to consider the Children's Improvement Board and the oversight of the required improvement journey.

Risk management

24. There are no new or additional risks arising from this visit. Risks associated with the wider improvement plan are monitored by the Improvement Board.

Consultees

25. None.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – [Report of the Children's Services Commissioner in Herefordshire \(December 2023\)](#).

Background papers

None Identified.

Report Reviewers Used for appraising this report:

Please note this section must be completed before the report can be published

Governance	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date	Click or tap to enter a date.
Finance	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date	Click or tap to enter a date.
Legal	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date	Click or tap to enter a date.
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Risk	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date	Click or tap to enter a date.

Approved by Click or tap here to enter text. Date Click or tap to enter a date.

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.



Department
for Education

Report of the Children's Services Commissioner in Herefordshire

**Progress report to the minister for
Children Families and Wellbeing by
Eleanor Brazil**

December 2023

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Introduction

Herefordshire Council children's services were inspected by Ofsted in July 2022 and found to be inadequate in each aspect of the inspection framework. The inspection report was published on 21 September. A Statutory Notice was issued by the Department for Education and I was appointed as Children's Commissioner to review the Council's capacity and capability to improve services within a reasonable timeframe. My report was published on 1st March 2023.

It was clear from my review that the concerns about the quality of children's services are longstanding and widespread. There were many contributing factors which included poor leadership and a failure to act on continued issues around performance. Ofsted inspections and other reviews during the previous ten years pointed to the same issues: poor decision making, lack of focus on the needs of children, drift and delay, lack of management oversight, high level of vacancies and turnover amongst staff and managers.

Herefordshire has been very publicly criticised in recent years, by a High Court judge, Judge Keehan, in 2018 relating to the inappropriate use of Section 20 for children in long term care in Herefordshire, and in March 2021 relating to very poor practice regarding a sibling group of four. More recently, in May 2022, the BBC broadcast a Panorama programme, which covered the negative experience of five families who had been receiving social work intervention in Herefordshire.

The DfE issued an Improvement Notice and appointed an Improvement Advisor, Gladys Rhodes White, in April 2021 and a multi-agency Improvement Board was set up to oversee and drive the delivery of an Improvement Plan. However, the Ofsted inspection in July 22 showed that little had changed. Following the inspection, there has been more focus and drive to tackle priority areas of concern, in particular the response in MASH, recruitment and retention and improving quality assurance.

In the conclusion of my review, I said that I felt on balance that operational control of the service should remain with the Council. I wrote that *'I believe it makes sense to build on the work that is already underway, albeit with a strong requirement to see evidence of progress in key areas within a period of three to six months. This report has provided detail on the many aspects of practice, leadership and management that need to change and improve. In my recommendations at the end of this report, I have outlined the areas where I will expect to see evidence of significant improvement by the end of this period. Ofsted will undertake its first Monitoring Visit around March next year, and this will be an important milestone in reviewing progress since the inspection.'*

Recommendations

The Minister for Children and Families approved the recommendations and a second Statutory Direction was issued on 1st March. The recommendations were:

1. Children's services remain under the operational control of Herefordshire Council. The Council will:

- a) Strengthen the leadership of children's services to ensure that the pace of improvement increases rapidly in line with the agreed Improvement Plan.
- b) Ensure that within the next 3 months there will be evidence of progress in:
 - i) Reducing the number of agency social workers and increasing the numbers of permanent social workers
 - ii) Increasing the number of permanent front line Team Managers
 - iii) Increasing the number of child protection case conferences and reviews held face to face.
 - iv) Reducing the proportion of assessments that conclude no further action
 - v) Children experiencing fewer changes in social worker
 - vi) Improving the quality of practice seen in audits
 - vii) Finalising the SEND strategy, and acting on agreed immediate priorities
- c) Resolve, as far as is possible, all outstanding historic complaints
- d) Agree, with its partners, through a range of Strategic forums, a number of actions which will demonstrate collectively their commitment to raising ambition and aspiration for children and young people, and responding to their views.
- e) Work with the LGA to develop the knowledge and impact of members in key roles, including the leader, lead member and scrutiny members.

2. The role of Commissioner is retained to oversee the securing of short-term external support, and to continue to drive improvement, including working with the Council and its partners to increase the effectiveness of the Improvement Board.

The Commissioner should explore options for a long-term partnership with a good or outstanding local authority to deliver sustained improvement

3. The Commissioner will conduct a review within 6 months

4. If the level and trajectory of progress that is required is not achieved within 6 months, consideration should be given to whether an alternative delivery model is required

Key developments in the last 6 months

- a) Formal agreement to 18 months programme of support with Leeds
- b) Commission to listen to Families held and report published
- c) Change in political administration
- d) First 3 Monitoring Visits conducted by Ofsted
- e) Planned support from other Local Authorities negotiated and partly delivered
- f) Improvements in SEND and quality of support for disabled children
- g) Progress in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub
- h) Limited progress in other parts of children's social care

Review of progress after 3 months

On 8th June we conducted an interim review of progress against the March recommendations with the Council political and officer leaders, DfE officials, the Improvement Advisor and myself. It was agreed that a fuller assessment of progress and recommendations on next steps would follow a further review in September, 6 months after the original published commissioner review as required. However, it was decided to slightly defer the '6 month' review till after the 3rd Monitoring Visit by Ofsted which took place at the end of September.

Prior to the meeting in June, there were 2 major issues impacting on children's services. The first was in respect to changes in leadership and the second was the conclusion of an initiative to listen to families with long standing concerns about children's services in Herefordshire.

