

**HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL CHILDREN'S SERVICES**  
**FAMILIES COMMISSION FOLLOW UP PROGRESS AND FINDINGS SUMMARY**  
**REPORT**  
*JUNE 2024*

## Foreword

I first want to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to the families involved in this comprehensive piece of work. I'm grateful for the time and energy spent sharing your individual experiences. We have listened to your experiences and have been able to understand how our interventions were received and we have been able to reflect and learn how we can do things better.

The progress report sets out an overview of what has been undertaken in relation to the considerations made by the review and I am pleased to confirm that such a comprehensive programme of work is under way to meet the considerations made. All specific work and activities now ongoing as part of our work have been incorporated into the phase 2 of our improvement plan which will be shared publically in September 2024.

Importantly our phase 2 plan retains as a priority the value of hearing the children, young person and family experiences and understanding the impact and outcome of our work. This has been developed in our quality assurance framework that is and will continue to be developed in every service area as we continue our improvement journey.

On behalf of Herefordshire Council, once again we would also like to extend our thanks to you, and other families, for coming forward and sharing your experiences.

Paul Walker – Chief Executive Herefordshire Council

## 1.0 Introduction

1.1 The 'Report of the Commission to Consider Families' Experiences of Children's Services in Herefordshire' was published on the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership (HSCP) web site in June 2023;

[Report of the Commission to Consider Families' Experience of Children's Services in Herefordshire \(herefordshiresafeguardingboards.org.uk\)](https://www.herefordshiresafeguardingboards.org.uk)

1.2 The Families' Commission was initiated by Eleanor Brazil, Herefordshire Children's Commissioner, having become aware of a number of families who had significant concerns about their experiences of Children's Services, and the consequences for their families. A number of families approached her directly with details of their specific circumstances. Many had attended council and public meetings to raise their concerns publicly or had written and made complaints to their local MPs and Councillors. Recognising the urgent need to restore confidence and learn from what had happened in past years, and to try and resolve issues for families, the Commissioner proposed establishing the Commission to give an opportunity for families to be heard by an independent panel and for their experiences to inform the learning about what needs to improve.

1.3 The terms of reference for the Commission set out its purpose as follows;

- To give parents and families an opportunity to tell their story to an independent panel.
  - To 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.
  - To learn from their experiences and to ensure that this knowledge is used to inform improvements to Children's Services.
  - To 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.
- 1.4 There were three independent panel members who sat for ten days during March and April 2023. What every family member expressed was the desire to ensure that their painful personal experiences should be used to improve services for everyone and ensure that 'nobody else should ever have to go through what I have gone through.'
- 1.5 At the conclusion of the Commission, the independent panel report posed seven questions to the Council and the HSCP. On 26 September 2023, Children's Services presented an update on progress to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee.

[Appendix 1. The arrangements and findings of the Families Commission.pdf \(herefordshire.gov.uk\).](#)

## **2.0 Follow up Activity with Families**

- 2.1 There were several parents, presenting as individuals or as couples, who made representation to the Families Commission in person and/or through written testimony.
- 2.2 Prior to the publication of the Families' Commission report several families received letters from the Service Director (Improvement) on behalf of Children's Services Directorate Leadership Team to address specific questions or queries that had been raised by the chair of the independent panel, Karen Manners, on behalf of individual families. Copies of the response letters were shared with Karen Manners, Eleanor Brazil and Darryl Freeman, former Director of Children's Services (DCS), before they were sent to the parents and families. In total, out of the 19 parent/families who made representation to the Families' Commission, there were 11 who received a letter addressing specific questions and queries.
- 2.3 In May 2023, following the outcome of local elections there was a change in the political administration of the Council whereby Councillor Lester became the Leader of the Council and Councillor Ivan Powell became the Lead Member. Councillors Lester and Powell, alongside the Chief Executive, Paul Walker, and Darryl Freeman, DCS, subsequently wrote letters to the parents/families who had made representation to the Families Commission and offered an opportunity meet with Councillors Lester and Powell. Of the 19 parents/families who had made representation to the Families' Commission, several responded to the invitation to meet with Councillors Lester and or Powell. These meetings included the Service Director (Improvement) to represent the Directorate Leadership Team and to provide any social work advice or guidance that may be required. Each meeting clarified a number of issues, concerns and 'bottom lines' which were subsequently followed up to resolve relevant matters for individual families.

