

## PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 22 June 2023

### Question 1

**Ms Reid, Hereford**

**To: Cabinet Member, children and young people**

Quarter 4 Budget & Performance Report discloses a £9.6 million overspend on the children's directorate blaming: "... increases in unit cost prices, inflation and rising demand for placements [eg fostering] and transport services in 2022/23."

There is a similar paragraph in the unaudited Statement of Accounts 2022-23 (A&G Committee meeting, 23/6/2023). The latest LAIT statistics (31/3/2022) show that the rate of children in care in Herefordshire was about twice that of its Statistical Neighbours' average (number since increased).

Per FOI2022/01890 the average weekly costs for each child (12/1/2023) were:

- Fostering: £315
- Fostering agencies: £890
- Children's homes: £5,066

The net base budget for 2023-24 for Looked-After Children is over £28.7 million (Cabinet meeting, 26/1/23). In what ways (with deadlines/dates) will the number of children in care in Herefordshire be reduced/minimised so that the children's directorate's budget is not overspent in 2023-24?

### **Response**

Work began in the last financial year to begin to reduce the numbers of children in our care; stimulate the local placements market; and to develop our commissioning arrangements. Together this activity is contributing to improved support and outcomes for families, and a reduction on the pressures on the children's services budgets through achieving best value and having a greater range and availability of homes for children who come into our care.

The need for each child to come into our care or to be returned home from having been in our care has to be carefully considered and be in the best interest of the individual child. It would not be appropriate to set specific targets or deadlines to reduce the number of children in our care. The numbers of children in our care are also affected by other external factors such as providing care for unaccompanied asylum seeking children through the national transfer scheme and we are proud of Herefordshire's contribution to this important national work.

There are a number of initiatives already in progress including work to increase capacity to ensure children and families at the "edge of care" are well supported; activity to support children and families for whom a return home from care is safe and appropriate; and to strengthen our permanency planning arrangements which are already starting to have a positive impact.

The children's services improvement plan provides an overview of the considerable efforts being made to improve children's services that I shall not repeat here but I am pleased to report that we continue to reduce pressures on the placements budget (which is the budget at the core of your question) through improved management oversight and systems. We will continue to monitor progress through budget monitoring throughout 2023/24

I can also report that through improving practice and increased management oversight the rate at which children come into our care continues to fall.

### **Supplementary question**

The average weekly costs for each child (12/1/2023) were:

- Fostering: £315
- Fostering agencies: £890
- Children's homes: £5,066

The response does not really address “deadline/dates”. Unaddressed is that the rate of children in care is about twice that of similar areas. The rate and cost (£28.7 million in 2023-24) of Looked-After Children (LAC) in Herefordshire were mentioned in the Children’s Commissioner’s report (1/3/23). Other councils care for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The rate of care proceedings was about twice that of Statistical Neighbours.

Ways of reducing LAC include Family Group Conferences (was virtually none in Herefordshire) and reunification of children with their families (was not mentioned in the Improvement Plan).

### **By when and how will these be expedited?**

Research by Coram using a randomised controlled trial found that Family Group Conferences reduce the number the number of children in care and cuts costs (*Community Care*, 13/6/23).

### **Response**

As indicated in my initial response, it would not be appropriate to apply targets or deadlines to a matter that is so personal to individual families, children and their own circumstances. The current rate per 10,000 children in our care is 113. That total figure also now includes almost 40 unaccompanied asylum seeking children, which inflates both the figure and the rate considerably but of course is an important part of our work. The rate at which children now come into our care has been below the statistical neighbour and England averages for the past three months as a result of improved practice and management oversight and so the director and his team are confident of seeing a reduction in the overall numbers in the year ahead.

You correctly repeat the average cost of placement so there is nothing more to add there.

Family group conferencing is a part of the improvement plan. It was added in December following the meeting of the children’s scrutiny committee. Reunification of children with their families where this is safe and appropriate to do so is implicit within the development of the edge of care services, also contained in the improvement plan, and there has been some increase in the capacity of the edge of care service. Progress against the improvement fund is monitored by the improvement board, the children’s scrutiny committee and Ofsted as the inspectorate.

