

Children's Improvement Plan

Meeting: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date: Tuesday 13 December 2022

Classification

Open

Report by: Cabinet member children and families;

Decision type

Non-key

This is a non-key decision because this is being considered by a scrutiny committee, which will not make any executive decisions on this matter, but may make recommendations to Cabinet.

The Cabinet is later expected to make key decisions on this matter. A "key decision" is likely to be significant having regard to: the strategic nature of the decision; and / or whether the outcome will have an impact, for better or worse, on the amenity of the community or quality of service provided by the authority to a significant number of people living or working in the locality (two or more wards) affected.

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to present cabinet with the Children's Services Improvement Plan for authorisation to submit the plan to Ofsted following the inspection in July 2022.

Recommendation(s)

That the Improvement Action Plan outlined in Appendix A be noted.

Alternative options

1. To not submit the plan to cabinet for endorsement and authorisation to send to Ofsted – this is not an option as it would put the council at significant risk by not having a plan to deliver the necessary improvements following the Ofsted judgement of inadequate in all areas of Children’s Services.

Key considerations

Background

2. The Honourable Mr Justice Keehan delivered a Judgement (26 March 2021) with leave for the same to be published that identified serious failings in Herefordshire Council children’s services.
3. Full council unanimously supported on 27 April 2021 the establishment of an improvement board as part of the assurance and improvement strategy following the High Court judgement.
4. On 18 May 2021 the Department for Education issued the Council with a [non-statutory improvement notice](#).
5. A Focused Visit by Ofsted in July 2021 identified shortfalls in the capacity of Social Workers, inconsistencies in social work practice and insufficient management oversight and supervision. The previous inspection by Ofsted in 2018, and each focused visit since, has raised similar concerns. The focus visit in July 2021 also criticised the lack of pace to achieve the required improvements.
6. An independent audit project, commissioned by the Chief Executive, concluded on 21 December 2021 having audited in excess of 1,000 cases allocated to Early Help and Children’s Social Care Services. Whilst none of the audit outcomes raised serious safeguarding concerns about the imminent risk of harm with children and young people that required immediate action, the majority of audits were judged to be ‘Inadequate’ or ‘Requiring Improvement’ to be good.
7. At the [28 October 2021 Cabinet](#) there was a decision to endorse the Children and Families Strategic Improvement Plan v1.0. Following this publication cabinet received an update about the improvement plan in May 2022 and version 2 was subsequently endorsed.

Current Situation

8. Children’s Services was inspected by Ofsted in July 2022 under the Inspecting Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) framework.
9. The inspection report was published on 21 September 2022 and is available [here](#).
10. The Secretary of State issued a [Statutory Direction](#) to Herefordshire Council on 21 September 2022, and appointed a Commissioner for Children’s Services.
11. The overall judgement was that Herefordshire Children’s Service is ‘inadequate’. The judgements contributing to this outcome are as follows:

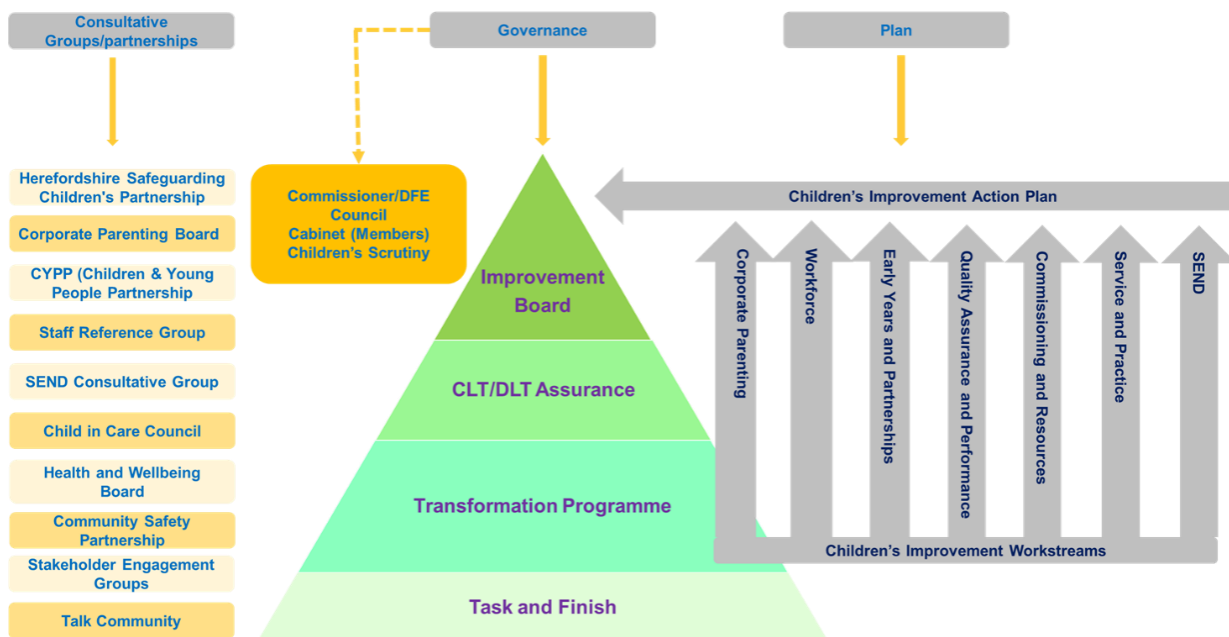
Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Inadequate
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Inadequate
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Inadequate
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate

