

Title of report: Children Improvement Plan - Progress Update

Meeting: Children and young people scrutiny committee

Meeting date: Tuesday 22 February 2022

Report by: Corporate Director, Children and Young People

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

Children Improvement Plan – progress update

Recommendation(s):

That the Committee:

- a) **Reflect on progress following receipt of the non-statutory Improvement Notice in May 2021; and**
- b) **Consider areas of work for further scrutiny activity, reflecting priority actions.**

Alternative options

1. The Committee could choose not to review the progress of the Children's and Families Improvement Plan delivery but this is not recommended as the Scrutiny Committee has an important role in exploring pressures and dependencies relating to priority actions, and in identifying and reviewing mitigation for any risk and issues which might work against the council delivering improvements.

Key considerations

2. The [18 May 2021 DfE non-statutory notice to improve](#)
3. The [28 October 2021 Cabinet](#) decision to endorse the [Children and Families Strategic Improvement Plan v1.0](#)
4. Progress made since the last report to [this committee on 23 November 2021](#)
Improvement Board and Improvement Plan
5. The Improvement Board continues to meet, currently at a six-weekly interval, with the chair and vice-chair of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee now attending as observers.
6. The Board monitors progress against the Improvement Plan and of the initiatives supported by the recently-awarded Department for Education (DfE) Grant.
7. Measures for outcomes of the DfE funded work were agreed by the Directorate Leadership Team on 13 January 2022 and accepted by the DfE. The formal offer from the DfE has since been received.
8. As previously indicated, the Improvement Plan is currently being revised and an updated version will be presented to the Improvement Board in March. The updated version will carry-forward all ongoing and future activities detailed in the current version and will have a primary focus on outcomes to be achieved rather than activities to complete (as is the focus of the current version of the plan).

Performance and management information

9. An online performance and management information framework has been in development since early December and was made available to managers and leaders across the service on 28 January. This is a significant step forward for the service which has been largely reliant on spreadsheets and moment-in-time reports to date. The new framework updates overnight each day and allows managers to drill-down into team and individual worker level data at ease.
10. Over the coming weeks and months, the framework will be further developed to include data for Early Help, the Virtual School, and SEND.
11. The framework is being used in a range of performance and management activities and allows the service to be more responsive and alert to changes in data and performance and members of the Committee will receive a demonstration in a future development workshop.

Recruitment

12. The service, whilst remaining an active and committed member of the regional Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) group, has successfully negotiated a temporary exemption for all social work and team manager posts from the Regional Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which allows us to adopt a more flexible and responsive approach to recruitment of locums in the coming months. This has had an immediate effect of increasing the number of CVs received and interim appointments made in the first month of the New Year.
13. A number of key policy documents which have been developed over the past two months and which staff focus groups are currently being consulted on are expected to be signed off early in February and include a broad workforce strategy; retention and recruitment strategy; a policy for supporting Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs); and a learning and development strategy. These together will provide a firm foundation for the future with a clear focus on retaining, developing and growing our valued permanent workforce.

14. The two vacant Service Director posts (Early Help and Safeguarding, and Safeguarding, Quality Assurance and Improvement) are to be advertised later in February, and vacant Head of Service and Service Manager posts will be advertised shortly after.
15. A recruitment campaign including adverts in Community Care, a refreshed webpage, and increased social media activity also commences later in February.

Workloads and capacity

16. The service has seen an increase in demand (contacts and referrals) likely as a consequence of positive changes made to MASH and also the impact of recent high-profile cases in the national media in recent months and this has had a significant impact on workload in the Assessment Teams, with caseloads rising and increasing demands on management and supervisory capacity. Senior leaders have been working with the service and have brought in extra capacity to increase supervision, aid the flow of work through the teams, and thereby reduce workloads.
17. Two additional teams are being temporarily introduced to allow us to focus in on the Assessment Teams, assist them to reduce caseloads and improve the flow of work as well as the quality of assessments. The temporary teams will take all allocations of new cases for a period of four weeks and then remain until those assessment are complete with appropriate interventions in place.
18. Two project teams were introduced in November last year, with a focus on child in need work and have taken a significant number of cases from the Assessment Teams. We propose to retain this and other additional capacity increased last year for the remaining year and to open these interim posts to permanent recruitment, thereby reducing our reliance on agency colleagues over time.
19. Whilst caseloads in the assessment teams remain higher than we would like, average caseloads in the children in need, child protection and court, and children in our care teams are more manageable and as we would see in other comparable local authorities.
20. Managing Practitioner posts have been added to each of the four Assessment Teams to increase management and supervisory capacity and thereby also improve the timeliness and quality of assessments.
21. An additional short-term Head of Service post has been added to the Corporate Parenting service to add capacity and to assist with the development of initiatives necessary to speed up our improvement.