Leadership

Political leadership

Local elections were held on May 4th. This resulted in significant change in the administration. The previous Council administration, a coalition of Independents for Herefordshire (the largest group) and the Green Party, had been in place since May 2019. Almost all the then Cabinet were recent and inexperienced councillors, elected in 2019, including the Leader. The Lead member who was from the Green Party, took up the role in 2021.

In May the Conservatives became the largest group with 21 Councillors, forming a minority administration. The Leader of the group, Jonathan Lester, was elected at the subsequent Council meeting as Leader of the Council. He has been a Councillor since 2011, and has previously been the cabinet lead member for children's services. His new cabinet is made up of Conservative Councillors except the lead member for children's services who is a newly elected Councillor, Ivan Powell, representing the True Independents group. Councillor Powell has a background in the police and recent and current involvement in chairing both adult and children safeguarding boards. Both Councillors are bringing strong commitment and knowledge to improving children's services.

A new chair and deputy chair of scrutiny committee were also appointed and agreement has been reached with the LGA that they will continue to support the new councillors as needed. Recent scrutiny meetings have been more focussed and purposeful, providing more of the constructive challenge that is needed.

Officer leadership

In January the Chief Executive, Paul Walker appointed an interim assistant Chief Executive, an experienced ex DCS, to provide additional capacity and capability to strengthen leadership in children's services. She undertook the role for just over 4 months, providing additional focus on recruitment and retention, understanding the financial pressures, preparing for the first Monitoring Visit and supporting the DCS and his team. An interim Service Director started in March to provide support on safeguarding, replaced in June by a new permanent Service Director, who now leads on Quality Assurance, partnerships and early help.

The Directorate leadership team is now fully staffed with 3 permanent Service Directors and the Improvement Director. They are beginning to work better together but need to develop as a more cohesive team supporting each other and collaborating more on the improvements and changes needed. A key element of the programme of support agreed with Leeds is intended to support and develop the leadership team.

The Commission to consider families' experience of children's services in Herefordshire

Whilst I was undertaking my review from September to December last year, I was aware that there were a number of families with longstanding concerns about their experience of children's services in Herefordshire, some from some years ago and some much more recent. Many had complained and also raised questions at public Council meetings. They continued to feel that their views were not listened to or responded to. It felt important to me to find a way to hear about their experiences. I established, with the agreement and support of the Council and the Safeguarding Partnership, a Commission to do this which consisted of an independent panel who were able to hear directly from families.

The agreed purpose was:

- To give parents and families an opportunity to tell their story to an independent panel.
- To identify any steps that the Council and partners can and should take as a result of hearing families' testimonies, either in relation to individual cases or in respect of general issues.
- To learn from their experiences and to ensure that this knowledge is used to inform improvements to Children's Services.
- To ensure that, as far as possible, families feel that their concerns have been heard and addressed, and that this is as much as can be done to resolve matters

The Panel comprised three appropriately qualified and experienced individuals, independent of Herefordshire, who were appointed directly by myself. The commission carried out its work in March and April 2023, during which time ten day-long sessions were held and 20 individuals came to speak to the panel. The independent scrutineer of the Safeguarding Children Partnership, and I attended all the sessions as observers.

The people who attended the panel had a range of experiences of Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care, police, health and mental health services for both children and adults, and specialised independent services, some of which were outside Herefordshire. They varied in age, circumstances, and in their position within their family. Some described many years of contact with statutory services, some had more recent involvement. The majority of cases were either still open or had been open in the last few years. Most had been impacted by the effect of the Covid 19 pandemic on how services were delivered.

What every person expressed was the desire to ensure that their painful personal experiences should be used to improve services for everyone and ensure that 'nobody

else should ever have to go through what I have gone through.’ We heard difficult stories of poor practice, failures to respond to appropriately to requests for help, complaints not responded to and children and their parents let down by professionals who should have done more to help them. The panel’s report goes into considerable detail, written from the perspective of families and using many quotes from them to illustrate the points made. Whilst families found it distressing to tell their story many said that they felt listened to and valued the work of the panel.

The [report](#) entitled ‘the Commission to consider families’ experience of children’s services in Herefordshire’ was published on 6th June on the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children website. The report outlines 9 areas for the Council and the Safeguarding Partnership to consider:

Summary of Questions for Consideration

- How will the Council and its partners provide a meaningful and responsive early help service which is accessible to families, regardless of which agency they contact first for help?
- How will the Council support its social workers to practise in ways that demonstrate empathy, perseverance, authority, professional confidence and capability; working with people to enable full participation in discussions and decision making?
- How will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership ensure that professionals are working together in the best interests of children and their families, to the highest standards of professional practice, informed by good quality research and evidence?
- What actions will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership take to satisfy itself that there is good understanding across all ‘frontline’ agencies of domestic violence and abuse and its impact on individuals and families?
- How will Herefordshire Children’s Services support social workers to establish and maintain the trust and confidence of parents and families and enable their participation in planning to keep their children safe and promote their wellbeing?
- What will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership do to promote a ‘Think Family approach across the partnership?
- What will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership do to ensure that the complaints procedures in every agency across the partnership are accessible to families, work well, and findings are recorded and acted on?

Both the Independent Scrutineer and I in our different roles are monitoring and supporting the Council and its partners to address these questions as part of the ongoing improvement journey.

The Council was initially slow to respond to issues raised by the Chair of the Panel on behalf of individuals who had attended. This resulted in further delay in resolving some of the longstanding concerns. Subsequent to the initial delays, the Improvement Director was tasked with managing this. The newly appointed Leader and Lead Member both took a personal interest in these matters being followed up, and with the Improvement Director, they both met with a small number of the families which was appreciated by them. For some families it has not been possible to find a resolution for them but where possible, issues are now being addressed.

