

Additional Questions for Scrutiny on Improvement Plan

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
	David Barrett	<p>Following several press releases stating that HCS have changed dramatically for the better in the last three months and are moving at Pace to deliver the plans needed. I suggest they have not and invite the councilors and media to view the evidence I have to prove this.</p> <p>Press releases went so far to say there has been consultation with the families, ACB disagree with this statement, as the barest minimum is offered. Louise Tickle tweeted the councillors' responses in October following contacting them for Panorama. ACB members will release the responses we've had since if we have even had a response.</p> <p>There's been little than empty words offered by this Council for families damaged permanently by failings. Words aren't enough!</p> <p>Please can you advise how much money you are setting aside for compensation claims relating to this outrageous behaviour?</p>	
<p>Response:</p> <p>Improvement activity has been supported by performance management and quality assurance arrangements which are overseen by single and multi-agency governance arrangements including Scrutiny, Cabinet and the Improvement Board, which is independently chaired by Gladys Rhodes-White who is our Department for Education (DfE) Improvement Advisor. Additional independent oversight or progress is further provided by the Secretary of State appointed Commissioner Eleanor Brazil.</p> <p>Any claim for compensation is reviewed on its own merit and reparatory action is taken as appropriate. We currently do not have monies specifically earmarked for any potential future compensation claims.</p>			
	Hannah Currie	<p>There are some very bold statements made as part of this new plan for improvement, which needs to be fully unpicked by the scrutiny committee and not be taken at face value as previous plans appear to have been:</p> <p>The children and families have more frequent contact with their social workers. Social workers have lower caseloads and better supervision.</p> <p>Given the proven pattern of behaviour to omitt key information (Keehan and other cases) are scrutiny satisfied, these appointments are sustainable permanent staff or spin-doctoring.</p>	

		<p>I want to know how many social workers does a child have allocated over a 2 year period (in 2016/2017 one child is proven to have had 13 in less than twelve months, in 2022 8 is frequent) and what percentage of children have had a social worker change in the past three months?</p>	
<p>Response:</p> <p>When a referral is received the first social worker from the Assessment Teams will complete the assessment before transferring to a second social worker who will support the child when subject to a Child in Need or Child Protection Plan. Should the child come into care, a third social worker from the Children in Care team is allocated. As such it is not unusual for a child to have two or three different social workers over a period of two years or for a child to have a change in allocated social worker in the preceding three months.</p> <p>We do not hold the data for 2016/17 and to go back to determine the answer would take up a considerable amount of time and resource. As at 09/12/2022, 43.8% of children open to social care have had more than one allocated social worker in the previous three months. The average number of allocated social workers for children who have been open to social care for the previous two years is 3.7.</p>			
	<p>Rachel Gallagher</p>	<p>Members of the public were made aware of some truly shocking cases handled by Herefordshire childrens services by judge keehan and Panorama. There was uproar about twins being separated for adoption by a report being changed.</p> <p>The improvement plan states nothing about improving the bond and relationship between siblings that have been separated, it doesn't even state anything about not splitting sibling groups up. Does this council plan on continuing to sever sibling bonds for adoption or will the amount of permanently broken families within Herefordshire increase? Also, when they have separated siblings, will they get to meet each more than twice before never seeing each other again?</p> <p>This question is for a scrutiny meeting regarding the improvement plan for children's services.</p>	
<p>Response:</p> <p>We work hard to ensure that the permanency plans for children are the most appropriate, proportionate and in the best interests of the child.</p> <p>Plans might be for a return home to families with support, long-term fostering or for some, a plan for adoption.</p> <p>In order for a child to be adopted a Placement Order needs to be granted by the courts. For 2021/22 the percentage of children who ceased to be looked after because a Placement Order was granted to Herefordshire had fallen, and was in line with that of our statistical neighbours and the England average.</p>			

Whether or not to keep siblings together is a significant consideration in any plan for adoption and the court will expect that this has been properly assessed. In the event that siblings are separated, their ongoing relationship and contact is also considered and assessed

Permanency plans, including the frequency of family time to see siblings, for children who are separated and adopted will have been subject to care proceedings in which a judge weighs the evidence available and grants orders based on this. During care proceedings children are represented by a Guardian whose role it is to ensure local authority arrangements and decisions protect the child(ren), promote their welfare and are in their best interests.

	Maggie Steel	<p>The focus of the Children’s Commissioner and Council leadership is on creating a new, improved service for Children and Families. Improvements to the service are important and necessary.</p> <p>Many families already harmed by the long history of inadequate Children’s Services have seen no changes on the ground. Their needs and their voices are still being ignored.</p> <p>Families affected by historic failings feel abandoned. The same old patterns of the past are alive and well. They feel that in the quest for “Improvement” what has happened to them, and what is still happening to them, is being brushed under the carpet. If the Council cares about these families, surely it is time to stop defending the indefensible and invest in the urgent appointment of an independent body to mediate between families and the departments they say have harmed them?</p>	
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Response:

Both officers and counsellors have met with some of the families who have felt dissatisfied, although we recognise that this is still more that we must do meaningfully listen to and work with families. There has been acceptance and public apologies for the way children and families have been let down historically.

