

Effective Scrutiny of Children's Services: training and development offer

Meeting: Children and young people scrutiny committee

Meeting date: Tuesday 12 October 2021

Report by: Democratic services manager

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

To review and approve the Local Government Association (LGA) scrutiny training and development offer.

As part of the LGA's continuing work to support political and corporate leadership for children's services, they are offering Herefordshire Council a training and development offer. This offer forms part of an LGA pilot to support councils to improve the effectiveness of their scrutiny of children's services.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) The committee reviews the LGA training and development offer, as set out in appendices A to C**
- b) Considers any recommendations it wishes to make to the LGA and/or the improvement board on the content**

Alternative options

1. Not to accept the training and development offer from the LGA. This is not recommended. The LGA provide bespoke and specialist training and development which is structured around the needs of different councils, and the modules that are most relevant to their needs. All modules will be facilitated by an LGA associate with significant experience of supporting councils with effective scrutiny, working with a Member with recent or current experience of children's services leadership.
2. To provide 'in-house' training. This is not recommended. The training offer from the LGA has been designed to support and strengthen the children and young people scrutiny committee and officers as part of the council's improvement plan journey. Further, the training offer provides the council with access to children's scrutiny 'experts' in other local authority settings where similar improvement journeys have been undertaken.

Key considerations

3. In March, a highly critical court judgement involving a child in the care of the Council (the YY case) was handed down by His Hon Justice Keehan to Herefordshire Council. This Judgement was not the first in which His Hon Justice Keehan had raised concerns regarding Herefordshire Children's Services.
4. Following this judgement, a Department of Education (DfE) approved independent improvement advisor (Ms. Gladys Rhodes White) has been appointed and Chairs a newly established Improvement Board. The Improvement Board is to ensure compliance with the non-statutory notice issued by the DfE. It is proposed a web page containing all minutes of meetings and information relating to board will be published. This board has developed an improvement plan to support the Council on our improvement journey.
5. Herefordshire Council has also sought external advice and support through the DfE, Ofsted and the Local LGA and has recently been successful in obtaining grant funding from the DfE (£215k) to provide additional expertise and capacity to support practice improvement.
6. Part of this improvement involves enhancements in scrutiny. As corporate parents, councillors have particular duties regarding the effectiveness and safety of children's services, and the Corporate Parenting Board and scrutiny should provide a mechanism for them to exercise these duties.

The Training Package

7. A training package is being developed to provide children's scrutiny committee members with a range of additional competencies and skills. This training is highly recommended to all scrutiny and non-scrutiny committee members.
8. Discussions with the children and young people scrutiny committee – specifically - has indicated that they wish to cover a range of training types. These include:
 - a. Bottom up training and support – where the basic elements of how the service works and operates are covered. Including providing a 'scrutiny committee' basic guide that includes a glossary of key terms used in the children's services sector and an outline of the processes that the service is required to report against to scrutiny..
 - b. Mid-term training – where specific training around the way the service operates is provided. This would allow scrutiny committee members to have detailed knowledge of the practices and processes carried out by the service, including any service standards that are required to be met.

c. Specific scrutiny 'practice training'.

9. In relation to 'c' above the council has been working with the LGA and the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) to develop a bespoke training package for the scrutiny committees.
10. The LGA, with their specialist knowledge in supporting children's scrutiny in other LA setting have designed a 'bespoke' training and development offer for the the children's scrutiny committee to consider. The full training and development offer is set out in appendix a to c. In summary, this training will focus on
 - a. Supporting scrutiny boards to identify strengths and areas for development using our self-assessment tool.
 - b. Using a mixture of workshop sessions, individual coaching and resources to improve the confidence and ability of scrutiny chairs and members to use their roles to have a positive impact on the lives of children and families.
 - c. Ensuring that the wider system of support around children's services supports and enables scrutiny to operate effectively.