With regard to the more general issues summarised in the questions for consideration, the Council and its safeguarding partners are working on a number of those. There are developments in early help which are outlined later in this report which are responding to the first question. The partnership with Leeds, which is also discussed later in the report, is intended to support the Council on improving practice and addressing the negative attitudes and behaviours that had been heard by the Commission.

The Improvement Board and Improvement Plan

The Improvement Board continues to be chaired by Gladys Rhodes White, DfE

Improvement Advisor. It now meets every 6 weeks and generally is well attended by partners including representatives from health, the Police and schools. The Board oversees delivery of a comprehensive improvement plan which has brought together 10 Priority improvement areas (9 from Ofsted ILACS plus 10th from LGA SEND peer review held a year ago) and includes 66 priority improvement actions overall. It has proved challenging for the Council and its partners to deliver on all the areas of activity required.

There are 7 Improvement work streams focusing on key themes within the Plan. These are: Practice and Service Delivery, Workforce, Commissioning & Resources, Corporate Parenting Safeguarding Children's Partnership, Children & Young People's Partnership and SEND.

Much of the reporting to the Board tends to focus on process activity (as can be seen from the table below) and in many parts of the service it is harder to determine the impact on improving outcomes for children and their families. There has also been delays in progressing some aspects of the plan. Concerns around pace have been commented on by Ofsted in the feedback from the 3 Monitoring Visits that have taken place.

Herefordshire Council Programme	August 2023 Highlights
Practice and Service Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completed well-attended and engaged launch events in July for children’s social care with the Leeds Improvement Partnership • The first phase of the Restorative and Relational Practice Programme commences September 2023
Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The workforce establishment project is now complete • Agreed increase to welcome payments and new retention payments with associated workforce communications • Finalising other initiatives, such as 9 day fortnight, increased annual leave and CPD leave are underway
Commissioning and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedures for unregulated placements have been completed. • The Children's Sufficiency Strategy has been finalised
SEND	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The SEND strategy has been coproduced, published and is informing the SEND action plan. • The SEND Assurance Board is now established and meeting monthly with good attendance from the health, care and education senior leadership with support from our Parent-Carer Voice Forum. • Nationally, the EHCP timeliness standard (20 weeks) has dropped from 59.9% (2021-2) to 50.7% (2022-3). Despite rising requests in Herefordshire, EHC plans continue to be issued within 20 weeks at a significantly higher rate than that seen nationally.

Table 1: Update on improvement workstreams

Performance

There has been an improvement in the quality of the data and performance reports which are brought to the Improvement Board. The data is now accompanied by more useful analysis. The majority of key performance indicators have improved over the past six months, including a gradual reduction in the rate of referrals and a small reduction in the re-referral rate; increased timeliness of assessments (although the quality of these remains a concern), improved timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs); a reduction in the numbers of children subject of a child protection plan; and a reduction in the rate per 10,000 of children coming into our care, though a rise in the number of unaccompanied young people.

Although slowly reducing, overall numbers of children in receipt of statutory intervention remain high compared with statistical neighbours suggesting that there continues to be a risk averse approach within the wider partnership, with not enough positive interventions with families at an earlier stage, which was the experience of families who attended the Commission to listen to families.

Key points reported to the September meeting of the Improved Board illustrate this:

Key points reported to September improvement board

There has been increased focus on the quality of assessments which has had an impact on the timely completion. Too many cases are passed from the MASH to the assessment teams, with over 70% not resulting in any further support for families following assessment.

Section 47 enquiries continue to be significantly higher than the England average (180 per 10,000 children) and that of our Statistical Neighbours (158 per 10,000 children). Additional management oversight is being undertaken to ensure S.47 enquiries are proportionate and this has resulted in a steady decrease in the number of Section 47 enquiries from a rate of 520 (per 10,000 children) in March 2023, to a rate of 260 in July 2023.

Significant work has been undertaken to stabilise the workforce within the Children in Care teams and as a result of this the proportion of Children in Care who have had the same Social Worker for the previous 12 months has increased from 11.8% in January to 19% in July 2023.

Over the last couple of months, the rate of Children in Care has remained mostly static at 112 per 10,000 children. This continues to be high when compared with the England average (70 children in care per 10,000) or our statistical neighbours (64 children in care per 10,000). The total number of children in care in July there was 405, of which 29 were UASC.

We are in touch with the majority of Care Leavers (94% of those aged 17 – 18 and 100% for those aged 19-21) although the proportion of young people seen within the last 8 weeks is too low. Most Care Leavers live in suitable accommodation (91% of 17/18 years old and 92% of 19-21 year olds as of the end of July). Thirteen (13%) of our care leavers aged 19-21 continue to live with their fostering family under “staying put” arrangements; this is better than the England average (9%) or our Statistical Neighbours (8%). The timeliness of visits to care leavers and the proportion of pathway plans that are up-to-date needs significant improvement. The November Improvement Board will include an item focussing on Care Leavers.

The letter following the second Ofsted Monitoring Visit reports: *‘A strengthened approach to understanding the quality of services for children through an enhanced audit process is becoming more embedded.’* Outcomes of auditing are reported to the Improvement Board. Whilst the numbers of cases being audited is lower than is needed and expected, there is some small improvement in the number being judged requires improvement or good. The use of storyboards and the presence of front line staff to present their work to some meetings of the Improvement Board has proved helpful in identifying some examples of good practice. At the moment, these are isolated examples but they do demonstrate that there is practice that is resulting in positive outcomes for some children.

In my review I commented that the Council had been slow to return to face to face working. One of my recommendations was to increase the number of child protection conferences and children in care reviews that were being held in person and not remotely. The project to develop a dedicated space for Conferencing at Plough Lane took a long time and was completed in August 2023. This provides a Conference suite, a comfortable children and family room and also an office / meeting area for IRO’s and Conference Chairs to meet with other professionals. The Leominster meeting room at Plough Lane is also currently used Monday to Thursday for Conferences. The service has also begun to hold Conferences at other Council Multi-Agency Offices venues in Herefordshire, specifically Leominster and Bromyard.

