

Title of report: Ofsted Monitoring Visit Feedback

Meeting: Cabinet

Meeting date: Thursday 22 June 2023

Report by: Cabinet member children and young people;

Classification

Open

Decision type

Non-key

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

To share the feedback from Ofsted inspectors following their first formal Monitoring Visit conducted March 29-30 2023 and activity to prepare for future Monitoring Visits.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) **Cabinet receive this report and note the feedback from Ofsted Inspectors.**

Alternative options

1. There are no alternative options. Herefordshire council children's services are judged as inadequate by Ofsted and will be subject to monitoring visits until considered to be ready for a full ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) inspection where a re-grading will be considered in the future.

Key considerations

2. Children's Services were judged to be inadequate during the Ofsted inspection conducted in July 2022. The inspection report was published on 21 September 2022 on the Ofsted [website](#).
3. When a local authority is found to be inadequate Ofsted carry out monitoring activity that includes an action planning visit, monitoring visits and ultimately a re-inspection. Monitoring visits will focus on where improvement is needed the most. Inspectors will monitor and report on the local authority's progress since the inspection. Inspectors will also check that performance in other areas has not declined since the inspection. If new concerns emerge, inspectors are likely to look at these on the monitoring visits.
4. The first monitoring visit to Herefordshire took place on 29-30 March 2023. We should expect 3 or 4 monitoring visits a year and ordinarily there would be a minimum of 6 monitoring visits before a re-inspection might be considered.
5. Two inspectors carry out the visits. Our lead inspector is Alison Smale, accompanied by Tom Antony. Ofsted do not publish the feedback letter following the first monitoring visit. Feedback letters following the second and subsequent visits are however published on the Ofsted [website](#). By presenting this feedback letter to cabinet, we are putting the letter into the public domain which we believe to be the right thing to do and consistent with the open and transparent approach adopted by the new service leadership over the past eighteen months.
6. The focus of this initial visit was on the arrangements at the 'front door', namely the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH); the multi-agency response to risk; the support for children and young people at risk of exploitation or who go missing from home or from care; and early help. The feedback letter is shared with cabinet members as Appendix A.
7. Inspectors concluded that protective responses through the MASH (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) 'have been improved, meaning that most children's needs are now promptly identified and responded to at the point when referrals and contacts are made.' Inspectors noted too that the improvement since the inspection was achieved through increased capacity, partnership changes and strengthened management oversight. This is a significant and positive development as when we were inspected last summer the multi-agency responses to risk, and in particular the organisation of strategy meetings was found to be seriously deficient and a major concern.
8. This was a marked and significant improvement for the MASH and it should be noted that further development and improvement is planned as a new multi-agency dataset is introduced that will allow our partners in other key agencies to further develop their responses to risk through the activity of the [Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership](#) (HSCP).
9. That the early help telephone line (01432 260261) was relaunched earlier this year was seen by inspectors as a positive development alongside the evident strengthening of the interface between early help and the MASH.
10. Despite a small number of children and families having to wait to be allocated within the early help services inspectors concluded that children and families are well supported once they are allocated to early help workers who are agile in the support that they provide. The positive use of direct work in the early help service was also observed.
11. Exploitation risks were recognised in the MASH and return home interviews where children are missing from home were seen to be well used to enhance plans to keep children safe and enable an effective response if they go missing again.

12. The out of hours response provided by the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) was considered to be timely and thorough.
13. As was consistent with our self-evaluation, inspectors found that the practice quality within the assessment service was variable with most assessments sampled continuing to be of a generally poor quality. A minority of assessments were found to be stronger (which was again an improvement on last summer) and it was noted that some families are receiving support and services whilst their assessment is taking place which is good and improved practice.
14. Management oversight was considered to not be sufficiently robust and this together with changes of worker were identified as the primary causes of the disappointing feedback for the assessment service. The potential impact of this is also described in detail by inspectors in their feedback.
15. Addressing the practice quality issues, a *Team Improvement Programme* (TIP) has commenced since the visit, focused initially on practice and management oversight in the four assessment teams whilst a separate frontline manager development programme for our permanent frontline managers across the service which was commissioned earlier this year has also begun.
16. Work with a long-term improvement partner begins in June which will focus initially on developing our practice quality, case auditing, focus group activity, and beginning the work to develop a relational practice approach with the Directorate Leadership Team. Focus at this early stage is also on our edge-of-care and family group conference capacity. This approach has been successfully undertaken by other authorities aiming to improve their service delivery.
17. Inspectors gave positive verbal feedback about improvement that they had noticed in both our performance, and the quality of performance data and also to concur with our own audit findings.
18. There was positive feedback too for the leadership of the service and for the chief executive and director of children's services.
19. It was reiterated, as was expected, but nonetheless disappointingly that the pace of change overall is not yet sufficient, and in some areas is too protracted. The pace of change and progress against the Improvement Plan is monitored by the Improvement Board.
20. During the two-day visit inspectors asked service leaders to look at three cases and to provide a comment which in each case was considered to be satisfactory by inspectors. No cases were raised with service leaders where there was a safeguarding concern (a significant improvement on last summers' inspection).
21. Logistically the event went well the service having engaged in pre-visit planning and preparation. Learning from the activity has been applied to preparation for future visits and to the preparation for an anticipated Area SEND (Special Educational Needs and/or Disability) inspection.
22. Our second monitoring visit is expected later in June, the focus of which will be on support to children in need of help (child in need) and of protection (child protection). Inspectors will also look at the circumstances of children who have recently come into our care and those families who are entering the pre-proceedings process (Public Law Outline).
23. It should be anticipated that this will be a more challenging visit for the service as the difference being made through improvement activity is less evident in this part of the service at this time than was the case in the MASH.

Community impact

24. 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.
25. 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

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

Equality duty

28. There are no equality issues arising from this report.

Resource implications

29. There are no new or additional resource implications arising from this monitoring visit and report.

Legal implications

30. The Ofsted inspection in July 2022 was undertaken under the Framework, Evaluation Criteria and Inspector Guidance for the Inspections of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS). This contains provisions regarding actions to be taken after an inadequate inspection report. These include monitoring by Ofsted including an action plan, 4-6 monitoring visits, and a re-inspection. The recent March Ofsted visit was the first of the monitoring visits.
31. As noted in the body of this report, Ofsted are not under a legal duty to publish the initial feedback letter following the first monitoring visit. Feedback letters following the second and subsequent visits are however published on the Ofsted website. The result of this is that in presenting this feedback letter to cabinet, the letter is entering the public domain.
32. There is no legal implication for the publication of this initial feedback letter, in fact, as the report notes it promotes the culture of transparency that the new leadership team, as part of the improvement journey, is actively promoting.

Risk management

33. There are no new or additional risks arising from this visit. Risks associated with the wider improvement plan are monitored by the Improvement Board.

Consultees

34. None.

Appendices

Appendix A: Ofsted feedback letter

Background papers

None identified.

Report Reviewers Used for appraising this report:

Please note this section must be completed before the report can be published		
Governance	Sarah Buffrey	Date 02/06/2023
Finance	Wendy Pickering	Date 08/06/2023
Legal	Tess Burgess	Date 06/06/2023
Communications	Luenne featherstone	Date 05/06/2023
Equality Duty	Harriet Yelling	Date 13/06/2023
Procurement	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date Click or tap to enter a date.
Risk	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date Click or tap to enter a date.

Approved by	Darryl Freeman	Date 09/06/2023
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