

**Agenda item no. 4 - Questions from members of the Council**

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
MQ 1	Cllr Carole Gandy, Mortimer	<p>Ofsted reports that most plans and planning are weak and do not ensure that children are sufficiently protected and that their lives improve. Most plans are too generic and do not relate to the identified risks for the individual child. Some centre around adult and tasks to be completed without defining the outcomes to be achieved for children or timescales to work towards.</p> <p>Were directorate managers too remote to be aware of this culture of behaviour and therefore complicit in the failure to adequately support children and families within our care, or was this a deficiency in the training of some of our staff?</p>	Cabinet member children and families
<p><b>Response:</b></p> <p>The reasons for the poor quality of practice in the service, including that of plans and planning are deep-rooted and varied. The Ofsted report clearly indicates a decline in the quality of social work practice over a number of years, specifically over the past four years and over a longer a period when one also considers the reports in 2012 and 2014. Directorate managers were not too remote to be aware of this, and it is through the efforts and presence of current directorate managers that more is known about the quality of practice, and performance in the service than was hitherto the case.</p> <p>Reasons include those reported by Ofsted inspectors such as staff turnover, weak guidance and a lack of management grip over a period of time. The report also points to a lack of scrutiny and focus by the council. Other contributory reasons include a poorly introduced model of practice, an electronic recording system that has not aided practice improvement and a lack of clarity about practice standards.</p> <p>Inspectors recognised small areas of progress from a significantly low base including the development of more accessible and more accurate data, developing the functionality of electronic case management recording systems and reducing caseloads. Inspectors also recognised that through the activity of the new senior leadership team there are plans in place, but that it is too soon to assess their impact.</p> <p>A decline that came about over a number of years is not turned around overnight. Significantly revised practice standards were published in the spring and we are confident that we shall see the quality of plans, and planning, improve.</p>			
<p><b>Supplementary question:</b></p> <p>I thank the portfolio holder for her response. I note in particular the statement in the last paragraph “A decline that came about over a number of years is not turned around overnight.” However I listened into the cabinet meeting yesterday where a professional stated that it takes between 18 months and two years to show any real improvement and I agree with that. Yet the Council has had 18 months since the high court judgement, following by an extraordinary full council meeting in April 2021, followed by the annual meeting in May 2021 to put in place measure which should by now have shown some improvement. Instead, the service has deteriorated further to a point never seen before in Herefordshire. Can the portfolio holder explain why the past 18 months, which should have put us on the road to improvement, as stated by the profession, has in fact produced this devastating</p>			

report. What confidence can the residents of Herefordshire have that the next 18 months will be any different to the previous 18 months and secondly what efforts will be made going forward to ensure that all members are kept regularly informed of progress or non-progress within Children's services.

**Response to supplementary question (Cabinet member children and families):**

Thank you Cllr Gandy. I know you care very deeply about this issue, I am always prepared to have a conversation with you about it. Her question is completely reasonable and I agree that it has taken too long to make changes. Some of the basic structures have not been in place to allow our staff to do their best work; that takes a long time to put in place. Not all the right people were in the right positions which took too long. A difference now, which was lacking in the past, is that there is more clarity for all of us about where we are and where we need to go. More resources and more ambition. I share Cllr Gandy's impatience and we will be judged on our results.