Many children in care reviews are still mainly being held remotely which makes it difficult for children and families.

The service distributed Questionnaires to families and to professionals evaluating their experience of Conferencing between June and August. 20 questionnaires have been completed (8 by families and 12 from professionals) and analysed. 18 of the 20 respondents indicate that they prefer Face to Face Conferences with only 1 definitely

preferring Teams. One comment from a family being *“I feel more comfortable being in a room with people. I am happy for others to join via TEAMS”*. Families and professionals also gave positive feedback about the skills and values of the Chairs and all respondents stated that they were treated with respect.

For the three months of August – October 2023, 157 Conferences took place of which 125 were Face to Face (80%), some hybrid. For Child in Care Reviews during August – October, 213 meetings took place of which 138 were Face to Face (65%) with in person attendance and some attendees on TEAMS

In June Ofsted found that *‘Core group and child-in-need meetings are held regularly. However, the effectiveness of these meetings for some families is undermined by them not being face to face.’*

Feedback from Ofsted Monitoring Visits

Three Monitoring Visits have taken place since the ILACS inspection in July 2022. The inspectors have in general found some progress but have commented that the pace of improvement, particularly for children in care has been too slow. Many of the previous longstanding issues around quality of practice, and staffing remain concerns, although more improvement was seen in parts of the service than in others and the challenge for leaders is to replicate this across the whole.

The first Monitoring Visit (MV) which took place on 29th and 30th March focussed on the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and assessments. The feedback was mixed but did show evidence of real improvement in the MASH where considerable time and resource had gone into making changes. The Council had done a lot of preparatory work and it was positive that evident signs of real progress were seen. However, there were still significant practice issues in the quality of assessments, the other area that was looked at. The inspectors also commented on the pace of improvement being too protracted.

The second MV took place on 28th and 29th June, with the outcome letter of the visit published on 2nd August. The focus was on children in need and children subject to a Child Protection plan. The inspectors noted some progress but identified concerns relating to the quality of care planning, children continuing to experience too many changes in social workers, the response to unaccompanied asylum seeking children and housing needs not being addressed.

The letter states: 'practice is starting to improve and positive progress is being made with some families. However, the quality and effectiveness of practice with children in need and those subject to a protection plan remain variable. The achievement of more consistently effective practice is hampered by several issues. These include continued high turnover of social workers, a legacy of some families with chronic long-term needs who have experienced poor practice over several years, closure of children's cases to social care before sustained change has been achieved, leading to increased re-referrals, and management support which is not yet consistently effective. When housing is a need, it takes too long to resolve and is not sufficiently prioritised by housing partners.'

Some positives were seen, including family support workers providing helpful practical support to parents, combined with enhancing parenting skills through parenting programmes, which makes a tangible difference for some vulnerable families. Other support services were noted to have a positive impact on children's lives, such as the ECHO (edge of care) service which provides more intensive support.

They also noted that supervision records lack critical evaluation and actions and tend to focus on routine process-based tasks rather than timely actions tailored to the needs and progress of individual children.

The third MV took place in September and focussed on Children in care and achieving permanence. Overall, the inspectors found that: *'Since the last inspection, when the experiences and progress of children in care were judged inadequate, leaders have achieved only modest progress for children in care. Leaders and senior managers have not given sufficient strategic focus to children in care. While there has been some limited progress, the pace of improvement and progress has been too slow.'* The letter which was published on 31st October is very critical of the continued lack of focus on children in care despite concerns having been known for several years.

They found that the pace and impact of improvement are too slow. Significant objectives in the improvement plan have been delayed or are not on track. The quality of practice for children in care remains inconsistent and children experience too many changes of social worker. The approach to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is not equitable or inclusive. *'All unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are routinely placed out of area and do not benefit from living in Herefordshire. There is an assumption that their needs cannot currently be met in Herefordshire and that they are better placed in inner city areas. The care and support of these children is very much left to the carers.'*

Care plans address children's basic needs, but many lack depth in setting out their day-to-day care, social and leisure needs. Over three-quarters of children in care have experienced changes of social worker in the last year. Direct work is underdeveloped and children's views do not influence their plans in a meaningful way. This remains the part of the service with the most interim staff, despite considerable efforts to recruit permanent team members.

Some more positive practice was seen, in particular the work of the Disabled Children's team and recent viability assessments for kinship care, which were thorough and completed to inform the preliminary decision to place with a friend or relative. However, very few special guardianship order (SGO) applications have been made. The potential for special guardianship is not considered for children sufficiently well when this would enable them to achieve a stronger sense of family identity and belonging. As a consequence, some children continue to be looked after subject to a statutory order unnecessarily or for too long.

Partnership with Leeds Relational Practice Centre and feedback from their initial involvement

One of the main recommendations from my initial review was the need for Herefordshire to have a long-term partnership with a good or outstanding authority to ensure there was additional capacity and capability to achieve the necessary improvements within a reasonable timescale. Leeds has an excellent reputation as an outstanding authority and is experienced in providing this kind of support through their relational practice centre. It is very positive that agreement was reached in June for them to be the long-term partner. A plan for delivery over 18 months was agreed, funded by the DfE. The agreed overall aim of the joint work is to promote more restorative, relational and family-focused ways of working in order to improve outcomes and practice.

Leeds began their involvement in Herefordshire, with some case auditing and focus groups. This has been followed by sessions with the senior leadership team, and then with groups of staff and partners focussing on introducing restorative practice. They are now engaged in more specific training sessions with individual service areas, informed by their analysis and early work.

