

Title of report: Children's Services Improvement Plan

Meeting: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date: Tuesday 18 July 2023

**Report by: Corporate Director - Children & Young People, Service Director
Improvement, Project Lead**

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

To provide an overview and update on progress against the Children's Improvement Plan as a benchmark for future scrutiny activity in this first meeting of the children and young people scrutiny committee since the local elections in May.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) **The children and young people scrutiny committee note the current position with regard to progress against the children's improvement plan; and**
- b) **Indicate which specific areas of the plan the committee might want to consider in more detail the future (recognising the role of the Improvement Board in monitoring progress overall).**

Alternative options

1. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee could choose to not consider this update report, however given the importance of the subject matter it is being presented to this meeting. This is not recommended.

Key considerations

2. On 21 September 2022, Ofsted published a [report](#) rating Herefordshire Council children's services as inadequate following an inspection that took place between 19 and 29 July 2022 and the council was given three months to prepare an improvement action plan in response.
3. Following the publication of the Ofsted report a [statutory direction](#) was issued by the Secretary of State to Herefordshire Council and Eleanor Brazil was appointed as Commissioner for Children's Services in Herefordshire.
4. The [Children's Services Improvement Plan](#) was updated setting out how the council is addressing each of the areas identified for improvement by Ofsted and a tenth area identified following a recent Local Government Association Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Peer Review.
5. Having been presented to [Scrutiny Committee on 13 December 2022](#), Scrutiny Committee recommended for Cabinet to endorse the Improvement Plan and for Cabinet to authorise for the Improvement Plan to be submitted to Ofsted.
6. The Improvement Plan was endorsed by Cabinet on Thursday 15 December 2022 and submitted to Ofsted on 20 December 2022. The Plan aims to improve the outcomes for children and young people across the county.
7. Progress against the improvement plan is overseen by the Improvement Board, independently chaired by Gladys Rhodes White (Department for Education Improvement Advisor). The Board meets on a six-weekly basis and has adopted a thematic approach in its focus on the outlined areas of the overall plan according to the pathway of the child through the service and specific areas of interest and/or concern.
8. The most recent progress cover report and updated Improvement Plan submitted to the Improvement Board for its meeting on 7 June 2022 is shared with the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for information. The next Improvement Board is scheduled for 19 July 2023.
9. The Improvement Plan is very detailed and comprehensive and runs to 86 pages. The format of the Improvement Plan incorporates a progress update on all the priority improvement actions, of which there are 64 in total, each time the Improvement Board meets. The Improvement Board also receives a cover report which provides an introduction and overview with updates about the direction of travel, key highlights, notable risks and issues as well as a summary and conclusion with any recommendations.
10. The updated plan and covering report are informed by the delivery dashboards reporting on the improvement activities that are tracked with assistance from the corporate Project Management Office. The delivery dashboards are enhanced by consultations and discussions with Senior Responsible Officers and Service Leads plus a review of the performance management and quality assurance reporting.
11. There are ten priority improvement areas in the Improvement Plan. This includes the nine improvement areas identified by Ofsted following the July 2022 inspection, plus a tenth priority improvement area focusing on improvements identified from the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review (October 2022) which focused on Special Educational Needs and / or Disabilities (SEND). Each of the ten priority improvement areas include a number of priority improvement actions. For ease of reference the ten improvement priority areas include the following:
 - i. Corporate responsibility for the help and protection of children and those in care and care leavers, so this is prioritised and embedded across the council and partnerships.
 - ii. The sufficiency and stability of staff across the workforce, including sufficient numbers of foster carers, so children receive a timely response to having their needs identified and met across the service.

- iii. The timely and robust identification and multi-agency response to children and young people who are at risk of harm, including, but not limited to, the response to pre-birth children and babies, 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless, children living in private fostering arrangements and children who go missing from home and care.
- iv. The quality of practice including assessments, plans, planning and purposeful visits that are responsive to risk and need.
- v. Timely and effective multi-agency arrangements to ensure children are protected and enter care when required.
- vi. Monitoring and tracking to prevent drift and delay. This includes the monitoring and tracking of children in the Public Law Outline (PLO), permanence planning, children subject to deprivation of liberty orders and those placed in unregistered children's homes.
- vii. The availability of support and services to meet children and young people's needs, including timely access to therapeutic interventions, access to dentistry, life-story work, emotional and mental health support, help for young people to support transitions into independence and sufficient suitable accommodation.
- viii. Management oversight and grip across the service to include clear structures and service pathways, and regular and effective supervision.
- ix. Performance and quality assurance arrangements to support and test service improvements.
- x. Services to support children and young people with Special Educational Needs and / or a Disability (SEND)

