

# Title of report: Children's Improvement Plan Quarterly Update

**Meeting: Cabinet**

**Meeting date: Thursday 24 February 2022**

**Report by: Cabinet member children and families;**

## **Classification**

Open

## **Decision type**

Non-key

## **Wards affected**

(All Wards);

## **Purpose**

To provide an update to cabinet on the children's improvement plan.

The Strategic Improvement Plan forms part of the council's response to the non-statutory improvement notice issued by the Department for Education (DfE) on 18 May 2021.

## **Recommendation(s)**

**That Cabinet Members review progress against the Children and Families Strategic Improvement Plan v1.0 ([Approved Strategic Improvement Plan](#)) following the 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021 DfE non-statutory notice to improve.**

## **Alternative options**

1. The Cabinet could choose not to review the progress of the Children's and Families Improvement Plan delivery but this is not recommended as Cabinet 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. Herefordshire Council maintains a strong commitment to improving performance in its children's social care services and outcomes for children and young people in Herefordshire more generally.

### **Overview of progress and impact.**

4. The focus of the service is now very much on the difficult and sometimes slow work of making sustainable change to practice, and to outcomes for children and young people. The Director and his team are tackling some complex and long-standing issues that started long before the High Court Judgement issued in 2021 and that will not be resolved overnight.
5. Progress which can be seen across the service is sometimes times slowed down by competing demands and the impact of other changes made as a part of the improvement programme. For example, decision-making and management oversight in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) were strengthened in October/November last year and this, together with the impact of recent high-profile national cases has meant that the service is experiencing a significant rise in the number of assessments started with rising caseloads in the assessment teams being a consequence.
6. At a meeting on 24 January 2022 the Corporate Director reported to the Improvement Board that whilst there is a great deal of activity underway there is also a risk that we might place too much pressure on some of our workforce unless we carefully measure and balance workloads against the need to improve at sufficient pace. It was reported too that some of the timescales in the original plan had been overly-optimistic and that whilst all activities were progressing, some that had been projected to be complete by March 31 2022 may slip. Progress against each element of the plan is monitored and challenged by the Improvement Board and by the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee.
7. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee will shortly be receiving reports on the workforce, including strategies to support retention and recruitment and our Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWS) as well as themes emerging from recent 'exit' interviews, and on performance. Key messages from these reports, and reports presented to the March meeting of the Improvement Board will be included in the next update report for Cabinet.
8. The strategic and operation plans endorsed by council in November 2021 were necessarily focused on activity rather than on outcomes, and the Directorate Leadership Team are, together with other stakeholders developing a revised version of the plan, to be presented to the Improvement Board as a draft in March which will bring the two plans into one single plan, and be driven by outcomes. This fulfils a previous commitment to the plan being a live document, which would be refreshed in spring 2022.

### **Council Governance and oversight**

9. Cabinet: It has been agreed that progress against the Improvement Plan will, from January 2022, be reviewed by Cabinet on a quarterly basis. Cabinet are responsible for overseeing the plan and ensuring the progress is made as set out in the improvement notice.
10. Cabinet briefing: Cabinet members will be briefed informally as part of the normal cycle of portfolio and cabinet briefings.

11. Scrutiny: It has been agreed that progress against the Improvement Plan will, from November 2021, be reviewed by the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee every two months. A forward plan for this activity is currently being developed. The Chair and Vice-Chair of CYP Scrutiny now attend the Improvement Board as observers.
12. Full Council: Reporting of progress against the Improvement Plan are expected to come to Full Council in March, July and October 2022.
13. All Elected Members will continue to be kept informed on a regular basis by invitation to a bi-monthly All Members' Briefing session.

### **Partners' oversight and engagement**

14. During the past three months, briefings have been presented to the Children and Young Peoples Partnership, and a group of Head Teachers, and updates have also been provided to the Designated Family Judge and to regional Ofsted inspectors.

