

Agenda item 5 – Questions from members of the public, plus supplementary question and response

Public Question 1

From: Mr Parkinson, Hereford

Current Whistleblowing Policy states (5.5.30):

‘if you feel that the matter is so serious that you cannot discuss it with any of the above, please contact the chief executive at Herefordshire Council, internal audit or the monitoring officer at Buckinghamshire Council’

However, the proposed revised Whistleblowing Policy does not give potential whistleblowers the option to contact the monitoring officer of another council (5.7) this discourages potential whistleblowers raising concerns.

Including the option to contact an external monitoring officer would encourage whistleblowing.

Many professionals should raise concerns. For example, the Professional Standards of social workers (England) includes Section 6: Promote ethical practice and report concerns. A section in the policy highlighting this would encourage potential whistleblowers to speak.

Will the Committee recommend my suggested amendments to the revised Whistleblowing Policy?

Response to Public Question 1

Our view is that the option to make a referral to another council’s monitoring officer is no longer needed as far better options have been provided within the revised policy. They allow the worker to make a referral to their manager, the head of service, their director or the Monitoring Officer. In addition, the worker can make referrals to a number of third party prescribed bodies and the policy includes links to the full list of such bodies that is maintained by the Government. In addition, if workers remain uncomfortable or unsure about these extensive arrangements or they need assistance or guidance, then the policy refers to support that is available from Protect protect-advice.org.uk who are an independent national whistleblowing charity. Protect are able to advise and signpost the worker and they provide a 5 days a week confidential advice line to whistleblowers.

In relation to referrals from professionals, the Council treats all worker referrals the same irrespective if they have a professional status and the policy applies to all with equal effect. Professionals are aware of their individual obligations of their professional bodies and we do not consider an amendment to be needed.

Public Question 2

From: Ms Reid, Hereford

The draft Statement of Accounts 2022/23 (Accounts) states (page 10):

“The £9.6 million overspend in Children and Young People reflects the significant pressures facing the Directorate in respect of increases in unit cost prices, inflation and rising demand for placements and transport services in 2022/23.”

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However, the latest Local Authority Interactive Tool (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 in care were (12/1/23):

- 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).

Should the Accounts be amended to mention that the high rate/number of Looked-After Children in Herefordshire was a major contributor to the Directorate's overspend in 2022/23?

Response to Public Question 2

The council's accounts are prepared in accordance with proper accounting practices as set out in the CIPFA Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom (the Code), supported by International Financial Reporting Standards.

All expenditure transactions in respect of Children's Services during the year have been included in the accounts and these will now be subject to testing by external audit as required by the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015. The Audit and Governance Committee is confident that the external auditors are fully aware of pressures in Children's Services and will focus an appropriate amount of attention on the recording of expenditure in this area.

The council is required to include a narrative report which provides summary information about the financial position and performance during the year.

The report summarises the key pressures facing the Directorate and these include increased demand in 2022/23. A final version of the accounts will be published following completion of the statutory audit by the council's external auditors.

Supplementary question a)

The Statement of Accounts 2022/23 includes (page 15):

"The council's Looked After Children (LAC) population is higher than our statistical neighbours and continues to require significant resources to support."

I think "is considerably higher" would be a truer statement.

"Sufficiency strategy" (ie enough foster placements etc) is on the Corporate Risk Register (30/1/23, A&G meeting). Of course, if the number of children in care is reduced, sufficiency is mitigated.

Actions to reduce the number of children in care include by investing in:

- Early Help
- Reunification of children with families
- Family Group Conferences

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And they accord with the law and good practice.

Early Help is under-resourced (Cabinet meeting, 22/6/23) yet the average cost of one child in care (fostering agency) for a year is over £46,000.

Should the “Further actions required” on the Corporate Risk Register be updated to include Early Help etc?

Response to supplementary question a)

Thank you for your question, we are very much aware of your concerns in this area in the council. As we move forward, looking at the risk register, we will take your comments into account and meanwhile I will make sure that the Corporate Director, Children and Young People is aware of your concerns.