## **3.0 Questions for Consideration - Summary of Progress**

- 3.1 In relation to the seven questions for consideration highlighted by the Families' Commission in the published report, three of these were for the Council and four were

for the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership. The seven questions for considerations, outlined in section 11 of the Families' Commission report are set out below for ease of reference;

- i. 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?
  - ii. 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?
  - iii. 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?
  - iv. 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?
  - v. 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?
  - vi. What will the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership do to promote a 'Think Family' approach across the partnership?
  - vii. 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?
- 3.2 Since this matter was first reported to the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee in September 2023, further activity has been undertaken and the following information provides an update about the progress that has been made to address the seven questions for consideration;

**a) Question for Consideration 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?**

**Early Help** - Within the Council's Targeted Early Help Service, the Children's Help and Advice Team (CHAT) has launched a telephone help and support line for families, and professionals. This gives families the option to access help at the earliest opportunity by telephone. During 2023/24 CHAT completed responses to 4,957 new contacts and took 1,313 calls. The telephone calls were approximately 50% from families and 50% from professionals. The team provides advice and guidance, signposting or facilitates the completion of an early help assessment. If a safeguarding concern is raised when talking to the family the contact these matters are shared with the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

- In 2023/24, early help family support supported 463 families with 938 children and Children Centre Services supported 234 families with 361 children.
- Since the publication of the Families' Commission report, partner agencies have been supported to complete new and refreshed Early Help Assessments (EHA). In April 2023, when the data started being collated, 49% of new EHA's were completed by partner agencies. The proportion of EHA completed by partners has increased during 2023/24 with an average of 67% EHAs being completed by partners by the year end in April 2024. Support has been provided to partners through training about how to complete EHAs, being a Lead Professional and managing a Team around the Family

meetings (TAFs) as well as offering of one to one support to complete an EHA when needed.

**Community Safety Fund** - The Council and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) launched a Community Safety Fund in 2023/ 24 to enable the voluntary and community not for profit sector and schools to be able to bid for funding to deliver early help approaches to meet need at the earliest point of presentation and to support diversion from crime and offending. The fund focusses on early prevention and tackling the root causes of crime, vulnerability and exploitation. The target audience is children and young people aged between 5 and 18 years (and up to 25 for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, SEND). A total of 12 projects have been successful in applying for the funding, including the following;

- **CLD Trust – Safe and Strong Project.** Funding to extend the benefits of the Strong Young Minds project. The project supports young people who are vulnerable due to poor mental health but at a preventative level.
- **St Martins Primary School (with Marbrook Primary School) – Caring in Action.** The Schools will work together with Putson Baptist church and South Wye Police Boxing Academy to identify particular families in need and offer targeted support. The funding will be used to employ 2 case workers who will work with children and their families to mentor and coordinate support working with other organisations.
- **Haygrove Community Gardens Charity – Family Link Project.** To set up a Family Hub at Ross Community Garden, activities to support children and families including a drop in café and parenting courses.
- **Hope Support Services – Youth Together in Herefordshire.** Providing support to young people when a loved one has a serious or terminal illness, this project will expand Hope's existing service provision enabling them to support 60 additional families.
- **Hereford Community Farm Nurture in Nature:** Raising aspirations. This project is focused on families living in South Wye and families with children from across Herefordshire with SEND. Hereford Community Farm will offer a range of activities taking a whole family approach, offering supported land based activities, taster sessions, an information hub to signpost people to other agencies and services and the presence of a Support Worker to facilitate families to access more targeted support for emerging need.
- **St Thomas Cantilupe CE Primary School – Family Learning Mentor.** St Thomas Cantilupe School is based in a deprived area of central Hereford, 65% of their pupils have English as an Additional Language and many are newly arrived in the UK. The School will employ a Family Learning Mentor to improve the outcomes and opportunities for pupils aged 5-11 years old and their families. The Family Learning Mentor will work directly with vulnerable families, and their children in order to promote, strengthen and develop the potential of parents/carers and children.
- **Hinton Community Association Ltd runs Hinton Community Centre in the St Martins and Hinton Ward area of Hereford.** The project will provide a recognised training programme for children and young people aged 5 to 18 years that have been excluded or at risk of permanent exclusion from schools, or identified as having anti-social behaviours, have a criminal record or are at risk of offending behaviour.
- **John Masefield High School – the provision of Family Support Worker** for 35hrs per week to work closely with families and young people who have emerging needs or additional needs that require targeted support. Additional level support will be promptly available to support at level 2.

- **Rural Media Charity - a youth participation project** that will see Herefordshire young people create impactful social media content which leads to powerful peer-to-peer then youth-to-stakeholder conversations about positive masculinity, healthy behaviours, personal safety and productive role modelling.
- **The Cartshed** –To run three woodland programmes for young people aged 10-13 transitioning to high school; young people aged 14-18 who are struggling to attend school/disengaged from learning; and young people aged 18-25 who have additional needs who are struggling to attend college or employment or who may be in contact with criminal justice services.
- **LEAF (Locally Encouraging All to Flourish)** - The project will provide children, young people and their families in Ledbury with a holistic support service including mentoring, counselling and family support work.
- **West Mercia Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre** – To deliver Purple Leaf Psychosocial Education, Support and Prevention. Tackling Inappropriate and Problematic Sexual Behaviours through psychosocial education and support at the earliest possible stage.