12. At the time of the inspection, the service was already developing a number of practice priorities and was focussing on addressing some wider systems issues. The service has increased the pace of this activity and in order to realise the vision and aspiration for improved children's outcomes, a comprehensive transformation of services is required to achieve the long-term and sustainable changes that local children, young people and families in Herefordshire need, deserve and expect.
13. Appendix A is the Improvement Plan that is required to be submitted to Ofsted 90 days after the judgement has been received and this is 20 December 2022.
14. Once finalised and submitted, a version will be produced for children and young people early in the New Year.

Development of the plan

15. This Improvement Plan (Appendix A), hereinafter referred to as the Plan, has been prepared in collaboration with a range of stakeholders including children, young people, parents and carers, the workforce and multi-agency / cross sector partners. Some of this engagement has been very challenging, particularly given the impact and legacy of inadequate service delivery. It has been necessary to do this however so that we can confront and abate the current problems and make improvements as quickly as possible. We intend to continue engaging with our stakeholders to further develop a local conversation whereby we will listen, address feedback and take appropriate action as an integral part of our improvement journey as we move forward.
16. The plan sets out the first phase of the post-inspection improvement activity as a direct response to receiving the inspection feedback and report. It focuses on the next 12-18 months although the transformation activity will necessarily take longer than this and the plan will be reviewed, refreshed and further developed as required. Having accepted the service's shortcomings, the focus is on doing what is required to deliver safe and effective core services as quickly as possible. This builds upon the activity undertaken before the inspection to diagnose the extent of existing weaknesses and is followed up with a focus on strengthening core systems, clearing backlogs, securing thresholds and stabilising the service. The service will continue to work at pace and in partnership to problem solve and assure the quality of practice moving forward.
17. The overall transformation programme has a number of projects, focusing on workforce, service and practice development, performance and quality assurance, commissioning resources, early help and partnerships, corporate parenting and special educational needs and / or disabilities (SEND). The corresponding project plans have all been reviewed and aligned to address the high level actions for each of the priority improvement areas identified by the Ofsted inspection, and the recent Local Government Association SEND peer review. A diagram outlining the governance arrangements is included at paragraph 19 and outlines the relationship between the Transformation Programme Projects and the Improvement Board.

18. The improvement activity will be supported and driven by strengthened performance management and quality assurance arrangements, with clear lines of accountability that are overseen by single and multi-agency governance arrangements reporting into Herefordshire's Improvement Board, which is independently chaired by our Department for Education (DfE) Improvement Advisor.
19. We will be reflective and embrace the learning opportunities that are afforded to the service from working in partnership with the appointed Commissioner, Sector Led Improvement Partners and through an open dialogue providing support and challenge by our colleagues in the DfE and Ofsted.
20. The diagram below sets out the relationship between all the different elements of the improvement planning and governance process. The base of the pyramid (coloured in yellow) identifies a range of task and finish groups that focus on the operational practice and performance priorities. These are directed by and report into to the seven delivery projects within the transformation programme. These seven delivery projects have refreshed plans to ensure all areas of improvement are addressed. Internal assurance for the transformation programme is provided by the Directorate and Corporate Leadership Teams and all the improvement progress and updates are reported into the Improvement Board. This activity is informed by several consultative groups and partnerships (outlined on the left hand side of the diagram), including the council's internal overview, scrutiny and decision making processes.