Participation Scrutiny

11. It is important to the committee members that they can speak directly with children who have direct 'lived' experience of being in the care of the council. As part of the wider improvement plan work, the council is developing feedback processes to engage more Young People in their children in care reviews in order that they can be more proactive in planning. The participation service is being reviewed with a view to broaden the span of engagement with children and young people to ensure that they are not only engaged in their own individual plans but also have a voice in ongoing service development, review and improvement.
12. Further, the scrutiny committee membership have also noted that they wish to have opportunities to meet with and understand the role of our frontline social workers and other children's service support staff.
13. In conjunction with the training and development programme, children and young people scrutiny committee members will wish to explore how they can integrate these experiences in to the forward work programme of activities.

Additional training for all of the council's scrutiny committees

14. In combination with the LGA offer, the CfGS have been working up a further training offer for all of the scrutiny committees and supporting officers. The opportunity is being taken as part of this improvement to put in place changes to the operation of scrutiny more generally. In particular, to enhance the way that cross-cutting matters are considered by scrutiny committees and to increase the opportunity for broader engagement with scrutiny (through public engagement, co-option and the use of expert witnesses).
15. While still being worked up, the CfGS scrutiny training offer will seek to focus on:
 - a. enhancing councillors' confidence and capability on core scrutiny skills, including questioning skills and use of data and information;
 - b. enhancing the ability of councillors to be able to draw on the lived experience of people in the area (and particularly children) to inform and support their scrutiny work;
 - c. enhancing officers' ability to support councillors in carrying out these roles.

16. The proposal seeks to integrate training opportunities into the delivery of scrutiny's substantive work.

Training schedule

17. A training schedule, which will include key dates and times, will be prepared with support from the project management office. It is envisaged this training will commence later this year.

Community impact

18. The Children's Legal Improvement Plan feeds into the broader Council Children's Improvement Programme with the aim to safeguard and protect Herefordshire children.
19. The term 'corporate parent' means the collective responsibility of the council, elected members, employees, and partner agencies, for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for children who are looked after by the council. Being a good corporate parent means we should; accept responsibility for children in the council's care; make their needs a priority; and seek for them the same outcomes any good parent would want for their own children.
20. Corporate parenting responsibilities are not confined to elected members. All officers share the responsibility to promote the needs of looked after children. Key responsibilities of all officers are: to promote the life chances of looked after children and care leavers in their area of responsibility; and to consider the impact of decision making on looked after children and care leavers.

Environmental Impact

21. Whilst this report relates to back office functions and will have minimal environmental impacts, consideration has been made to minimise waste and resource use in line with the Council's Environmental Policy.

Equality duty

22. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to –

- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
23. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. As this is a decision on back office functions, we do not believe that it will have an impact on our equality duty.

Resource implications

24. There are no financial resource implications with the council accepting the LGA training and development offer. The LGA, under their contractual obligations and arrangements with the DfE fully subsidise their training and development programmes for local authorities.
25. There will be some financial and resource implications with the council providing all of the scrutiny committees with training and development via the centre for governance and scrutiny. The training package being prepared for the council is currently under consideration with final costs yet to be confirmed. Democratic Services holds the member development budget which will be the budget assigned to cover the costs of this training offer.

Legal implications

26. There are no legal implications with the matters discussed in this report.

Risk management

27. There are no risk implications with the matters set out in this report.

Consultees

28. None.

Appendices

Appendix A: LGA Training offer – effective scrutiny of children’s services

Appendix B: LGA Presentation – Introduction to effective scrutiny of children’s scrutiny

Appendix C: Effective Scrutiny Self-Assessment

Background papers

None

Glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.

- I. **The Local Government Association (LGA)** - the national voice of local government, working with councils to support, promote and improve local government.
- II. **The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS)** - is a social purpose consultancy and national centre of expertise. Its purpose is to help organisations achieve their outcomes through improved governance and scrutiny.
- III. **Department for Education (DfE)** - is the government department responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy.