

Public Question.

“Did CYP Scrutiny committee ever get a satisfactory answer to its question posed in September 2020 on the back of public questions which was this: why was the decision was made to keep the existence of the CSO report and its advice on safeguarding victims of peer on peer sexual assault hidden from the Committee for over three years?”

(Name provided)

Response.

“The question posed to scrutiny in Sept 2020 informed the scope of the subsequent VWV Report commissioned by and for Cabinet. Specifically in relation to this question, the review was asked to form an independent view on: “Item (e) - Why was the CSO report not made available to CYPSC when it undertook a spotlight review into PoP abuse in Herefordshire in the autumn of 2019?”.

In undertaking its investigation VWV considered the council’s handling of the CSO report from its inception through to the present date.

The final VWV report was received by the council in November 2022. The Leader at the time, Cllr Hitchiner, undertook to share the investigation outcome by briefing the then Chair of Scrutiny (Cllr Howells) on the entire report and providing all C&YPS scrutiny members with the entire Executive Summary with the offer to answer any questions they had.

The Chair of Scrutiny agreed that there would be no public debate of the report or its Exec Summary as all had been agreed as confidential from the outset so as to encourage the most open engagement of staff with the investigation and to achieve the widest possible organisational learning from its findings.

The previous Chair of S&YPS, Cllr Gandy, was also given a briefing on the report and specifically on the findings relating to item (e). These briefings took place in December 2022.

The then members of the Scrutiny Committee considered that:

- the information they had been provided with to be satisfactory in explaining the council’s handling of the CSO report and the advice it contained;
- the investigation captured the occasions when the council missed opportunities to make better use of the information in the council’s possession from 2017 onwards; and
- these mistakes had had been acknowledged and opportunities to learn from this had been identified.

The lessons learned from the findings of the investigation continue to inform and shape improvements in Children’s Services and across other service areas of the council’s operation.”

Supplementary Question.

Can the committee confirm what steps have been taken since February (2023) to ensure that:

1. IROs can be contacted directly by families, kinship carers, foster carers given their phone numbers failed to accept external calls for at least three years (2020-2022).
2. That IROs are pushing back on Legal guardians to ensure they have at least tried to speak to kinship carers etc before giving hearsay testimony that could be second, third or fourth hand. Confirm any policy/ies that have been brought in to address this.
3. Report social workers and IROs to social work England for failings in professional standards which also mislead other professionals and the courts about options available for the children Herefordshire has lost permanently.

Ms. Hannah Currie

Response to Supplementary Question.

1. All Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) provide children, young people, relevant family members and carers with their contact details, this includes their mobile phone number. It is recognised that during “lockdown” (especially in the early stages) there were some technical issues in respect of ensuring all phone lines were correctly re-routed and accessible; these matters have since been addressed. The current Head of Service is not aware of any complaints in respect of IROs not being contactable.
2. The primary function of the Independent Reviewing Officers is to review the care plan by the local authority for children and young people. The scope of the IRO role is set out in [statutory guidance](#). Whilst IROs do communicate and liaise with legal guardians (CAFCASS Guardians), any statements or plans produced by Guardians are scrutinised and weighed by the judge(s) during care proceedings rather than by the IRO.
3. Where an Independent Reviewing Officer has a concern about a Social Worker’s [fitness to practice](#) these concerns are typically first raised with the relevant manager/the employer; in line with the pathway recommended by Social Work England. Where required a fitness to practice concern is also raised with [Social Work England](#).