21. To ensure that improvement activity is focused, well-coordinated, progressing at pace and having the desired impact to improve outcomes for children and young people, the Children's Improvement Board, which is independently chaired by a Department of Health Improvement Advisor, will meet and report on a monthly basis.
22. The progress reporting will provide a rating to determine if improvement activity is both on track and delivering the right impact to improve outcomes for children and young people. The ratings will be informed by the progress reporting of activity as well as analysing quality assurance and performance reporting.

23. Corporate senior responsible officers and the project management office will work together with the Improvement Director, Service Directors and the Corporate Director for Children and Young People to ensure a collaborative operating model that delivers the improvement requirements.
24. Herefordshire Council continues to have a strong commitment to improving performance in Children's Services. Transformation of the service is in its second year, of a three year programme that commenced in October 2021 following the publication of the first version of the Improvement Plan and a further refresh is expected in December 2023.
25. The aims of the transformation plan remain the same which are:
 - a. Improving outcomes for children, young people and their families.
 - b. Making working in Herefordshire an attractive and rewarding career choice.
 - c. Embedding systemic partnership approaches and exploring alternative models of delivery.
 - d. Making the service financially viable for the future across a range of services the Council delivers.

All of these are underpinned and driven by improvement across the system of practice, management and leadership.

Community impact

26. The Ofsted inspection judgement of 'Inadequate' has a direct and indirect effect on the lives of both current and future children and families in Herefordshire.
27. The County Plan 2020–2024 includes the ambition to 'strengthen communities to ensure everyone lives well and safely together' and more specifically, the council aims to:
 - a) Ensure all children are healthy, safe, and inspired to achieve;
 - b) Ensure that children in care, and moving on from care, are well supported and make good life choices;

Environmental Impact

28. There are no specific environmental impacts arising from this report.
29. The transformation activity will be undertaken with consideration to minimise waste and resource in line with the Council's Environmental Policy.

Equality duty

30. 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.

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

In particular, the council must have due regard to the public sector equality duty when taking any decisions on service changes.

32. Children and young people who are assessed to be 'in need' of support, protection and care are additionally vulnerable, often as a result of abuse, neglect, exploitation and a range of personal and family circumstances.
33. As individual improvement projects and service delivery progresses, and changes are designed, equality impact assessments will be undertaken, as necessary and appropriate.

Resource implications

34. There are no resourcing implications to this decision report.
35. The resource implications of the transformation programme have been outlined in separate reports to Cabinet.

Legal implications

36. There are no additional legal issues to bring to the Cabinet's attention which are not already mentioned in the report

Risk management

37. The following risks have been considered

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
Partnership buy in to the plan – recognising a joint responsibility to deliver an improved childrens services	Extensive partnership engagement activity and involvement, focus groups with children and young people and key stakeholders. Quartely partnership summits
Plan is not adopted or endorsed	Continuous engagement throughout the development of the plan and the governance process. Engagement with CLT, DLT, Improvement Board, the commissioner and the DFE.

Consultees

38. A large number of partners has been consulted whilst the plan has been in development. These are listed below:

Group	Date
Foster Carers	4 November 2022
Police and Health Colleagues	4 November 2022
Education Partners	4 November 2022
Children’s Services Workforce	3 November 2022
Voluntary and Community Groups	3 November 2022
Child in Care Council	3 November 2022
Children’s Directorate Leadership Team – Operational Board	28 November 2022
Children’s Assurance Board	16 November 2022
Corporate Leadership Team	29 November 2022
Improvement Board	1 December 2022
Children’s Scrutiny Committee	

Appendices

Appendix A – Children’s Services Improvement Action Plan

Background papers

A – Improvement Plan for Children and Families V1 – October 2021 - [28 October 2021 Cabinet](#)

B – Tranche 1 Cabinet Paper - [March 2022](#)

C – Tranche 2 Cabinet Paper - [November 2022](#)

D – Council Report – April 2021 - [April 21 Council Meeting](#)

E – Non-Statutory Improvement Notice - [Non-statutory Improvement Notice](#)

F – Ofsted’s Recent Publication - [Ofsted Inspection Report](#)