

MEETING:	CABINET
MEETING DATE:	19 SEPTEMBER 2013
TITLE OF REPORT:	HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL, SAFEGUARDING ARRANGEMENTS FOR CHILDREN: SIX MONTH REVIEW REPORT FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
REPORT BY:	INTERIM HEAD OF IMPROVEMENT
CABINET PORTFOLIO:	CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

1. Classification

Open

2. Key Decision

This is not a key decision

3. Wards Affected

County-wide

4. Purpose

- 4.1 The purpose of this report is to inform members on the progress of improvement planning in children's safeguarding resulting from the self-evaluation undertaken and reported to the Department of Education in July, 2013 in relation to the Herefordshire Safeguarding and Protecting Children Improvement Plan.

5. Recommendation(s)

THAT:

- (a) the report be noted; and
- (b) a further update report be provided in three months' time.

6. Alternative Options

There are no relevant alternative options.

7. Reasons for Recommendations

- 7.1 To ensure that Cabinet are fully informed and able to challenge the progress of improvement planning in line with the Department of Education expectations and requirements, in relation to arrangements for safeguarding children.

8. Key Considerations

- 8.1 Immediately following the September, 2012 Ofsted inspection of arrangements to Safeguard Children in Herefordshire, the Council established a multi-agency Improvement Board. An Improvement Plan was developed in October, 2012 and updated and published, following receipt of the Improvement Notice in March, 2013.

- 8.2 The Herefordshire Safeguarding and Protection Children Improvement Board (HSPCIB) has been chaired by an independent Chair, Paul Curran, since November 2012. The Board has been attended consistently by a purposeful multi-agency group of partners, leading the implementation of the Improvement Plan.

- 8.3 An evaluation of progress to date is contained within the attached document. In summary however, the following areas highlight specific progress and areas for development:

Leadership and Governance

- 8.4 Ofsted drew attention to the quality and effectiveness of leadership and management arrangements. The Council has strengthened the political and corporate leadership and governance arrangements. The new Leader was elected in May 2013, and he has created a dedicated Lead Member for Children, Youth and Education Services. New Scrutiny arrangements are in place with a dedicated Health and Social Care Overview Committee; the vice-chair of that Committee leads the Scrutiny task and finish sub-group dedicated to developing member knowledge, understanding and challenge of children's safeguarding. Safeguarding Seminars have been undertaken with good engagement by elected members. Whilst these developments mark significant action, it is too early to fully evaluate the impact as yet.
- 8.5 The new Chief Executive started in March 2013. He has reviewed the Directorate structures with a particular aim to place renewed organisational focus on Children's Safeguarding. Assistant Director capacity was also enhanced in January 2013 which has ensured two full time permanent and experienced Assistant Directors are in place for Children's Services.
- 8.6 The Council's Cabinet has published a clear statement of Expectations for Safeguarding for further development with children and young people. Our Children in Care Council have supported this, making some specific changes. This will be used to guide the improvement and development of services. Advocacy services for children and young people have been enhanced through additional commissioned capacity although there is likely to be a need to enhance this capacity further.
- 8.7 There has been a strong multi-agency response by the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board. It has been restructured with enhanced quality assurance, training and case review arrangements in place. Case auditing in children's social care is now part of a systematic process linked in to the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board.

8.8 The immediate action required of the Council, to undertake an audit of all cases was undertaken by external auditors. By January, 2013 all 1440 cases had been audited.

No children were deemed to be at immediate risk. The quality of case work ranged from outstanding to inadequate, reflecting the same issues found by OFSTED. Robust follow up action was taken on all cases found to be inadequate.

8.9 The Advanced Practitioner service has been redesigned and is now fully staffed. Their focus is on supporting and improving frontline practice and management practice including assessment improvements, recording, care planning and ensuring the voice of the child is used and embedded into social work practice. Very well received multi-agency Risk and Resilience training is currently being rolled out.

8.10 The new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) has been operational from 22nd July 2013, and as it develops will address a number of improvement requirements in the Improvement Plan.

8.11 Performance management arrangements are being enhanced through the implementation of a new Frameworki reporting and alerts tool, CORIUS.

8.12 The first phase analysis of a 'child's journey' approach to early help and safeguarding has taken place to secure a more effective, targeted and efficient service. All staff will be engaged in finalising the model.

Challenges

8.13 The focus of the past nine months has been on establishing the basic building blocks for effective safeguarding practice. Whilst there is evidence of significant commitment and hard work from very many, there remain some fundamental challenges for us to address:

Recruitment and Retention

8.14 During the past six months, there has been significant turnover in front line and middle agency managers. The Council has recruited one new permanent Head of Service and one new permanent Service Manager, as well as four new agency service managers.

8.15 The MASH has 75% permanent staff, that is, three out of four; the current FAST has only one permanent member of staff and the Safeguarding and Review service has a 50% ratio of permanent staff to agency staff.