Our social workers and managers do their best to support families and protect vulnerable children and we continue to see positive changes from a very low base. We know that our practice and processes need to continue to change and improve, as set out in our refreshed Improvement Plan.

Progress made will continue to be scrutinised and reviewed by a number of independent and external structures such as the Secretary of State appointed Commissioner, the Department for Education, Ofsted and our independently chaired Improvement Board.

	Teresa Fenner	<p>Please can this scrutiny committee look at what is being done to improve the working conditions of our County’s Foster Carers ? As a former Foster Carer for many years, having been forced out because of a less than acceptable moment when under severe pressure and realising the dishonesty of reports made about me I worry that Children’s services are struggling to recruit the best of people to this very wonderful but stressful profession without huge improvements to the support given.</p>	
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<p>Response:</p> <p>By providing a safe, loving environment for the children in their care, foster carers make a real difference to vulnerable children in Herefordshire. The retention and recruitment of foster carers is an ongoing challenge for local authorities including Herefordshire. We have recently appointed a new recruitment manager in respect of foster carers and we are currently reviewing our foster care recruitment and retention strategy and plan. We are also reviewing the current fees and allowances for carers.</p> <p>A dedicated recruitment campaign to attract more foster carers is planned and will be launched in the spring of 2023. We working to expand our training offer for foster carers and we are recruiting a Clinical Psychologist to support foster carers.</p> <p>We need a range of different foster carers from overnight short-breaks to long-term foster care; for more information please visit Foster with us – Herefordshire Council</p> <p>We continue to collaborate with multi-agency partners to further develop an Early Help offer for families. Recently, services and organisations including from the voluntary and community, and faith sectors attended two “World Café” events to consider how we can work together differently to provide earlier help and support to children and families. Follow-up events are being planned for early in the New Year.</p>			
	<p>Melissa Portman - Lewis</p>	<p><i>This question is about Section 10 of the Draft Improvement Plan for Children’s Services: Services to support children and young people with Special Educational Needs and / or a Disability (SEND).</i></p> <p><i>The content of the Draft Improvement Plan focusses heavily on improving processes and paperwork. Children, and outcomes for children, barely feature. There is nothing about listening to, working closely in partnership with or supporting carers - a critical part of improving outcomes for children with SEND.</i></p> <p><i>The plan is focussed on the timely production and completion of paperwork. There is scant reference to quality assurance processes and implementation reviews.</i></p> <p><i>The families of A Common Bond SEND children are still being ignored and their SEND children’s needs are still not being met. Culture change is badly and urgently needed. Is culture change possible without a change of leadership? “</i></p>	
<p>Response:</p>			

In October 2022, the Local Government Association completed a Peer Review of our Special Educational Needs and / or Disabilities (SEND) which was commissioned earlier this year by the new leadership of the service and we have included SEND in our refreshed Improvement Plan as an acknowledgement that our local SEND partnership strategy needs to be developed and strengthened and that we need to review and improve the effectiveness of our collective resources.

Following the High Court judgement, a new Chief Executive and a new leadership team within children’s services was appointed. Improvements, including positive cultural changes, are being made but we know that we need to continue this and are working hard to deliver our refreshed Improvement Plan which ultimately will result in better services to the children and their families of Herefordshire.

	Ms Reid, Hereford	<p>The Children’s [Services] Improvement Plan report for the 13/12/22 CYPSC meeting states:</p> <p>“This Improvement 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. ... 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.”</p> <p>However, the list of consultees does <u>not</u> include any birth families consultees.</p> <p>Please outline the ways in which birth families have been consulted when drafting the Plan and how you will continue to engage with them.</p>	
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Response:

Whilst there were a broad range of participants who contributed to the development of the refreshed Improvement Plan, official representatives of birth families were not involved as a targeted group as there are currently limited opportunities for engagement. Some members of birth families were present, but representing another agency or organisation rather than specifically as a birth family. This is something that we are acutely aware of and are working to develop our listening to families approach, to be published in the New Year that will include the establishment of a regular forum for families to meet with service leaders, feedback processes at key points in a child or families’ experience of services (such as when an assessment is completed, or a service ended), and a change in our practice framework so that it is more relationship-based.

The views and opinions of families expressed at recent open meetings was taken in account in the development of this high-level plan. We are also committed through our future listening to families approach to collaborate with families in the development of new services.