



**Department for Education  
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16 January 2015

Dear Jo,

Angela Windle and I would like to thank the Council's senior leadership team; Councillors; staff (in particular, Caroline and John for organising the focus groups and logistics); and partners, for contributing to the Departmental review on 15 and 16 December 2014.

Our discussions and the information you provided gave a comprehensive picture of improvement and impact since the Improvement Notice was issued in February 2013. A summary of our key findings is attached at Annex A, and I would be very grateful if you could arrange for this to be shared with all those concerned.

Our overall assessment is that the Council has made good progress since we last visited in April 2014. This improvement has also been evidenced by the outcomes of the recent Ofsted inspection and the LGA diagnostic peer review of the LSCB in November.

It was evident that pace has increased since the last DfE review and that the senior management team continues to drive change throughout the service. The workforce demonstrated confidence, strength, and passion in their commitment to effective safeguarding practice.

We heard your plans to create the conditions for success and to be a learning organisation with a stable and experienced leadership team. We heard how you plan to improve practice by further development of management oversight

and timely decision making; improved management confidence; clear evidence of the voice of the child through assessment; meaningful and valued supervision; and building resilience in the system to embed confidence, challenge, and escalation.

We heard that there is cross-party political support and commitment to improving children's services and it was good to hear that funding will be protected and that leaders show an active interest in the work of front-line social work teams. There were strong messages from leadership that safeguarding and child protection practice in Herefordshire would not be allowed to slip back as it has in the past; and that improvement is on a long term course to get to 'good'.

There were a number of key messages we wanted to share with you, these included a strong sense of delivery and drive in the MASH; a workforce that feels safe and which is clear on its role; and a culture of improvement and consultation is now evident. Staff reported that management oversight and supervision had improved and that there were now opportunities for training and development and movement between teams to augment and strengthen learning. Managers, some staff, and partners now have regular access to performance data and the various audit processes are starting to embed.

Staff continued to welcome the visibility of the Lead Member, Councillors and senior staff and the recent stability at management level. Overall staff reported morale as good, and were proud to be part of the service improvements and seem optimistic for the future.

Partners were positive about the recent pace in improvement and the MASH. They valued council investment in children's services and in Frameworki, and welcomed the increased level of challenge, improved data reports and partners feeding back information from their agencies. There is now stronger group partnership working and effective working between the IB, HSCB and other Boards.

A number of key issues were raised during the focus groups. In particular, staff, and partners especially, need to understand the future vision and within that how you plan to get to 'good'. It is important to communicate clear messages and plans to all stakeholders on roles and responsibilities and what still needs to be achieved, and how. Concerns remain in some teams about the Business Support (BS) and what your internal review will bring, it seems that some teams have closer working relationships with BS than others and therefore levels of support are not equitable.

In the next phase of implementation we would expect to see, and therefore recommend, that:

- improvement work is fully embedded, sustained and becomes the standard for the Council;
- Herefordshire addresses the over-reliance of agency staff and aims for workforce stability at all levels;

- immediate plans are put in place to recruit a new HSCB chair and the necessary arrangements for a smooth handover are implemented;
- a clear plan for the transfer of Improvement Board work to the HSCB, Children's Trust, and the authority and partners is developed and agreed to ensure clarity of what responsibilities transition to where; which outlines your vision of getting to 'good', and when the intervention is stepped down will provide confidence to Ministers and stakeholders; and
- gap analysis on the performance data is undertaken which focuses on areas of non-compliance and offer explanations and solutions.

The Improvement Notice continues to remain in place until the Minister can be confident that the quality of practice and service performance is embedded and sustainable and, in particular, that transition arrangements from his Improvement Board to the HSCB are robust. We therefore look forward to speedy progress on the recommendations outlined above.

In the meantime, Angela will draw together messages from the focus group discussions, your self-assessment, the letter from Tony Johnson and the reports from Paul Curran and Dave McCallum in readiness to provide evidence of progress to the Minister.

I am copying this letter to Councillor Tony Johnson, Councillor Jeremy Millar, Councillor Attwood, Alistair Neill, Paul Meredith, Dave McCallum and Paul Curran.

Yours sincerely

**OLIVER BROOKE**

## Annex A

### **Herefordshire 18 month review – summary of feedback from focus groups**

#### Key positive messages

- The “Requires Improvement” rating from the last inspection feels right.
- SMT and Lead Members continue to be visible, approachable and supportive. This is valued by staff and partners.
- Senior management stability is welcomed but still feels new – staff would become concerned if this “unravels” as some contracts are due to end shortly.
- There are open communications and lots of dialogue. People feel listened to, consulted and included in changes and new ways of working - for example CHIPPS.
- There is increasing confidence in the figures, and the data being produced is much richer and more reliable – although some operational staff rely on management analysis rather than using the data themselves to better drive practice.
- Morale seems good and there is an evident passion within the MASH.
- Staff (including agency) have opportunities to move around the service, learn different practices and now have time to train – with some staff involved in delivering training.
- Caseloads remain at a manageable level but vary from team to team and within teams. It may be helpful to set a standard for each team as well as trigger points to identify where remedial action is required should these triggers be reached.
- Frameworki is improved, is more user friendly, and contains additional bespoke fields for capturing voice of child and CSE intelligence. Increased smarter use of performance data at many different levels internally and externally is welcomed. Partners were grateful for real, trustable data and noted that the Council’s financial investment in the system is clear.
- There is increased management oversight, supervision and audit – all fully “on the agenda” now.
- There is greater connectivity and communication between teams within the Council.
- Staff are now clear about what is required of them and case progression is much more effective as a result.
- The offer for social workers is good. The support and mentoring for NQSWs remains effective and well received. There are now opportunities for progression to senior SW roles and the Academy for growing your own is well supported.

- Partners reported more joint-working and increased challenge – both ways.
- People feel the service infrastructure is much stronger so that when processes and changes need making this can now happen quite quickly.
- Council commitment to the children’s service agenda is clear.

#### Less positive messages

- Some partners were unclear as to how the council would “Get to Good” in terms of what the next steps are and what that means for the future for the council and for their organisations, this will require further planning and communication of the vision.
- Changes at senior management level have been unsettling and potential for more changes is a concern to staff.
- Evidencing the child’s voice is improving but there is more work to do on embedding this across the system as the norm.
- Concerns remain over the internal Business Support function – some staff feel overwhelmed with “admin type” work, and are concerned that reduced administrative support will affect available time for reflective practice and training.
- Although caseloads are currently manageable, some staff had concerns over potential “caseload creep” and the effect on finding time to reflect, and undertake training.
- There are capacity issues with police partners, where presence is required across adult and children meetings/conferences/boards and attendance levels cannot be maintained.
- Partners are unclear about funding levels for the HSCB Business Support Unit moving forward.