

DRAFT

Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held at Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Thursday 19 December 2024 at 2.30 pm

Cabinet Members Physically Present and voting:

**Councillor Jonathan Lester, Leader of the Council (Chairperson)
Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst, Deputy Leader of the Council (Vice-Chairperson)**

Councillors Graham Biggs, Harry Bramer, Barry Durkin, Carole Gandy and Philip Price

Cabinet Members in remote attendance

Councillor Stoddart

Cabinet members attending the meeting remotely, e.g. through video conferencing facilities, may not vote on any decisions taken.

Cabinet support members in attendance

None

Group leaders / representatives in attendance

Councillors Clare Davies, Liz Harvey, Terry James and Diana Toyndee

Scrutiny chairpersons in attendance

Councillors Toni Fagan and Ben Proctor

Other councillors in attendance:

None

Officers in attendance:

R Cook, H Hall, C Porter, Russell and P Walker, S Gregory (Secretary),

38. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were apologies from Councillor Powell.

39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

40. MINUTES

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 November 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

41. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

No questions were received from members of the public.

42. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

No questions were received from Councillors for the meeting.

43. REPORTS FROM SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

There were no reports from scrutiny committees for consideration at this meeting.

44. **CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY**

The Leader of the Council introduced the report. It was highlighted that the strategy is raising awareness of an important responsibility that all members of the council hold. It was noted that this is a multi-agency document and strategy, and all partners will play their role in contributing to the delivery of this strategy. Whilst the legal requirement to be a corporate parent remains with the council (within the Children and Social Work Act 2017), it was confirmed that the Government have plans to widen responsibilities to all government departments and relevant bodies.

The corporate parenting strategy sets out the seven corporate parenting principles which local authorities must have regard to when considering looking after looked after children and care experienced young people. The open letter from Herefordshire's children and young people requested that the council consider how it will care and support them to achieve their aspirations. The open letter also highlighted that they want the council to keep to their promises as corporate parents, and the council can do this by doing all that it can to ensure the children have the best chances in life and by treating them as their own children.

It was noted that the Corporate Parenting Board worked hard to create the strategy, and the council is fully supportive of the strategy and of its role as a corporate parent.

Cabinet members discussed the report and it was noted that the plan was clear and well thought out. Particularly, the open letter from the care experienced young people highlighted that their voices had been heard and it was important to continue listening and responding to them. It was also highlighted that Herefordshire's care experienced young people had achieved attainment 8 scores, which was above the national average and 92% of care leaves were in suitable accommodation. It was noted that having the strategy helps supports the positive direction of reunification as 30 children had already been reunited with their families, with the care order being discharged in 2023/24, and this can only be taken as positive.

Group leaders gave the views of their groups. The report was welcomed and it was noted how important it was for all parties and partners to fully engage with it. Also, the inclusion of children's experiences in the strategy was positive. The commitment in the strategy to follow the recommendations of the 'The Cass Report' was also positive.

A query was raised regarding how the council will ensure it continues to deliver against the content of the strategy and continue to gather the voice of the children. It was also raised if the response to the young people could have been drafted in a more natural less formal style. Also, for appendices to have titles on their documents itself.

In response to the points and questions raised it was confirmed that the council will ensure that there is monitoring against all the achievable outcomes, and these will be built into the work plan. The process will involve children's participation to ensure the council is keeping to the strategy. Therefore, through participation, monitoring and ensuring the board is cited on all the objectives this will ensure the strategy is implemented and it will be an active document that is continually referenced. It was confirmed that this strategy will be placed on the agenda for full council, so it can be endorsed by all 53 members.

Councillor Lester proposed the recommendations, and it was unanimously resolved that the following be recommended to Council

- a) **Endorse the corporate parenting strategy 2025-2027 as approved by the Corporate Parenting Board (appendix 1)**

- b) Delegated authority be given to the Corporate Director for Children and Young People to take all operational decisions, as set out within this report and appendices, that fall within the responsibility of Herefordshire Council.**

45. OFSTED MONITORING VISIT FEEDBACK

The Leader of the Council introduced the report. The key points were highlighted, notably that the focus was on children at risk of extra familial abuse in the forms of exploitation and the visit reviewed the whole service, including the get safe team. It was found by Ofsted that children at risk of extra familial harm in Herefordshire benefited from a committed specialist team which reduced the risk to many of these vulnerable children. They found that the get safe team worked effectively to reduce risks from children and young people and their work was timely and well structured.