8.16 This is impacting on our ability to secure stable relationships with children, families and other organisations, and to see a sustained and embedded improvement in practice. This remains an issue both for timeliness and for quality. However, we are also clear that we will only recruit staff of the appropriate calibre.

8.17 Following initial recruitment and retention activity, the Council has provided additional strategic Human Resources capacity. This has led to an in-depth analysis of workforce issues, informed by staff, which was reported to Committee in July 2013. A stronger recruitment strategy is well in development, to be delivered in partnership with national recruitment specialists. We are also currently recruiting practice educators and some more newly qualified staff to ensure we build capacity in the longer term.

8.18 A retention plan is also nearing completion which will address issues such as pay, progression and the total reward offer.

8.19 Good agency staff have been taken on for longer contractual periods and there have been a small number of conversions of high quality agency staff to permanent posts. Recruitment of experienced staff and managers in social care remains our most fundamental challenge.

Practice

8.20 Evidence from Council and Safeguarding Board quality assurance shows there is still some way to go in securing consistently effective and high quality practice.

8.21 Following Ofsted, there was a significant growth in workload in all child protection teams, including the Looked After Children Teams. This was caused by new referrals and re-referrals, addressing some long-standing drift in cases and the work on audited cases. Teams have taken on additional staff to keep workloads manageable. However, the combination of volume of work, practice changes and training, 'clunky' technology and lag with permanent staff commencing has meant that improvements in practice overall are not being seen at the rate we would wish and in some teams such as FAST, performance is highly variable.

8.22 In the light of this, the service is in the process of refocusing and slimming down the Improvement Plan so that every member of staff understands it and is clear about milestones and expectations; refocusing the work of the Advanced Practitioners and, using learning from other good authorities, taking a more disciplined approach to the structure, pace and prioritisation of the work undertaken by the social care teams.

8.23 Now that Core Logic, the Frameworki software supplier, has delivered on the Corius upgrade to the performance information available for staff and managers, the shortcomings in the functionality of the casework system in relation to its usability for chronologies, and other fundamental practice issues, can be addressed.

Workload and morale

8.24 Despite additional resources, the social care teams are reporting significant challenges with workload. This is also reflected in some partner agencies. Since the Ofsted inspection there have been morale issues within the front line child protection teams. There has been a robust approach to performance management in teams which has increased pressure.

8.25 Some of the solutions to these issues relate to more efficient and effective working practices and tools, which are not yet fully rolled out. There is also a review of business support underway to ensure social care teams have the right support.

8.26 The Children and Young People's Partnership Forum (Children's Trust) has also acknowledged the need to be more ambitious for the collective approach to early help, to manage down the demand for specialised child protection services. This will be the focus of work for the Partnership in Quarter Two.

8.27 It is evident that there is a significant commitment being made by all staff and partners to achieve excellence in safeguarding in Herefordshire. There remains,

however, much to do.

8.28 Feedback from the Department of Education would indicate that we are appropriately on track with our Improvement Plan and taking this forward at a pace which is in line with their expectations. Our current expectation is that we could achieve an adequate inspection rating during 2014/15.

8.29 Ofsted have announced that they will be publishing their new inspection framework in September, 2013 and will not be carrying out any inspections until November, 2013. Meanwhile a peer review of children's safeguarding arrangements has been commissioned which will take place during the first week of October, 2013. This will act as a supportive but challenging 'critical friend' approach to assist us and our partners in celebrating strengths and identifying areas for improvement.

9. Community Impact

9.1 The improvements planned will lead to a positive impact on the most vulnerable children and families in Herefordshire.

10. Equality and Human Rights

10.1 By the nature of its work Children's social care services, in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to -

10.1.1 eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under this Act;

10.1.2 advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;

10.1.3 foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it."

11. Financial Implications

11.1 There are no specific financial implications to this report. However, the turnover in staff and increased reliance on agency staff have created financial pressures in year. The planned recruitment campaign will cost from £65k to £127k depending on the numbers of experienced qualified social workers successfully recruited.

12. Legal Implications

The Department for Education issued an Improvement Notice in respect of improving the Council's arrangements for safeguarding children. Failure to comply with the notice could lead to the Secretary of State for Education using statutory powers of intervention under s.497A Education Act 1996, directing the Council to enter into an appropriate arrangement to secure the necessary and rapid improvements required in Children's Wellbeing Services.

13. Risk Management

13.1 Risks related to the Improvement Plan are recorded on a risk register and the recruitment and retention of a stable workforce is a critical area related to the necessary improvements required in the Improvement plan and notice.

14. Consultees

14.1 Staff, health and school partners were consulted as a part of the formulation of this report.

15. Appendices

- 15.1 Appendix 1 – Six month review, self-evaluation report.
- Appendix 2 – DFE feedback letter.

16. Background Papers

- 16.1 None identified.