External support and review

22. External peer evaluation is welcomed by the service and we are currently negotiating an external Peer Review of our SEND provision.
23. Support from Telford and Wrekin children's services as a Sector-Led Improvement Partner (SLIP) has been negotiated, and supported by the DfE. The focus of initial support is on developing our quality assurance framework and building resilience in the service to support this activity going forward.

Community impact

24. The notice requiring improvement will have a direct and indirect effect on the lives of both current and future children and families in Herefordshire.

25. Keeping children safe is one of the most important things this council does and the details in this report support whatever action is required to ensure children and families receive the services they deserve.
26. The County Plan 2020-24 includes the ambition to '*strengthen communities to ensure everyone lives well and safely together*', specifically the Council aims to:
 - Ensure all children are healthy, safe and inspired to achieve;
 - Ensure that children in care, and moving on from care, are well supported and make good life choices; and
 - Protect and improve the lives of vulnerable people.

Environmental Impact

27. There are no specific environmental impacts arising from this report.
28. The work of the committee will be undertaken with consideration to minimise waste and resource use in line with the Council's Environmental Policy.

Equality duty

29. 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:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
30. The Equality Act 2010 established a positive obligation on local authorities to promote equality and to reduce discrimination in relation to any of the nine protected characteristics: Age; disability; gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. In particular, the council must have due regard to the public sector equality duty when taking any decisions on service changes.

Resource implications

31. There are significant revenue resource implications for the improvement work required. There are no expected capital resource implications.
32. The resource implications are not included in the base budget.
33. An additional resource of £5.2m across all services has been approved to fund both direct Children Services and Corporate Support Services.
34. An additional £1.7m DfE grant was approved in October 2021 to fund specific pieces of work in Children's Services to be delivered by 31 March 2022.

35. The Improvement Board will receive monthly reports to monitor spend incurred as part of the monthly DCS update.

Legal implications

36. The Council was issued with a non-statutory improvement notice by the Department for Education on 18 May 2021. To comply with this notice, the Council must adhere to a number of measures, which include
37. Secretary of State appointment of an Improvement Advisor. The Council will work with the adviser for a minimum of 12 months, and until such time that the Secretary of State is satisfied this is no longer required.
38. Implementation of an Improvement Plan.
39. Establishment of an Improvement Board with an independent Chair (to be set up and chaired by the DfE Improvement Adviser).
40. Officials or advisers from the DfE will undertake reviews of progress against the Improvement Plan at least every 6 months and more regularly where appropriate.
41. The DfE will offer dedicated improvement support through its Partners in Practice arrangements and may consider additional requests for support as part of the review process.
42. The Improvement Adviser will provide, to the DfE, 6 weekly reports of progress or concern against the areas set out in this notice; and progress against the improvement plan; and any other such information relevant to the improvement journey:
43. The notice sets out that the council should aim for actions included in the Improvement Plan to be delivered by the end of April 2022 or sooner, where appropriate. If there is a failure to comply with this notice, ministers may choose to invoke their statutory powers of intervention (s497A Education Act 1996) to direct the council to enter into an appropriate arrangement to secure the improvements required in children's services, potentially resulting in the establishment of a Trust.

Risk management

44. The improvement notice is clear that, should the council be unwilling or unable to comply with this improvement notice, or should ministers not be satisfied with the Council's progress at any stage, ministers may choose to invoke their statutory powers of intervention (s497A Education Act 1996) to direct the council to enter into an appropriate arrangement to secure the improvements required in children's services.
45. Statutory improvement notices could be issued and more critical or enduring underperformance may necessitate the use of Statutory Directions compelling the Council to take certain actions. In extreme cases the DfE can direct partial or complete outsourcing of Children Services to a third party or the establishment of a Children's Trust.

Consultees

46. The arrangements for governance of the improvement process, including the various individuals and bodies that will be briefed, are set out in the key considerations section above.

Appendices

47. None

Background papers

48. None

Glossary

Report Reviewers Used for appraising this report:

Please note this section must be completed before the report can be published		
Governance	Joanna Morley	Date 10/02/2022
Finance	Louise Devlin	Date 02/02/2022
Legal	Ruth Whittingham, Head of Law, Children & Families	Date 03/02/2022
Communications	Reviewer Group Communications	Date 14/02/2022
Equality Duty	carol Trachonitis	Date 04/02/2022
Procurement	Mark Cage	Date 08/02/2022
Risk	Chris Jones, Directorate Support Hub Manager	Date 02/02/2022
Approved by 14/02/2022	Darryl Freeman, Corporate Director Children and Young People Date	