### **Programme Management and Governance**

15. A new Improvement Lead was appointed on 6<sup>th</sup> December. The Improvement Lead provides extra capacity and support to the Directorate Leadership Team.
16. All five programmes of work within the Improvement Plan, namely:
  - Leadership and Governance;
  - Workforce;
  - Quality and Performance;
  - Right Help Right Time; and
  - Partnerships

now have an allocated Sponsor who will be accountable for their delivery, along with a comprehensive range of project management support in place supporting the many work streams sitting within the five separate programmes of work.
17. Work streams activities are now clearly defined and more work has been undertaken to determine the outcomes to be achieved and how these will be benchmarked and measured in order to clearly show progress and improvement.
18. The Operations Portfolio Board chaired by the Corporate Director met for its inaugural meeting in October. This Board will continue to meet on the third Thursday of each month and drives the operational activity.
19. A clear governance and reporting framework is now in place with workstream/project highlight and exception reporting now able to escalate upwards through their respective programme boards to the Operations Portfolio Board. These reports also inform the Director's report to the Improvement Board and updates for Members.
20. The Improvement Board continues to meet with the frequency of meetings altered to six-weekly (from monthly) for the period of January – March 2022. The Improvement Board continue to ensure compliance with the non-statutory notice issued by the DfE.
21. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) remains responsible for making the changes necessary to improve the services with support from the Corporate Director. Management Board continue to provide a check and balance to the plan and are advised of progress. The Resources Board continues to be in place to monitor spend and value for money.

### **DfE Grant Funding**

22. We have received official confirmation of the Grant offer and are now able to submit evidence of spend against the grant criteria and conditions.
23. All activity supported by the DfE Grant is progressing, with two project teams now in place, supporting the work of the assessment teams and focussing on child in need work. This is having the immediate effect of reducing caseloads in the assessments teams and driving improvement in timeliness of visits, frequency of supervision, and management oversight of assessments and plans.
24. Signs of Safety practice leads are also in place and are already contributing to a rapid review of Signs of Safety forms and supporting practice development in frontline teams.
25. Separate governance and reporting arrangements are in place to robustly monitor both spend, and impact, and will be summarised in future Improvement Plan progress reports to the Improvement Board.

### **Quality and Performance:**

26. The Director is leading activities to develop an online performance reporting framework, updated daily to support and assist managers and leaders in the service, and to inform service and practice development. A first version of this was made available to managers on 28 January and whilst focusing on children's social care initially will be further developed to incorporate performance and management information for early Help services, the Virtual School, and for SEND services.
27. Agreement has been reached with the DfE and colleagues from Telford and Wrekin, our Sector-led Improvement Partner (SLIP) about support that they can offer over the coming months to further develop our Quality Assurance Framework, particularly in training and supporting our managers to be able to undertake high-quality audits themselves, and to support our inspection readiness activity. Other support, for the future, will be focused on the further development of our frontline line managers.

### **Community impact**

28. The notice requiring improvement will have a direct and indirect effect on the lives of both current and future children and families in Herefordshire.
29. 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.
30. 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**

31. There are no specific environmental impacts arising from this report.
32. 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**

33. 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.

34. 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:
  - a) Age;
  - b) disability;
  - c) gender reassignment;
  - d) pregnancy and maternity;
  - e) marriage and civil partnership;
  - f) race;
  - g) religion or belief; sex;
  - h) and sexual orientation.
35. In particular, the council must have due regard to the public sector equality duty when taking any decisions on service changes.

## **Resource implications**

36. There are significant revenue resource implications for the improvement work required. There are no expected capital resource implications.
37. The resource implications are not included in the base budget.
38. An additional resource of £5.2m across all services has been approved (2021/22) to fund both direct Children Services and Corporate Support Services.
39. 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.
40. The Improvement Board will receive monthly reports to monitor spend incurred as part of the monthly DCS update.

## **Legal Implications**

41. 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 work with the DfE

Adviser for a minimum of 12 months, and until such time that the Secretary of State is satisfied this is no longer required.

42. 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**

43. 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.
44. 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.
45. 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. None

### **Appendices**

None

### **Background papers**

None

### **Glossary**

DfE Department for Education  
DCS Director Children's Services  
CEO Chief Executive Officer

### **Report Reviewers Used for appraising this report:**

**Please note this section must be completed before the report can be published**

Governance	Sarah Buffrey, Democratic Services Officer	Date 07/01/2022
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Finance	Louise Devlin, Finance Manager	Date 11/01/2022
Legal Improvement	Ruth Whittingham, Head of Law, Children & Families, Education and	Date 06/01/2022
Communications	Luenne Featherstone, Communications Manager	Date 12/01/2022
Equality Duty	Carol Trachonitis, Head of Information Compliance and Equality	Date 10/01/2022
Procurement	Mark Cage, Commercial Services Manager	Date 10/01/2022
Risk	Chris Jones, Directorate Support Hub Manager	Date 10/01/2022

Approved by Date 12/01/2022	Darryl Freeman; Corporate Director Children and Young People
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