In October they completed a report covering their initial impressions and identifying key areas where they consider focussed improvements are needed. Key points from their report are summarised below and are consistent with Ofsted findings, reports to the Improvement Board, feedback from families to the Commission and via complaints and my own understanding of the current position.

Key points from the Leeds report

1. Families in Herefordshire have experienced practice that has been intrusive and over-reliant on process, leading to unnecessary use of formal mechanisms to engage families and a disproportionate use of intervention in family life and too many children being looked after when there could have been opportunities to safely keep them with parents or the wider family
2. There are positive signs of change - the sharp rises in children being drawn into the child welfare system have been moderated or even reversed – less children are becoming looked after, more are returning home and despite the increase in activity the hard work of local services has meant that there has been a steady improvement in data relating to compliance with national standards.

3. Re-referral rates are more of concern – they have averaged 28% in the last six months, well above benchmarks (around 20%). The proportion of children assessed is higher than seen in similar areas of the country. What is most striking in this area is the high proportion of assessments that are closed to social work on completion – 66% This is much higher than the national rate and suggests that there may be issues with decision-making at the Front Door – generally that decisions there are risk averse and do not consider alternatives such as single agency or Early Help support for families.
4. 248 children in Herefordshire have a child protection plan (CPP). This equates to a rate of 69 per ten thousand – which is well above the rates seen nationally or in similar areas. In the last six months 189 children started having a CPP, and 169 children had their plan closed.
5. 399 Children Looked After in Herefordshire – a rate of 111 per ten thousand. This is much higher than the rate seen either nationally or in similar ‘Statistical Neighbour’ local authorities. In the last six months 42 children became looked after and 51 ceased to be looked after.
6. Around one in five (19%) of children looked after are in residential settings, which is well above the national rate and is likely to be less than ideal for some of those children as well as punishingly expensive for the Local Authority.
7. Whilst previously Herefordshire was around the rates seen elsewhere, since 2021/22 there has been a very large fall in the proportion of all care leavers in education or work. (Fall from 83% to 31% for 17-18, from 48% to 16% for 19-21 yo).
8. Local partners need to answer this Commission’s question about early help and work together to ‘rebalance the system. This will require a collaborative multi-agency approach and the need to work with some families that are currently being referred into and receiving services from social work teams.
9. Children in need - overall, whilst there was some effective work with families there was a need to be more family led, creative and challenging. There was no evidence in majority of cases of engaging families in the context of escalating concerns. Sometimes it seemed that escalation to Child Protection was used as a response to get compliance because engagement had failed
10. Child Protection: Analysis and reflection was relatively weak – there was not prompting for challenge and reflection. Few cases looked at - Overall there was a need for a sharper focus on significant harm rather than wider worries and danger.

11. Staff concerns included the recent history of changes in staffing in leadership, and ongoing problems with working across a large county, so were interested in the possibilities of more focused locality or 'patch' working

12. The latest national data shows that around 13% of children looked after in Herefordshire are with kinship carers. This is below the regional average and well below nearby LAs such as Shropshire.

Other External support

Following the publication of my review and with DfE funding and support, short term immediate support from Worcestershire and Telford and Wrekin was brokered and agreed. Their input was intended to add capacity to address key challenges, pending the identification and appointment of a long-term improvement partner. Worcestershire's support was intended to focus on key partnership issues given the number of shared partners, including the work to improve the MASH and Safeguarding Partnership performance information. This did not progress as quickly or as well as we hoped, with Herefordshire struggling to engage with the support on offer. In June we reflected on how their support could help with the significant challenges in relation to children in care and agreed an additional programme of work over the subsequent months to assist with re-unification and discharge of Care Orders.

Unfortunately, as has previously been the case in Herefordshire, this offer of support was not responded to with any urgency and it is only very recently that any work has commenced. Whilst there has been some progress in the discharge of Care Orders of children placed at home with around 9 discharges achieved in recent months, potentially far greater progress could have been made in respect of the nearly 40 children who have been identified as children for whom this outcome would be in their best interests.

DfE funded SLIP support from Telford and Wrekin was also slow to get going, primarily due to changes in personnel. They did finally complete some useful work to assess the impact of early help which should help with the development of early help arrangements. However due to the time taken more than half the allocated days of support were not used and have now been withdrawn.

More positively, we have seen a lot of progress in relation to SEND with the active involvement of LGA and DfE helping and SLIP support from Bedford assisting. There seems to be better partner engagement on the SEND activity than there is on social care, and work has progressed to agree a new SEND strategy, re-vitalised Strategic Partnership Board and Operational group now in place, improvements in timescales for Education Health and Care Plans and work underway to develop the Local Offer.

Finance

Like most local authorities, Herefordshire is experiencing financial pressures and has required savings across all directorates, including children's. At the same time children's services is projecting a considerable overspend, despite investment in the service, reflects the unprecedented increase in demand and national cost pressures as recently reported by the County Councils Network (CCN) ¹ and also includes pressures from the cost of agency staff, placements and SEN transport, in addition to a savings target of £4m. This is a difficult situation to manage and until recently there was insufficient regular and detailed financial information to enable the directorate to properly monitor and manage spend.

It has taken too long to actively explore safe options for reducing spend, such as the level of family support workers' time spent on supervising contact for children in care, where there may no longer be a need for contact to be supervised, although in other areas, such as reducing the overall headcount and associated costs, there has been more progress. The Council has recently brought in an experienced interim finance officer to support the directorate with firming up a much needed 3 year financial strategy aimed at reducing costs and achieving a balanced budget by the end of the 3 years.