Ofsted recognised that staff formed trusting relationships with children and the quality of these relationships served as a positive foundation to reduce the risk to many children.

Regarding early help support and identification of risk, Ofsted found that there was a range of early help services available and for most children their needs and risks were promptly identified. In MASH these systems enabled the service to undertake prompt screening and allocation, through close work with targeted early help there was a coordinated approach to support children.

Regarding partnership working, Ofsted found that external partnership collaboration helped to protect vulnerable children through targeted interventions. Multi Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) meetings were held for all children identified as experiencing exploitation and Ofsted Families Partnership meetings provided a structured and multidisciplinary analysis, which led to reliable decisions about next steps. Ofsted noted that children and families were encouraged to attend MACE meetings which they noted increased their understanding and ownership of any planned intervention. Ofsted asked the council to consider how initial information from meetings could be more productive, and if parental and the young person's consent were obtained, if better engagement could be achieved. It was confirmed that the service will take this into consideration. However, it was acknowledged that some meetings required only agencies to be present.

Ofsted identified that children were engaged in their assessments and their plans. However, Ofsted noted that some of the plans presented as formulaic and would benefit from better use of the child's own words. It was confirmed that work was underway to provide more tailored plans, to reflect the verbal account that was given.

It was highlighted that Ofsted found that the child and family assessments received in other parts of the service had improved in their quality. Ofsted noted that these assessments were detailed and reflected the child's overarching need with an exploration of the risks to the child. Ofsted found the quality of these assessments led to effective protection, action and support. However, Ofsted found a small number of children with complex needs and who were in care had experienced placement disruption. This was causing delay and disruption in their needs being met and understood. It was confirmed that in response the service was undertaking a senior management led case review for each case, which will provide critical reflection challenge to ensure the council is identifying managing and minimising the risks. The reviews will include consideration of a change of plans to permanency by rehabilitation at home, provided it was safe and in line with the young persons and parents' wishes.

Ofsted recognised that the take up of missing from home and care interviews completed could improve but the ones completed were done in a timely manner and enabled the child to share valuable information.

It was noted by Ofsted that the revised judgement guidelines for case audits resulted in a more accurate understanding of practise. It was highlighted, that for the first time, Ofsted agreed with all the services own audit judgements. Ofsted acknowledged the quality assurance process was new but provided feedback regarding how the service could be more consistent. In response, the service developed a single record of the audit outcome which considered both the peer and the lead audit reports and identified case learning as well as service learning with regards to management and leadership.

Ofsted reported that since its last monitoring visit in February 2024 a new interim director for children's services had been appointed which had brought a renewed focus to the service. It was noted that a refreshed improvement plan was being implemented and there were early signs of improvement. It was confirmed that Ofsted found staff were consistently positive about the leadership of the new director for children's services and wider senior managers. Staff told Ofsted that they felt supported, they liked the training and development opportunities and felt well respected with an overall sense of improvement in the service.

Cabinet members discussed the report, and it was noted that the report was very positive, and it was good to see the directorate moving in the right direction. Thanks was extended to the directorate for all their hard work on the journey to date. It was hoped that staff working for the council felt positive about the training and development opportunities across all directorates, as it was important to emphasise that opportunities were not just available in children's.

Group leaders gave the views of their groups. The report was welcomed, and it was noted that good points were highlighted whilst identifying areas that still required improvement. It was positive that staff enjoyed working for Herefordshire Council. The children's services team were also congratulated on their progress to date. More structure around early help and what is mean by it would be welcomed. It was acknowledged there was difficulty with social worker turnover for some young people, but this area was being focused on. It was noted that scrutiny had taken an interest regarding quality assurance, capturing the voice of the child and how the service were evidencing the work in a meaningful way. Progress update on turnover of social workers, return home interviews and audits would be welcomed in due course.

It was queried what the service could do to improve management oversight, supervision of social workers and personal advisers to ensure progress was made in children's circumstances.

Disappointment was expressed as to how the report had been covered by the media.

In response to the query raised it was noted that the social worker needed to be mindful that a review of a case should consider the longer picture rather than a review at that point of time. It was confirmed that the service is going to develop a process where the case workers are providing three monthly case file updates which will include previous supervisions to provide a joined-up approach. This will ensure progress is made and there is a strategic and seamless approach to how the case is managed.

Councillor Lester proposed the recommendations, and it was unanimously resolved that Cabinet

- a) Cabinet receive and note the feedback from Ofsted Inspectors' Monitoring Visit letter, at appendix a.**

The meeting ended at 15:15

Chairperson