### **Question 2:**

**To: Cabinet Member, children and young people**

**Maggie Steel, Hereford**

In the Ofsted Monitoring Visit Feedback report we read:

*“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.”*

Meanwhile, the damning Report of the Commission to Consider Families’ Experience of Children’s Services has not been presented to Cabinet. Further, there has been no contact with affected families since its publication. The families asked on 7 June for an “urgent meeting” with the Leader and Cabinet member but no date has been offered and their cases are still not being reviewed.

The gap between public apologies and the ongoing silencing of families is sickening. When will the new Cabinet meet the affected families?

### **Response**

The agenda for the Cabinet Meeting of 22 June 2023 was set in May 2023, prior to the publication of the Report of the Commission to Consider Families’ Experience of Children’s Services in Herefordshire.

The report was shared with all councillors on the day of publication. The report is a challenging and difficult read and the council is extremely grateful to the families who were able to share their experiences, and to the panel for their professional and sensitive approach in hearing the families and preparing their report.

On the day of publication, the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and the Director of Children’s Services made statements acknowledging the report and thanking the families for sharing their experiences.

The Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People will meet with any families who shared their experiences with the Commission who would want to meet with them.

The Commission panel asked the council and the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) to consider seven questions posed by the report authors and this activity is underway. To take time to carefully reflect and make meaningful change is important and the Cabinet Member for children and young people will report back to cabinet in due course.

### **Supplementary question**

It is sad that you are not ready to meet the families as a group. The families are offering you the opportunity to hear the common threads in their stories, past and present. These common threads point to systemic risks, and demonstrate that the culture change demanded by Councillors in April 2021 has not yet materialised.

Culture change could start with treating the families with lived experience as an asset not a threat, and with listening openly to them as a group.

A meeting would also be an opportunity for someone from the Council to respond in person to the families who went to the Commission; apologies written for journalists are upsetting, and in many cases do not even reach the families.

Will the Cabinet Member reconsider the decision not to meet with the families as a group?

## **Response**

The cabinet member noted how traumatic it could be for families to have to retell their story again, having been brave enough to tell that story to the commission, and that he wanted to consider carefully whether meeting the group of families collectively was the right thing to do for all of the families. The cabinet member stated that he had not made a decision not to meet with the group of families and wanted to make an informed decision based on the conversations currently taking place.

### **Question 3:**

**To: Cabinet Member, children and young people**

**Ms. Currie, Hereford**

Given the significant implication there was profound abuses of power in the recent findings by the families commission report. What action is going to be offered to the families and children effected by this abuse?

## **Response**

The council is grateful to the families who shared their experiences with the panel and is determined to learn lessons and make the necessary improvements.

Work has begun to consider the seven questions posed by the report authors to the council and the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) and the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for children and young people have offered to meet with any of the families who shared their experiences with the panel who wish to meet them.

Wider improvement of children's services is monitored by the Improvement Board and by Ofsted inspectors (through the activity of monitoring visits).

### **Supplementary question**

Alongside the work to try and improve Children's Services what actions are you doing to help the families who have suffered abuses of power highlighted in the recent families commission where decisions based on abuses included life-changing for children, birth parents and birth families irreversible and unjust decisions such as adoption.

## **Response**

The cabinet member noted that as he had not yet met with the families to understand in detail the particular needs of those families it was difficult to give a full response to the question.

### **Question 4:**

**Liz Wallace, Herefordshire**

**To: Cabinet Member, community services and assets**

If the review goes ahead and the original site of Maylord Orchards remains as the chosen option, can the Committee confirm that this will proceed?

## **Response**

The review will consider the best possible location for the proposed new library and learning resource centre. Should the cabinet conclude through the review that Maylord Orchard remains the best location, the intention would be for the project to proceed.

## **Question 5:**

**Mrs Helen Astley, Herefordshire**

**To: Cabinet Member, community services and assets**

Herefordshire Local Government UNISON are extremely concerned about the impact on museum and library users regarding the decision to review the relocation of the library to Maylord Orchards.

UNISON are very concerned that this is an attempt to return to the conservatives previous plans to outsource museum services and significantly reduce Herefordshire libraries down to the bare minimum.