Currently the Council is working on its budget for 2024/25 and seeking to close the current potential gap of £20m, with around half of that related to children's services. It is hoped that reduction in numbers of children in care and in costly residential placements will contribute to savings and that increased recruitment and lower number of cases will reduce the numbers and cost of agency staff. The Leader has signalled a likely review of overall council budgets but remains committed to giving children's services appropriate priority.

¹ [Councils warn they are 'running out of road' to prevent financial insolvency, as in-year overspends top £600m - County Councils Network](#)

Staffing

In each of the three Ofsted monitoring visits staff spoken to by inspectors reported that they like working for Herefordshire and are positive about the changes implemented by senior managers and can see the benefits in terms of capacity, improved staff stability, workload and process (Ofsted, May 2023).

Staffing remains a significant challenge though, with nearly 50% of all social work staff agency staff. The Council needs to improve reporting on turnover, and detail on the different service areas so that we can better understand the pressures and the impact of the work that is detailed in the box below. From January to April, the interim assistant chief executive did help drive greater focus on recruitment and retention and this has shown some limited results. The support from H.R. has improved and the directorate's leadership team are working more closely now with the Director of HR to ensure that their efforts are better co-ordinated, and support the service as needed.

Over the past 6 months, as a result of recent efforts, there has been some reduction in the churn amongst permanent social workers and improved communications, marketing and processes put in place for recruitment. Earlier in the year two locum social work project teams were withdrawn from the overall number of teams working in the service.

Recruitment of permanent social workers is proving difficult but recently 2 permanent team managers and one service manager have been appointed. 13 of 19 team managers are now permanent. After the inspection it was proving difficult even to recruit agency social workers, however all social worker vacancies are now filled, although as stated above, too many with agency staff. This situation has improved and the service is starting to reduce the overall number of agency staff by holding more vacancies as positive action

The council is considering working with an external recruitment partner and has recently significantly improved the financial offer for permanent social workers and team managers to include welcome and retention bonus payments, which appears to be having the desired effect with increased applications in recent weeks.

Agreement has been reached to increase the number of NQSWs employed within this financial year and putting in place increased support for social work apprenticeships (including backfill arrangements). Retention and recruitment is included in the proposed programme of work with Leeds Improvement Partner as they had considerable success over time in this area (albeit in a less challenging recruitment market at that time).

Learning and development opportunities were neglected during previous years but this has now improved and includes a core foundation programme focusing on practice principles that all social workers have attended. There is also a 6 month programme of development for permanent team managers underway which commenced in May. The Social Worker Career Progression Panel is now operational and induction sessions for

new starters, covering additional days for MOSAIC (the case management system) training as well as service orientation for new practitioners and managers, have also been introduced to build on the existing corporate induction day.

Earlier in the year the Improvement Advisor and I met with front-line staff and managers to seek their views on the improvement journey and current situation. The discussions were interesting and helpful. As might be expected there was more focus on the concerns than on what was working better. Issues raised included:

- Anxious about more change if agency managers replaced by permanent
- Concern that some agency staff often not available in Hereford when needed to visit a child e.g. saying 'I'm not in Hereford this week, needs to wait till next week'
- Lack of focus on policy and procedures and bringing them up to date – not accessible or easy to understand
- Pressure of longstanding complaints falling on TMs
- Lack of planning to deliver face to face conferences

Among the more positive comments were the following:

- Things have improved after disastrous period with previous senior managers
- More collaboration now on Mosaic developments
- 1st training in 4 years for Team Managers happening now

At that time staff told us that they appreciated the regular weekly updates from the DCS and Service Director and the remote staff monthly briefings, but we felt much more was needed to improve communication. Suggestions from staff included: More face to face all staff meetings, suggestion boxes (actual and virtual), team meetings (regular with agenda and minutes) staff notice boards in all areas (along with signage about which team is in situ), video blogs from senior leaders, more "you said we did communications", regular floor walking and talking to staff by senior leaders. The work being undertaken with Leeds is helping to improve communication as several workshops focussing on restorative practice have taken place, and work within service areas has now commenced.

In November, while writing this report, I met with the group of 6 Team Managers who have benefitted from the development programme. They told me that the programme had been very useful, particularly the inclusion of individual mentoring. There are still some concerns amongst this group about how significant changes are planned and implemented, and how their views are taken into account. Going forward there is an opportunity to build on this programme to ensure the Team Managers develop a strong forum that can contribute to and influence positive change.

Partnership

Steps have been taken to improve strategic planning and partnership working across all areas of children's services but this has developed from a very low base, and is not yet showing significant impact. Whilst demonstrating a willingness to work together to support children's services in its improvement, the partnership is not yet making sufficient progress to reduce the pressures on the MASH and to bring down the levels of referral to a rate that should be expected in a local authority of this size.

The Children and Young people's partnership is now meeting, chaired by Councillor Powell and supported by the Director of Public Health. The focus to date has been on establishing its priorities, on developing early help and the Best Start in life programme. As a Board it is not yet driving change sufficiently or looking at a broader range of issues beyond those that might broadly be contained within a public health agenda such as provision for youth in the county and broader consideration of the impact of rurality and social isolation.

The SEND Strategic Board is now meeting regularly, and is proving much more effective. Work is underway to improve the effectiveness of the Corporate Parenting Board, now chaired by the lead member, but as the findings of the most recent Monitoring Visit and the initial Leeds analysis show, much more needs to be done to improve outcomes for children in care and care leavers.

Kevin Crompton, the Independent Scrutineer, currently chairs the Safeguarding Children Partnership and is actively engaging with partners in health and the police to improve the effectiveness of the Partnership. Progress on joint issues such as agreeing a multi-agency data set and the partnership response to the challenges posed by the Commission to listen to families has been very slow.

