

Supplement to the agenda for

Council

Friday 30 September 2022

3.00 pm

**Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4
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Agenda item no. 3 - Questions from members of the public

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
PQ 1	Name and address supplied	<p>My question is about the Herefordshire Children’s Services.</p> <p>What is Herefordshire Council/Children’s Services going to do about the children that have increased court ordered contact with their abusive parent after advice from the social and family worker? As you are aware family court follows the social and family workers advice against the safe parents advice of supervised contact.</p>	Cabinet member children and families
<p>Response: Thank you for your question. Legislation and statutory guidance are clear that decisions made by Judges within the family courts have to be made by considering what is in the best interest of the child, including with regard to matters of family time (contact). In order to come to such decision, the courts receive evidence from all parties including parent(s) and the Local Authority. Additionally, within family courts, children are independently represented by a Guardian who also provides evidence to assist the Judge in making decisions. The role of the Guardian is to review the Local Authority’s care plan (including contact arrangements) and to make sure that Local Authority arrangements and decisions for and about children protect them, promote their welfare and are in the child(ren)’s best interest.</p>			
PQ 2	Ms Currie, Hereford	<p>Where staff (past and present) are identified as having made mistakes or kept information out of official reports to support objectives sought by the local authority, will the Council be referring matters to the police, regulators and/or taking dismissal steps for gross misconduct? Will line managers be held accountable for either allowing this practice or failing to challenge staff on reports submitted? Withholding information e.g. failing to document kinship carer offers that are not SGOs and share internally and externally prevents natural justice from being achieved and is a form of fraud/misfeasance of public office. This behaviour undermines public confidence in the service and brings the organisation as a whole not just the department into disrepute.</p> <p>Children that have been adopted where failures are identified can make civil claims against the council how will you be making the children aware?</p>	Cabinet member children and families
<p>Response: Thank you for your question. All allegations against staff are taken seriously. Where there is evidence of misconduct or gross misconduct we will follow our HR procedures, making a referral to the relevant professional body and or external agencies as necessary.</p> <p>Where failures are identified and adopted children are involved, they will be contacted and supported through either Adoption Central England or through our own Adoption Support team, depending on the circumstances.</p>			

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PQ 3	Ms Gallagher, Hereford	In my case there were many delays, so many that practically all of the time during proceedings was used up waiting for assessments to be completed. This then meant there was no time to address any concerns and make changes needed. Why are parents not given the time they need to keep their children? Why are families punished for the social workers disorganisation and inability to adhere to timescales?	Cabinet member children and families
<p>Response: Thank you for your question. Whilst I cannot comment on individual cases, I am sorry that you experienced delays which can be caused by a number of things. Once families and the local authority are in court and proceedings are issued, there is limited opportunity to make changes as this is the period in which the Courts ask for evidence and assessment. Many assessments required by the Court are carried out by external and independent assessors and it is often their availability that can challenge the Courts' preferred timescale of completing proceedings within a 26-week period. The period where much of the preventative and support activity can take place with families is in the pre-proceedings stage where we work with families to try to bring about change so that going to court is avoided wherever possible.</p>			
PQ 4	Mr Griffiths, Hereford	I understand there is no longer a Domestic Abuse Hub running in Herefordshire, nor an individual with specialist knowledge and training around domestic abuse working within the MASH. The Ofsted report reflects under-developed partnerships and insufficient co-location or partnership resources within the MASH. The report also states the early help offer is limited and in particular, services to address domestic abuse. This is indicative that recent decisions made by the local authority in this regard, have been counterproductive, leaving a concerning gap in terms of knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse within Children's Services. According to recent statistics, the prevalence of domestic abuse in Herefordshire is significant, with many children suffering significant harm as a direct result. What is going to be implemented to address the issues around lack of resources/response to cases where domestic abuse is a factor?	Cabinet member children and families
<p>Response: Thank you for your question. The decision was made to incorporate the Domestic Abuse Hub into the MASH, any staff and resources have been absorbed by the MASH and have not been lost or removed. We continue to commission West Mercia Womens Aid to provide specialist support to those experiencing domestic abuse throughout the county, this includes the provision of specialist advice and support to the MASH hub. Going forward this resource will be utilised across both Early Help and MASH teams. Following the Ofsted inspection, MASH resources have been further strengthened.</p> <p>We have secured a bigger area for the MASH and this allows us to bring forward our plans to co-locate all key partners within the MASH. Training in respect of domestic abuse is available to all staff. In addition to this, multi-agency training is also offered by the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership to all partners, the most recent training took place on Wednesday 28 September 2022. We continue to work with our partners to provide support to those at risk of domestic abuse, details of which are listed on our Talk Community Directory. We recognise the gravity and impact of domestic abuse and continue together with our partners to further develop services to support families and victims of domestic abuse.</p>			