12. Each improvement priority area includes a discreet number of 'Measures that Matter' which are shown within the Improvement Plan underneath each relevant section. The 'Measures that Matter' are some key performance indicators and service measures that help to determine the impact of practice and service delivery and the difference that is being made to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families. The 'Measures that Matter' are mostly quantitative measures but some qualitative measures are included and these are taken from the monthly auditing programme as part of the Quality Assurance Framework.
13. The Improvement Plan includes a 'BRAG' rating outlining the progress status of each of the priority improvement actions. More recently the improvement plan has been developed to also include a 'BRAG' rating to begin measuring the improvement outcomes to help evaluate and determine if the improvement activities are improving outcomes for children, young people and their families. The latter is work in progress and each work stream is being encouraged and supported to identify and report on outcome measures to help determine what difference is being made to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families. Currently, and increasingly over time, this will be further tested by a range of quality assurance activities and punctuated by the feedback from the Ofsted monitoring visits.
14. Ofsted also monitor progress against the improvement plan and conduct a series of monitoring visits following an inadequate inspection judgement. The first monitoring visit to Herefordshire children's services took place in March 2023 and the feedback letter was presented to [Cabinet](#) on 22 June 2023. The second monitoring visit took place on 28-29 June 2023 and focused on children in need and child protection activity. It is expected that the feedback letter will be published on the [Ofsted website](#) on 2 August 2023.
15. After the June 2023 Improvement Board, at the point the Improvement Plan had been operational for 6 months, a rationalisation exercise was undertaken. This exercise aimed to

streamline and coordinate the improvement infrastructure, improve accountability and increase the pace of improvement. The Improvement Board infrastructure is now supported by three, as opposed to seven, Transformation Delivery Boards (including Practice and Service Delivery; Workforce; and Commissioning and Resources) and the four key Partnership Boards (including the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership; Corporate Parenting Board; Children and Young People's Partnership; and the SEND Strategic Board). The Senior Responsible Officers for the Transformation and Partnership Boards will be reporting directly to the Improvement Board moving forward and this will begin at the 19 July 2023 Improvement Board.

16. Progress against the improvement plan is overseen by the Improvement Board and will continue to be reported upon to the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet at regular intervals.

Community impact

17. 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.
18. Keeping children safe is one of the most important things this council does and the details in this report support whatever action is required to ensure children and families receive the services they deserve.

The County Plan 2020-24 includes the ambition to 'strengthen communities to ensure everyone lives well and safely together', specifically the Council aims to:

- Ensure all children are healthy, safe and inspired to achieve;
- Ensure that children in care, and moving on from care, are well supported and make good life choices; and
- Protect and improve the lives of vulnerable people.

Environmental Impact

19. There are no specific implications for the environment arising from this report.

Equality duty

20. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to –

- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

21. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services.

Resource implications

22. There are no resource implications associated with this report. The resource implications of any recommendations supported by the Scrutiny Committee will need to be considered by the responsible party in response to those recommendations or subsequent decisions.

Legal implication

23. The Council was issued with a statutory direction by the Department for Education on 21 September 2022. To comply with this notice, the Council must adhere to a number of measures, which includes complying with any instructions of the Secretary of State or the Children's Services Commissioner in relation to the improvement of the council's exercise of its children's social care functions.

24. If there is a failure to comply with this notice or should ministers not be satisfied with the council's progress at any stage, ministers may choose to invoke their statutory powers of intervention (s497A Education Act 1996) to direct the council to enter into an appropriate arrangement to secure the improvements required in children's services.

Risk management

25. There are no new risk implications identified emerging from the recommendations in this report.

Consultees

26. None.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Children's Services Improvement Plan Progress Update - Cover Report - June 2023
Appendix 2 Children's Services Improvement Plan Progress Update June 2023

Background papers

None identified.

Report Reviewers Used for appraising this report:

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