

## Families Commission – progress update

### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Herefordshire Council Children’s Services were inspected by Ofsted in July 2022 and found to be inadequate across each area of the inspection framework. The inspection report was published on 21 September and a Statutory Notice was issued by the Department for Education. In September 2023, Eleanor Brazil was appointed as Children’s Commissioner to review the Council’s capacity and capability to improve services within a reasonable timeframe. The Commissioner’s report was published on 1 March 2023 and included several recommendations including the need for the Council to resolve, as far as is possible, all outstanding historic complaints:
- 1.2 Whilst the Commissioner had been undertaking her review from September to December 2023, she became aware of a number of families with longstanding concerns about their experience of Children’s Services in Herefordshire, some from several years ago and some much more recent. Many had complained and also raised questions at public Council meetings but families continued to feel that their views were not listened to or responded to.

### 2.0 The Families’ Commission

- 2.1 As part of her improvement work with the Council, the Commissioner felt it was important to find a way to hear about the experiences of families and with the agreement and support of the Council and the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children’s Partnership, a Commission was established. The Commission consisted of an independent panel who were able to hear directly from families with the express purpose of being able to:
  - Give parents and families an opportunity to tell their story to an independent panel.
  - Identify any steps that the Council and partners can and should take as a result of hearing families’ testimonies, either in relation to individual cases or in respect of general issues.
  - Learn from their experiences and to ensure that this knowledge is used to inform improvements to Children’s Services.
  - Ensure that, as far as possible, families feel that their concerns have been heard and addressed, and that this is as much as can be done to resolve matters
- 2.2 The Panel comprised of three appropriately qualified and experienced individuals, independent of Herefordshire, who were appointed directly by the Commissioner. The Commission carried out its work in March and April 2023, during which time ten day-long sessions were held and 20 individual families came to speak with the panel. The Independent Scrutineer of the Safeguarding Children’s Partnership, Kevin Crompton, and the Commissioner attended all the sessions as observers.

- 2.3 The family members who attended the Independent Panel had a range of experiences of Children’s Social Care, Adult Social Care, Police, Health and Mental Health Services for both children and adults, as well as specialised independent services, some of which were outside Herefordshire. Family members varied in age, circumstances and in their position within their family. Some described many years of contact with statutory services, some had more recent involvement. The majority of children from the families who made representation to the Independent Panel were still allocated and open to Children’s Services, or had been open in the last few years. Most had been impacted by the effect of the COVID 19 pandemic in relation to how services had been delivered during this time.
- 2.4 What every family member expressed was the desire to ensure that their painful personal experiences should be used to improve services for everyone and to ensure that ‘nobody else should ever have to go through what I have gone through.’ The Independent Panel heard difficult stories of poor practice, failures to respond appropriately to requests for help, complaints not responded to and children and their parents let down by professionals who should have done more to help them. The Independent Panel’s report goes into considerable detail, written from the perspective of families and using many quotes taken directly from them to illustrate the points that were made. Whilst families found it distressing to tell their story many said that they felt listened to and valued the work of the Independent Panel.
- 2.5 The Independent Panel met with twenty families. The Independent Panel Chair, Karen Manners, requested responses to several questions and queries in relation to eleven families. Responses to the questions and queries were prepared by the Service Director for Improvement, Gail Hancock, on behalf of the Children’s Directorate Leadership Team. In consultation with the Independent Panel Chair and Commissioner, the response letters were sent to parents on 2 June 2023.
- 2.7 Both the Independent Scrutineer and the Commissioner, in their different roles, will continue to monitor and support the Council and its Partners as part of the ongoing improvement journey.

### **3.0 The Families’ Commission published report**

- 3.1 The report entitled ‘The Commission to consider families’ experience of children’s services in Herefordshire’ was published on 6 June 2023 on the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children’s Partnership website. Please click [here](#) to see the full report.
- 3.3 At the point of publication the Director of Children’s Services, Darryl Freeman, Lead Member, Councillor Powell, and Kevin Crompton, Independent Chair and Scrutineer of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children’s Partnership, all issued public statements to express gratitude to the families who had been willing to make representation to the Commission and share what were emotional and upsetting accounts of their experiences. Sincere apologies were offered to

families for the failings outlined in the report and there was a stated commitment, as part of the Children’s Services improvement journey, to learn from the mistakes of the past. There was an acknowledgement that a significant cultural shift, characterised by different and better ways of working with families, would need to be an integral part of the improvement journey.

- 3.4 The intervening period of time following the publication of the report until now has allowed the Council and the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children’s Partnership to reflect on the full nature and extent of the issues and concerns contained in the Families’ Commission report. It was considered inappropriate and insensitive to rush to quick responses or stock answers which would belie the magnitude, complexity and implication of the families concerns and the failings. Considered responses to these matters are now starting to emerge, although more detailed work is clearly required and will be the subject of a further update in three months’ time.