PQ 5	Ms Reid, Hereford	<p>There are sixteen “Measures that Matter” in the <i>Children’s Social Care and Early Help Improvement Plan 2022-24</i> (Version 2.0 May 2022, presented at the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee meeting on 26 July 2022). Numbers 1 and 2 relate to the caseload of social workers.</p> <p>For the below Measures that Matters, please give data for the following dates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quarter 4 of 2021-22 • July 2022 • Up-to-date number (and/or %) and state the relevant date <p>Number 6: “Number of unallocated cases” Number 10: “Proportion [%] of Plans considered to be Good or Outstanding” (<u>exclude</u> other grades eg “Requires Improvement”) Number 15: “We respond appropriately to complaints and service feedback from children [% <u>and</u> number] (measure number of complaints that are responded to within timescales)” Number 16: “The number of complaints we receive is reducing”</p>	Cabinet member children and families
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Response:

Thank you for your question. Measures that Matter are reported on a quarterly basis; information is shown for Quarter 4 21/22 and for Quarter 1 22/23.

Measure that Matters	Quarter 4 2021/22	Quarter 1 2022/23
6 – The number of unallocated cases in the service	30	27*
15 - We respond appropriately to complaints and service feedback from children (% number of complaints that are responded to on time within the reporting month)	65%	83%
16 - The number of complaints we receive is reducing (decreasing and low is good)	7	12

* For clarity, these are not the same cases. These are snapshot figures at a particular point in time. Any unallocated case at any point in time is rigorously risk assessed and is monitored by appropriate managers. There are several reasons why a case might be unallocated for a short period of time, including transfer between services and awaiting allocation, or change of worker.

Information requested in respect of number 10 deviates from the Measures that Matters and is listed separately below

Question	Quarter 4 2021/22	Quarter 1 2022/23
% of audited plans considered to be good	2%	7%

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

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
MQ 1	Cllr Carole Gandy, Mortimer	<p>Ofsted reports that most plans and planning are weak and do not ensure that children are sufficiently protected and that their lives improve. Most plans are too generic and do not relate to the identified risks for the individual child. Some centre around adult and tasks to be completed without defining the outcomes to be achieved for children or timescales to work towards.</p> <p>Were directorate managers too remote to be aware of this culture of behaviour and therefore complicit in the failure to adequately support children and families within our care, or was this a deficiency in the training of some of our staff?</p>	Cabinet member children and families
<p>Response:</p> <p>The reasons for the poor quality of practice in the service, including that of plans and planning are deep-rooted and varied. The Ofsted report clearly indicates a decline in the quality of social work practice over a number of years, specifically over the past four years and over a longer a period when one also considers the reports in 2012 and 2014. Directorate managers were not too remote to be aware of this, and it is through the efforts and presence of current directorate managers that more is known about the quality of practice, and performance in the service than was hitherto the case.</p> <p>Reasons include those reported by Ofsted inspectors such as staff turnover, weak guidance and a lack of management grip over a period of time. The report also points to a lack of scrutiny and focus by the council. Other contributory reasons include a poorly introduced model of practice, an electronic recording system that has not aided practice improvement and a lack of clarity about practice standards.</p> <p>Inspectors recognised small areas of progress from a significantly low base including the development of more accessible and more accurate data, developing the functionality of electronic case management recording systems and reducing caseloads. Inspectors also recognised that through the activity of the new senior leadership team there are plans in place, but that it is too soon to assess their impact.</p> <p>A decline that came about over a number of years is not turned around overnight. Significantly revised practice standards were published in the spring and we are confident that we shall see the quality of plans, and planning, improve.</p>			

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