Could the cabinet member confirm that they are still committed to the cultural services transformation, including the review of community libraries, as agreed by the previous administration and part of the public consultation?

## **Response**

The council continues to be committed to the transformation of cultural services, we will continue to seek views from partners and staff, with both stakeholders will be fully engaged throughout the process.

## **Question 6:**

**Gemma Davies, Kings Caple, Herefordshire**

**To: Cabinet Member, community services and assets**

It is my understanding that the contracts not only for the glass ceiling but also the relocation works to Maylord orchards, in preparation for the relocation of the library have been awarded. Please could you confirm all costs already incurred in preparation of the site including surveys, feasibility studies, relocation of previous tenants, communications, planning application costs and other relevant costs; the current and expected costs of delaying any works for this review. This should include any potential retendering of the works.

Please ensure that this are in an accessible format and broken down per cost.

## **Response**

A contractor is currently on site to undertake maintenance to the roof, but these works are required for the existing operation of the building and not specific to the Library and Learning Resource Centre project.

The following provides a further breakdown of the headline costs incurred to date as requested. At this stage it is not anticipated works will need to be re-tendered, subject to the outcome of the review.

| <b>Work Element</b>   | <b>Costs To Date</b> |
|---|----------------------|
| <b>Design Works RIBA Stage 2,3,3+</b><br>Project Management<br>Architect<br>Structural Engineers<br>Mechanical, Electrical, Plant Consultants<br>Fire Engineer Consultant<br>Principle Designer                         | £ 396,264.79         |
| <b>Survey Works</b><br>Asbestos Survey<br>Drainage Survey<br>Revenue Business Case  | £ 11,662.50          |
| <b>Planning Application Fee</b><br>Planning Application Fee(Change of use)  | £ 462.00             |
| <b>Design Works RIBA Stage 4</b><br>Construction Partner(PC)<br>Principle Designer<br>Project Management<br>Architect<br>Structural Engineers<br>Mechanical, Electrical, Plant Consultants<br>Library Design Specialist | £ 118,740.02         |
| <b>HC Internal Staffing Cost</b><br>PMO   | £ 31,504.52          |
| <b>Total</b>  | £ 558,633.83         |

### Supplementary question

I am sorry but you do not appeared to have answered my question. I asked what current and expected costs are of delaying the library works due to this review. During many cabinet meetings, all group leaders stressed the importance of proceeding with building plans on time due to the continued increase in cost of labour and materials.

The breakdown that you have provided shows that £556k approx has been spent to date on the planning, RIBA works, survey works and staffing, all of which are not transferable. What's more, a large proportion of that money has been drawn down from the stronger towns funding already allocated to the site specific project.

From the information that you have provided and the apparent lack of due consideration of the cost of delaying the project, would you agree that this purely political decision puts the budget, timescales and entire Hereford city stronger towns fund at risk and shows contempt and disregard for those who have been part of the process all along, including four members of your

Cabinet, who voted through the decision to go ahead with this project, in this location, in July 2022?’

**Response**

I do not agree at all with the premise that you propose at the end of the supplementary question. We are purely proposing the review of where the library and learning resource centre may go to find the best place for it under the current conditions.

**Question 7:**

**Peter McKay, Leominster**

**To: Cabinet Member, Transport and Infrastructure**

May I please have an update as to when may expect to see the information regarding anomalies in the path records online, reference replies to my supplementary question of 29 June and question of 29 September 2022 ?

**Response**

Further to the request for an update in relation to the publication of the anomalies in the path records, the council data was created for internal use, it is a working document. Resource will be required to screen and validate the information and make available for the public. Whilst we recognise the potential benefit to the public, with the current resource available, the team are not able to progress due to other priorities and commitments.

**Question 8:**

**Nina Shields, Herefordshire**

**To: Cabinet Member, community services and assets**

Will the Council lose the grant funding if it pulls out of the Maylords project now?

**Response:**

At this stage the council is proposing to undertake a review of the best possible location for the library and learning resource centre, including in Maylord Orchard. Once the outcome of the review is known, should the proposed location change, we would need to discuss the continued availability of any grant funding with the Stronger Towns Board and the government.