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Jo Davidson
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14th August 2013

Dear Jo

Angela Windle and I would like to thank you, Councillor Johnson, Councillor Millar, Councillor Morgan, Councillor Robertson, Alastair Neill and others for attending the six month review meeting on 17th July to discuss the Council's progress since the Improvement Notice was issued in February 2013.

Please pass on our thanks to those who organised the day and all the staff and partner agencies who took the time to meet us during our visit. These conversations were extremely valuable in reinforcing our understanding of progress and it was good to see first-hand what a committed workforce you have. We promised to share with the people we met a written summary of the review findings and this is attached as an annex to this letter. I would be grateful if you would arrange for this to be shared with the staff and partners who gave us their views.

Angela and I felt that it was a very productive meeting and appreciated your open and honest assessment of progress. It is clear that a great deal of work had been done over the past nine months since the inspection to address issues raised by Ofsted and to put in place firm foundations. It was clear that partners and the HSCB are on board with the improvement plans. However, as we discussed there is still much to be done before the service is operating at the appropriate level.

The independent Chair of the Improvement Board, Paul Curran, was unable to attend the review but confirmed in his report that the improvement board had been well attended with the right seniority and that partners were committed to the improvement process. The leadership team has put in place systems and processes to address the weaknesses found by Ofsted, some very recent, and these will rightly take time to embed. He cautioned that the

biggest risk to progress was staff recruitment and retention and that the improvement plan remains very ambitious and recognised that it would be a challenge to deliver it.

Having held focus groups with a number of staff and partners, I gave a factual report of our main findings (please see annex). I covered a number of areas where we had heard very positive messages including: the new MASH; multi-agency training; staff feeling committed to doing a good job and welcoming being part of the improvement process. We also learned that staff have welcomed the improved visibility of the Lead Member, other Councillors and senior staff and would like this to continue.

As is to be expected a number of key issues were raised during the focus groups which we discussed in detail. The most pressing issue was the need to address the significant over reliance on agency staff and interim workers. We also discussed the issue of management consistency throughout the teams. It was clear from the focus groups that further work needs to be done to achieve a consistent management approach and oversight amongst the various teams. Whilst it was recognised that supervision was effectively working in some teams this was not the case across the whole service. The consistency (both within the Council and with partner agencies) of the application of thresholds was also highlighted as an area of concern. During the discussion you outlined that this was an issue the Council were aware of and were taking steps to address it. It is vital to the improvement process that thresholds are understood and consistently applied across the whole partnership. Finally we discussed that it was important to understand the effect that apparently small changes to working areas can have on the moral of staff.

Partners were also mainly positive of the improvements made to date, valuing the improvement measures that had been put in place and the engagement with you and the rest of the leadership team. In particular they welcomed the opportunity to be part of the Improvement Board and the opportunity to shape the improvement process and challenge where necessary. They were also pleased with the new ways in which the HSCB was working, with clearer performance indicators, new case audit processes and a robust training programme.

You gave a presentation about the improvement journey and shared your aspirations. Whilst recognising that there is still much to be done, to improve current practice, the timeliness of assessments and a reliance on agency and interim staff in key posts you outlined the key improvements which have happened during the last six months including:

- Improved corporate support from the council and strong member commitment;
- Strengthened case audit processes;
- Redesign of the Advanced Practitioner Service;
- The launch of the MASH. It was also pleasing to note that the MASH would include a new post funded by schools to address and coordination issues identified in the focus group with partners.

- New performance management arrangements.

You then outlined your key priorities for the next six months:

- Phase 2 recruitment campaign including plans for a Social Work academy (grow your own);
- Focussing the priorities of the Advanced Practitioner Service on improving the quality of case work;
- Ensuring that the voice of the child is heard; and
- The establishment of the MASH which you hope will address the issues of inconsistently applied thresholds and the timeliness we discussed.

It was pleasing to note during the discussion that the political leadership were committed to taking all the necessary steps to secure improvement. Alistair Neill outlined that as a result of this desire to address the short comings that a decision had recently been made to split the Director of People's Services role into two posts, so that you would be responsible solely for children's services.

Overall, we concluded that progress has been satisfactory over the first six months of the Improvement Notice. However, the scale of your plans to improve the basic quality of practice whilst relying on a high level of agency and interim staff remains a great challenge.

Over the next phase it should be a priority for the Council and partner agencies to continually test the impact of the changes through audits of frontline practice – something of which you are starting to do. We have noted the progress of the HSCB and expect it to pick up pace in order to deliver the necessary training and to have an unrelenting focus on the quality of frontline inter-agency practice.

The Council will need to maintain the pace and provide evidence of the impact on outcomes for children and young people. The evidence base which you are building should form a strong foundation upon which to do this. The next formal DfE review will take place in six months' time. In particular we will be looking at examining improvements in the quality of practice, consistency across the service and the impact of the MASH. The Department will continue to observe progress through attendance at the Improvement Board and looks forward to seeing evidence of the continuing improvements being delivered in Herefordshire.

I am copying this letter to Councillor Tony Johnson, Councillor Jeremy Millar, Councillor Patricia Morgan, Councillor Sally Robertson, Alistair Neill, Kathy O'Mahony, Julie Rzezniczek and Paul Curran.

Yours sincerely



DUNCAN WALLS

Herefordshire 6 month review – emerging themes

Positives

- Both staff and partners said that they are focussed on better outcomes for children. They could see signs of early progress and held a belief that real change is possible.
- Staff and managers acknowledge there is a very skilled and committed workforce in Herefordshire including interim staff and managers. The general feeling is that they work very hard and need to know they are valued.
- Recent multi agency training on CSE and Risk and Resilience was welcomed. The multi agency aspect was felt to be particularly helpful for networking purposes and understanding others roles and pressures.
- Staff said they welcomed improved visibility of the Chief Executive, Lead Member and Councillors, Jo and Heads of Service and would appreciate this continuing but on an informal basis (pop in for a cuppa) rather than “formal” meetings which take up too much time.
- Staff generally felt listened to and able to approach management and the leadership team.
- Staff said they were aware of the role of the Improvement Board and the Improvement Plan. They felt the right areas were being addressed and could feel a general “push” for change taking place, which was welcomed.
- There was a lot of positive energy around the new MASH.
- Managers are now getting decent performance data and the IT system has improved slightly.
- Communications were deemed to be generally good.
- A culture of celebrating “good” is developing.

Remaining issues

- High levels of agency staff churn were evidently having an impact on fellow permanent staff, partners and ultimately children and families.
- Lack of permanent managers was causing morale issues in some of the teams.
- Caseloads were reported as unmanageable across all teams (with the exception of NQSW case loads).
- Many staff work more than their contracted hours, including weekends.

- IRO caseloads are too high.
- Supervision was said to be inconsistent across teams and focussed on cases rather than being reflective and tailored around personal needs.
- Staff asked for more focus on training and development and a proper induction process.
- It was important to staff to feel valued and sometimes the "small things" make a difference, ie. ability to park at/near to work, having a desk of your own and access to water in the office.
- Although case audit procedures are now underway as part of the HSCB role, staff are not engaged in the process or getting feedback.
- Thresholds are still not understood within the council and across all agencies.
- There is no longer a co-ordination point for Education making communications difficult and the agency vulnerable.