**My Family, My School, My Community** - Herefordshire has also been successful in receiving £300,000 from the Department of Education to support the development of early help approaches. The My Family, My School, My Community initiative launched in April 2024 and is provided by a consortia of voluntary organisations, Vennture, CLD and Homestart. This service will enable an expansion in early help support by developing early help approaches within schools.

- The provision and support will be informed by the bespoke needs of the children and young people, families and that of their communities so that children, young people and families identify with and are supported by communities that care, harnessing the skills and assets of people and the community space and place.
- The project has identified 8 Primary Schools and 2 secondary schools: Ashfield Park, Brampton Abbots CE, Bristow CE, Leominster Primary, Broadlands, Clehonger, St Thomas CofE Cantilupe, Kingstone, Aylestone and Earl Mortimer College. The approach will build a “School-Community Connector” role around the schools to enable children, young people and their families to feel connected to and in and of their community in conjunction with a wider Healthy Schools programme.

**Strategic review** - Peopletoo is an organisation that provides support to organisations across Local Government and Health through the design and implementation of affordable and outcome focused services. PeopleToo has been commissioned to review the strategic approach to early help in order to meet need at the earliest point of presentation. PeopleToo has engaged with partners, the not for profit and community sectors, and considered the views of children and young people and families in considering the future approach. The report will be completed ready for published at the end of June 2024.

- b) **Question for consideration 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?**

**The Herefordshire - Leeds Improvement Partnership and Implementation of the Relational Practice Model** – Having secured DfE funding, the improvement partnership between the Leeds Relational Practice Centre and Herefordshire was launched in July 2023 and will continue until March 2025. In accordance with the agreed delivery plan, progress has

been made and is on track to introduce and embed a more relational and restorative way of working with children, young people and families. It is proposed that this model of practice will provide high support and high challenge to ensure social workers work in a strengths based way *with* families. Leeds is considered to be a good fit as an improvement partner for Herefordshire. Leeds has been judged by Ofsted to be 'outstanding' having previously been 'inadequate'. Leeds has embedded Restorative Practice and is considered to be one of the leading local authorities in the country. Following the Families' Commission work, Herefordshire Council confirmed its decision to adopt the Restorative Practice Model of approach. To date, the following elements of the delivery plan have been rolled out;

- In-service and partnership based launch sessions completed in July and September 2023
- 500+ staff have received mandatory introductory awareness raising training, including elected members on the Corporate Parenting Board, with a cohort of in-house staff also trained to roll out this training on an on-going basis for new starters
- Programme of 8 lunch time thematic Restorative Practice Learning Webinars completed in June 2024
- Team Manager Action Learning Sets co-facilitated by Service Managers with Leeds consultants, including an evaluation completed in June 2024
- Directorate Leadership Team and Head of Service development sessions from October 2023 to date
- MASH diagnostic
- Team Manager Management Oversight and Supervision due to commence July 2024 through to September 2024
- Various Service Reviews and thematic practice consultations completed across the service, including but not limited to workforce planning, complaints management, performance data, conference and reviewing services, family group conferences etc...

**Case Reviews** - Herefordshire invited Leeds colleagues to review a sample of practice with some children and families where there had been significant concerns and/or complaints. For balance, Leeds also reviewed practice with a similar number of children and families which had been selected by the service to represent good practice. The main findings are summarised below:

- **Good practice cohort** - The Leeds team agreed with Herefordshire colleagues about some of the strengths shown in the good practice cohort. Whilst some of the families in the good practice cohort had experienced less than perfect support and an interventionist approach in the past, there was evidence of a changed approach for some families in the sample and they were positive about the more recent support from children's services. The good practice cohort emphasised the impact of effective engagement and strong relationships between workers and families whereby key relationships and good direct work had made a big difference. There was evidence of effective help from a wider range of services such as the Edge of Care and Home Team (ECHO), and good use of Family Group Conferences (FGCs) to engage and involve wider family networks. There were some examples of effective partnership working, for example in Core Groups and Child Protection Conferences, which were well led and had good partner engagement. There were also examples of effective leadership and management in supervision, decision-making and the overall grip on practice. Progress was found to have been made within a challenging context, including difficulties associated with a high turnover of social workers and challenges in partnership working, particularly around a tendency to escalate early. Whilst there are many positives, this selection of practice also included some continuing areas for

development, including around drift and delay in achieving stable plans for children. At times, utilising a more family led approach would have been more appropriate to avoid proceedings to 'gather evidence'. In some cases, early involvement of the family could lead to better solutions for children in kinship rather than stranger care. There are circumstances where, along with partners, involvement at the outset of a case is heavy-handed and punitive and whilst it is positive that this involvement changed later in the case (with a change of Social Worker and Team Manager) the immediate approach could have been avoided altogether. In some instances the recording remains descriptive with little analysis and many of the issues are compounded by the number of changes of social worker including 4 Social Workers in 12 months for one of these young people.