#### **4.0 Questions for Consideration:**

- 4.1 In section 11 of the Commission’s report there are seven questions for the Council and the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children’s Partnership to consider. Three of these are directed to the Council and four are directed to the Safeguarding Children’s Partnership. The excerpt of section 11 is outlined below for ease of reference:

##### **11.0 Summary of Questions for Consideration**

11.1 How will the Council and its partners provide a meaningful and responsive early help service which is accessible to families, regardless of which agency they contact first for help?

11.2 How will the Council support its social workers to practise in ways that demonstrate empathy, perseverance, authority, professional confidence and capability; working with people to enable full participation in discussions and decision making?

11.3 How will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership ensure that professionals are working together in the best interests of children and their families, to the highest standards of professional practice, informed by good quality research and evidence?

11.4 What actions will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership take to satisfy itself that there is good understanding across all ‘frontline’ agencies of domestic violence and abuse and its impact on individuals and families?

11.5 How will Herefordshire Children’s Services support social workers to establish and maintain the trust and confidence of parents and families and enable their participation in planning to keep their children safe and promote their wellbeing?

11.6 What will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership do to promote a ‘Think Family’ approach across the partnership?

11.7 What will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership do to ensure that the complaints procedures in every agency across the partnership are accessible to families, work well, and findings are recorded and acted on?

4.2 The following information sets out how each of the seven questions are currently being addressed, by way of a progress update and it is recognised that these are significant issues and will require further consideration and more work on the parts of the council and the partnership to bring about meaningful change, including setting clear timescales for action:

**4.2.1 How will the Council and its partners provide a meaningful and responsive early help service which is accessible to families, regardless of which agency they contact first for help?**

The council and the partnership is still developing its approach and response to this question as it is recognised that early help and intervention services in Herefordshire are underdeveloped. The Children’s Help and Advice Team (CHAT) now have a direct telephone line for families and professionals which means that families can now contact the service directly for advice and guidance, signposting or support. Professionals are also able to contact CHAT if they need support or information about services that are available. Additional support has also been put in place to support professionals undertaking Early Help Assessments

The partnership is currently reviewing and will re-launch the Early Help and Prevention Strategy to ensure that all agencies share a commitment to meeting need at the earlier point of presentation in any agency. It is also looking at options through the work of the Children and Young People Partnership to increase early help capacity across partner agencies and the community, voluntary and faith sectors. In line with the activity to develop and embed a restorative practice approach within children’s social care services the partnership will take a strengths-based and relational approach to working with children, young people and their families to seek to provide help and support at the earliest point of opportunity and by the least intrusive means – the right help at the right time.

**4.2.2 How will the Council support its social workers to practise in ways that demonstrate empathy, perseverance, authority, professional confidence and capability; working with people to enable full participation in discussions and decision making?**

Confirmation of the long term sector led improvement partnership with Leeds City Council’s Relational Practice Centre, which was announced on 3 July 2023 and launched on 24 July 2023, provides a key opportunity to enable and support social work practitioners and managers to acquire, develop and promote Restorative Practice skills. Leeds have proven the benefits of relational and restorative practice and are well respected in the sector for

having been on their own journey of improvement to 'Outstanding', and for helping several other improving local authorities. Programme planning and coordination has now been completed for the first phase of the improvement partnership between Leeds and Herefordshire. Intensive Restorative Practice training for all staff is scheduled to commence in October alongside a range of other learning and development opportunities for leaders, managers and practitioners. One of the key principles of Restorative Practice is about working 'with' people rather than doing 'to' or 'for' them. There is an emphasis on the importance of relationships centred on the use of restorative language and attitudes to influence the way people think and feel. One of the benefits of taking a Restorative Practice approach is that it helps to repair harm to people and when relationships have been damaged. In turn this helps to prevent future harm and rebuild trust and confidence which is particularly important in respect of responding to the messages from the Families' Commission. In this way it is anticipated that all of the attributes that are listed in terms of improved empathy, perseverance, authority, professional confidence and capability will be achieved and mark a shift in the cultural approach that is required.

**4.2.3 How will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership ensure that professionals are working together in the best interests of children and their families, to the highest standards of professional practice, informed by good quality research and evidence?**

The Partnership will further strengthen its quality assurance and Senior Officer review activity focussing on;

- Implementing a multi-agency line of sight audit and assurance process (including 'test and challenge' events with frontline practitioners and with strategic partners 'walking the floor') that seeks to understand the lived experience of children, young people and families alongside evidenced based practice and research. This will also include increased opportunities to hear the voice of children and young people directly.
- developing and implementing a multi-agency dataset to:
  - identify and analyse areas of concern and good practice
  - evidence impact and measure how partnership activity and influence is making a difference
- ensuring that any commissioned training is supported by evidence based practice promoting a relational and restorative approach
- working with the Director of Public Health and the Health and Wellbeing Board to develop trauma informed ways of working to support children, young people and their families

Further, the Partnership is working closely with the Children’s Improvement Board to deliver the children services Improvement Plan and to work towards implementing the Restorative Practice approach being developed through the partnership with Leeds.