Relationships with head teachers and schools have strengthened. Following publication of my report, the Service Director for Education has supported the establishment of a number of head teacher and other forums which are now ensuring much greater engagement between schools and the Council. This has resulted in better joint planning to support vulnerable children locally, such as establishing a number of local nurture groups based in schools.

Early Help

The Service Director, with responsibility for safeguarding, early help and partnerships who started in June, is now taking forward working with the Council, partners and the voluntary and community organisations on what needs to change to deliver better early help arrangements.

The Council's own early help service is an area of strength, with recent evaluations by Ofsted, Leeds and Telford and Wrekin commenting positively about the effectiveness of their child centred approach with families. I commented in my review on the lack of a co-ordinated multi-agency early help response that means that too many families struggle to access support when they are beginning to experience difficulties. The Council's own service currently has a waiting time for families of around 8-12 weeks. Given the rural nature of Herefordshire, focussing early help arrangements round schools potentially gives the opportunity to develop locally based timely help. The Council has spent a long time consulting with its partners in the statutory and voluntary sector but has been slow to spearhead any identifiable change.

Earlier in the year, the Police and Crime Commission committed £500k over 2 years to fund youth provision to reduce offending and the Council committed to match fund this. It has taken some considerable time for the Council and its partners to agree how to best use this money. This is now being taken forward with a published invitation for voluntary and community groups and schools to bid for grants to develop local provision. This is a positive initiative and should form the basis for developing creative local early help solutions.

I have encouraged the Council to bid to the DfE for additional funding to support the delivery of better early help arrangements. If successful the funding would enable co-ordination of activity and the opportunity to pump prime new arrangements in a number of identified locations across the County. The intention is to engage with interested schools who already have experience of extended services e.g. developing nurture groups and with voluntary organisations. This would support building new arrangements which potentially would include the Council's own early help service, the Council Talk Community initiative which currently focusses on adult support, alongside other professional services such as health visitors.

This would be the beginning of a different way of working which would benefit families, and should lead to a reduction in the need for social work intervention. The key will be to work creatively, proactively and quickly to secure ways of responding to families that are timely, co-ordinated, meet need and deliver measurable positive outcomes. The strategic oversight for this work lies with Children and Young People's Partnership who need to ensure the programme is driven forward, whether or not the bid to the DfE is successful.

Pace of improvement

The Improvement Advisor and I agree with the comments made by the Ofsted inspectors at the conclusion of the Monitoring Visits, that whilst there is evidence of some improvement and areas of much better practice, the pace of change is too slow. I commented in my initial review on the need for a much more robust and purposeful approach. Whilst there is greater direction now from the DCS and his leadership team there are still too many areas in the Improvement Plan which have not been addressed quickly enough and the timescales have shifted. The Improvement Director has recently listed the areas of priority (with the link to the Improvement Plan (IP) where agreed timescales have not been met:

- a) **Recruitment & retention** - for social workers and foster carers (IP 2.1 & 2.4)
- b) **Supervision and Management Oversight** (IP 8.2 & 8.3)
- c) **Participation & Engagement** (encompassing Direct work, Life Story Work and Consultation with children in need of support, protection and care and their parents/carers) (IP 4.2, 4.3, 4.4 & 7.3)
- d) **Child Protection - Safety planning & risk management** (IP 5.5)
- e) **Children in Care achieving Permanence** (IP 6.5 & 6.6)
- f) **Implementation of Care Leaver's Offer** (IP 1.5)
- g) **Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children** (IP 5.9)
- h) **Performance, Systems and QA** (IP 2.4, 9.1, 9.2 & 9.3)

I have mentioned some of areas that have been slow to progress including the use of external support, return to face to face conferences and reviews, reviewing family contact time, developing early help arrangements and discharging care orders. In addition to those we have been concerned about delays in agreeing a housing protocol for 16 and 17 year olds, setting up family group conferencing, and developing locality working.

The improvements in SEND have demonstrated that the Council can make effective use of external support and deliver change in a timely way. The political and officer leadership need to be clearer about the barriers to moving more quickly in other key areas, and how this can be speedily addressed.

Conclusions and next steps

To conclude I will reflect on each of the recommendations in my original review:

Progress against original recommendations

The Council will:

- a) Strengthen the leadership of children's services to ensure that the pace of improvement increases rapidly in line with the agreed Improvement Plan. *The leadership has been strengthened, pace has increased only slightly with delays in agreed timescales.*

- b) Ensure that within the next 3 months there will be evidence of progress in:
 - i) Reducing the number of agency social workers and increasing the numbers of permanent social workers. *Progress made.*
 - ii) Increasing the number of permanent front line Team Managers. *Achieved.*
 - iii) Increasing the number of child protection case conferences and reviews held face to face. *Progress made.*
 - iv) Reducing the proportion of assessments that conclude no further action. *Progress made.*
 - v) Children experiencing fewer changes in social worker. *Progress made.*
 - vi) Improving the quality of practice seen in audits. *Progress made.*
 - vii) Finalising the SEND strategy, and acting on agreed immediate priorities. *Achieved.*

- c) Resolve, as far as is possible, all outstanding historic complaints. *Progress made.*

- d) Agree, with its partners, through a range of Strategic forums, a number of actions which will demonstrate collectively their commitment to raising ambition and aspiration for children and young people, and responding to their views. *Progressing.*

- e) Work with the LGA to develop the knowledge and impact of members in key roles, including the leader, lead member and scrutiny members. *Progressing.*

I have remained as Commissioner to oversee the securing of short-term external support, and to continue to drive improvement, including working with the Council and its partners to increase the effectiveness of the Improvement Board, and to put in place a long-term partnership with an outstanding local authority (Leeds) to deliver sustained improvement.