Through the Section 11 audit and Section 175 Audits, the partnership will seek assurance from partners and agencies that they can evidence:

- how the strategic priorities and learning from multiagency training are being implemented and become embedded into practice (e.g. learning from reviews)
- how training and development is positively impacting on outcomes for children and young people

#### **4.2.4 What actions will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership take to satisfy itself that there is good understanding across all ‘frontline’ agencies of domestic violence and abuse and its impact on individuals and families?**

- The Partnership will seek assurance from the Herefordshire Domestic Abuse Partnership that the Domestic Abuse Strategy is having a positive impact for children and families.
- The Partnership will seek assurance from the Herefordshire Domestic Abuse Partnership of the knowledge, and understanding of domestic abuse across frontline agencies and practitioners
- The Partnership will seek assurance from the Herefordshire Domestic Abuse Partnership on the effectiveness of multi- agency working and case audit.
- The Partnership will continue to promote and offer its Domestic Abuse Training Programme and will seek evidence of the impact of this training, in particular the understanding of domestic violence and its links to neglect, exploitation, and substance misuse, by staff and volunteers across Herefordshire.
- In addition to seeking increased assurances from the Domestic Abuse Partnership, the partnership will integrate assurance and responses to each of the Commission questions into the increased line of sight arrangements already described in this paper.

#### **4.2.5 How will Herefordshire Children’s Services support social workers to establish and maintain the trust and confidence of parents and families and enable their participation in planning to keep their children safe and promote their wellbeing?**

This is going to take time to achieve and families who made representation to the Families’ Commission will ultimately decide whether they feel trust and

confidence has been restored in ways that enable them to participate in the planning to keep their children safe and to promote their wellbeing. Repairing harm is a necessary first step however and although challenging to achieve given the context, this will be a key barometer of progress.

Some targeted activity has been underway in attempt to address outstanding matters. Shortly before the publication of the Families' Commission report, there was a local election on 4 May 2023, which resulted in a change of political administration with newly appointed elected members. The new Leader of the Council, Councillor Jonathan Lester, and new Lead Member, Councillor Ivan Powell, in consultation with the Chief Executive, Paul Walker, and Director of Children's Services, Darryl Freeman, wrote to all of the families who made representation to the Families' Commission on 25 July 2023. The Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Children's Services offered to meet with families to discuss any outstanding matters.

Of the twenty families who made representation to the Families' Commission, responses were received from six families. Individual meetings were organised with parents/family members, their representatives, Councillors Lester and Powell plus the Service Director for Improvement. Of the six families who responded to the offer to meet Councillors Lester and Powell, all six had previously received a letter from the Service Director for Improvement.

At the time of writing, meetings with four of the six families have already taken place with Councillors Lester and Powell. One other scheduled meeting is yet to take place and another meeting is being rescheduled at the request of the family. Individual issues, concerns and 'bottom lines' are discussed and further enquiries and actions are being / will be followed up. Although it is clearly inappropriate to refer to individual circumstances, early feedback from some parents has confirmed that they are appreciative of this opportunity and felt it was helpful.

#### **4.2.6 What will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership do to promote a 'Think Family approach across the partnership?**

The Partnership's commitment to the 'Think Family' approach is evident in the adoption of Restorative and Trauma Informed practice.

- The Partnership will work with the Safeguarding Adults Board to ensure a Think, Child, Think Parent, Think Adult and a Think Family Approach in delivering its functions and oversight of the safeguarding system

- The current core safeguarding training will be reviewed to ensure it better reflects a “Think Family Approach” balancing the needs and vulnerabilities of parents and carers to support them in their care of their children.
- Suitable impact measures will be developed and introduced to demonstrate over time the difference that this approach is making.

**4.2.7 What will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership do to ensure that the complaints procedures in every agency across the partnership are accessible to families, work well, and findings are recorded and acted on?**

The Safeguarding Partnership recognises that this is about building trust, and doing what we say we will. Given the different approaches and systems in place across a range of partner agencies, there is more still to do to fully understand how we can best get the learning from across the partnership. This work continues. In the short term we will produce an easy to understand guide to the complaints processes of the safeguarding partners and the HSCP>

We will in addition seek assurance through the Section 11 challenge and audit processes that agencies have a robust complaints procedure in place that seeks to learn positively from complaints evidencing how this has influenced and improved the experiences of children, young people and their families.