In this review of progress 8 months on from my report being published, we need to return to the question of whether the level and trajectory of progress that is required has been sufficiently achieved to confirm that children's services should remain under the operational control of the Council, with no further consideration of the need for an

alternative delivery model. Whilst progress has been slower than we would want, there has been positive developments that hopefully can form the basis for quicker and more sustained improvement. I do not think any further consideration of an alternative delivery model is required as it remains my view that supporting the Council and its partners to deliver quicker and better improvements is the best way forward.

There has been a lot of activity since my report was published. There are some signs of improvement which is encouraging but it is also very clear the longstanding and deep-rooted issues remain a challenge for the council and its partners. This is crystallised in the Commission's report outlining the poor experiences some families have had. We know many of those issues are still current, particularly for children in care, and need to be tackled.

The short- term support has to date had limited impact. It is hoped that the partnership with Leeds will help bring about the fundamental changes needed, but this will also require ongoing commitment and drive from the Council leaders and partners. Herefordshire need to demonstrate that they can deliver change at pace which will make a difference to children and their families. The Commission's report contained some hard-hitting messages about the poor response some families received, not just in the past but also currently due to limited early help and poor practice. The evaluations by Ofsted and Leeds have identified some strengths which must be built on if the Council and its partners are going to respond in a way that will begin to restore confidence to families and to achieve many more tangible moves forward. The partnership with Leeds will support children's services to address the cultural, leadership and practice issues but this will take time to have real impact across the whole service.

For those of us working to support and challenge Herefordshire, there has been a level of frustration experienced when even with our involvement issues have not progressed with pace or been concluded. Often progress is only achieved through our continued focus, such as the work of the Improvement Advisor on early help and myself taking the lead on the Commission to listen to families. The work with Leeds is being well received and is an important addition to the DfE intervention, which is critical and necessary. We hope that with this additional help the Council will start to deliver the changes needed in a more timely way.

Progress should be reviewed in 6 months' time.



Department
for Education

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Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee draft work programme

18 July 2023 report deadline 10 July 23

Topic and Objectives	Evidence required	Attendees*
Children’s Services Improvement Plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Measure progress in delivering the priorities of the improvement plan. - Identify areas of the focus for the committee’s work programme, to include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Quality of assessment o Partnership working 	Service Improvement Plan “Measures that Matter” dataset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service Director, Improvement – Herefordshire Council
Safeguarding Children’s Partnership Annual Report <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scrutinise responses to questions to the independent scrutineer. 	Partnership Annual Report Answers to questions submitted the Independent Scrutineer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Scrutineer, Herefordshire Safeguarding Partnership

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26 September 2023 report deadline 18 September 23

Topic and Objectives	Evidence required	Attendees*
Early help <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the nature of both targeted and universal early help services in Herefordshire. - Further understand the offer made by the council and other agencies. - Scrutinise how partners work together to identify and support children and families who need early help. 	“Right Help Right Time” framework for support Herefordshire Council Early Help Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of Public Health • Service Director Early Help, Quality Assurance and Prevention • West Mercia Police • Independent Care Board
Families’ Commission Report <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scrutinise progress in responding to the seven challenges contained in the report 	Families’ Commission Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Scrutineer, Herefordshire Safeguarding Partnership

14 November 2023 report deadline 6 November 23

Topic and Objectives	Evidence required	Attendees*
SEND action plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scrutinise the action plan. - Identify gaps in action and progress in delivering the plan. 	SEND strategy and action plan Pre-meeting briefing session with service director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of Education, Skills and Learning • Parent Carer Voice • Maria Hardy Health • Roz Pither – head of service SEND • Rachel Gillett - Safeguarding
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investigate access to and the availability of appropriate mental health services for children and young people. - Identify gaps in provision and explore opportunities for more effective commissioning of services. 	Directory of mental health support services in Herefordshire Service specification for CAMHS CAMHS performance information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Herefordshire and Worcestershire NHS Trust • Director of safeguarding • Director of all-age commissioning

23 January 2024 **report deadline 15 January 2024**

Topic and Objectives	Evidence required	Attendees*
Workforce, fostering and adoption sufficiency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the shortages faced by the council and its partners in workforce recruitment. - Identify challenges in recruitment of foster families. - Make recommendations to support improved rates of recruitment. 	Current staffing levels Fostering and adoption rates of recruitment Payment rates for fostering and adoption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of Service, Fostering and Adoption
Schools Capital Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding how the local authority determines its investment in new and existing schools. - Review the impact of the 2016 capital investment strategy. - Seeking assurance that capital investment is aligned to implementation of the Local Plan. 	Capital Investment Strategy Schools investment programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of Education, Skills and Learning
Safeguarding Children's 2022-2023 Partnership Annual Report <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scrutinise responses to questions to the independent scrutineer. 	Partnership Annual Report Answers to questions submitted the Independent Scrutineer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Scrutineer, Herefordshire Safeguarding Partnership

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26 March 2024 **report deadline 18 March 23**

Topic and Objectives	Evidence required	Attendees*
Looked after children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify the factors resulting in the current rate of children being looked after. - Further identify areas of focus for the committee to pursue. 	Current and historical numbers of children looked after by the local authority Comparison with statistical neighbours and other local authorities in West Midlands region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director, safeguarding
Corporate Parenting Board <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scrutinise the current constitution and activity of the corporate parenting board. 	Corporate Parenting Strategy Corporate Parenting Board agendas and minutes % care leavers who are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In suitable accommodation - in education, training or employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair, Corporate Parenting Board • Service Director Early Help, Quality Assurance and Prevention • Head of service, looked after children • Your Voice Matters representatives

*The Corporate Director, Children and Young People and Portfolio Holder, Children and Young People, both have a standing invitation to the meeting. It is assumed that the portfolio holder will attend each meeting.

Safeguarding children partnership annual report (January 2024)