- **Concerns and complaints cohort** - Concerns were confirmed by the Leeds team in the majority of examples, but the Leeds reviewer judged one concern to be unwarranted and judged that Herefordshire had worked well and made the right decisions. Immediate issues for decision-making were shared with Herefordshire Leaders to inform decisions where necessary. Resolving complaints would benefit from being more restorative in ethos and providing better coordination. At times, whilst families were rightly protecting their rights and correctly criticising services, seemed to be perceived as undeserving troublemakers. It also seemed that in many cases too many leaders, with the best of intentions, had become perhaps too closely involved in a way that was often too remote from day-to-day work and plans with the families. It was thought that a strengthened role for the complaints team to manage this and ensure that actions are properly progressed would be beneficial.
- **Reflections and next steps** - The Leeds Team met with Herefordshire's Senior Team in late May 2024 to review progress, problem solve and agree next steps. The broad aim for the next stage of joint work, now that the foundations of relational culture and practice are in place in Herefordshire, is to move onto key areas of practice and the wider system to drive reform shaped by a restorative values. The proposals are as follows:
  - Management Oversight and Supervision programme: This will commence in July 2024 and is considered critical for supporting improved consistency and quality. The programme has had a good impact in other local authorities with Ofsted reporting significant improvements.
  - Preparation for the 5<sup>th</sup> Ofsted monitoring visit / exploitation: Leeds will provide a critical friend role to inform preparation for the next monitoring visit. A positive first meeting has already taken place.
  - Team level reflective restorative practice programme: This programme will bring practitioners and managers together to reflect, share, problem solve and learn together about key challenges in everyday practice. This will be trialled in the Corporate Parenting Service in July 2024.
  - Partnership: The data, case reviews and ongoing discussions with Herefordshire colleagues all suggest partner culture, practice and decision-making is not always supportive of the shift to more restorative ways of working. As such it is proposed that there will be joint planning with the HSCP leads, will be followed by Restorative Practice training, some reflective learning circles to set a longer term vision and shared values.
  - Child protection: In light of the recent reduction in the proportion of children with a child protection plan, Leeds will undertake a review of a sample of records to provide assurance that decision-making remains safe and appropriate.
  - Edge of Care, Family Group Conference and Kinship: Further work will start in July 2024 to develop the ECHO (edge of care) Team and Family Group Conferencing

will be progressed. This will include work to promote kinship care as part of the wider strategy to working better *with* families.

- Locality working: There have been conversations about service redesign based on a more localised and relationship focussed structure. Draft planning will be shared with Leeds and discussed with the in-coming Director of Children's Services.
- Complaints: Building on strong involvement from local leaders and a good complaints team, the overall system could be more restorative and better coordinated. Leeds will work with the complaints team to agree a revised approach in July 2024.
- Performance data reporting and workforce development: positive initial conversations have taken place but have not progressed. This will be revisited and plans agreed in the next month.
- Child Friendly Herefordshire: Discussions are planned between Leeds and Herefordshire Public Health colleagues about the feasibility of a Child Friendly Herefordshire initiative. Proposals will be agreed in July 2024.

Whilst there is strong agreement between the Herefordshire and Leeds about the priorities and plans for the next stage of joint work there will be a need to align these with the plans and priorities of the incoming Director of Children's Services when they take up their position on 1 July 2024.

**c) Question for Consideration 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?**

**Multi-Agency Line of Sight Audit and Assurance Processes** - Since the publication of the Families' Commission report Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) has increased its multi-agency line of sight and audit activity in the following ways to ensure professionals are working together in the best interests of children and their families;

Over a three day period in January 2024, a review of the Herefordshire Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) was undertaken by Herefordshire Council's Children's Services Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Team working collaboratively with MASH and Early Help colleagues, representatives from West Mercia Police, NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire and Leeds Relational Practice Centre.

- The purpose of the review was to provide assurance that the progress, since the Ofsted ILACS in July 2022 and the monitoring visit in March 2023, had been maintained within the Herefordshire MASH and that it continues to offer a safe safeguarding service for children in Herefordshire. The MASH review was the first to be undertaken locally from a multi-agency perspective working with Herefordshire's improvement partner, Leeds Relational Practice Centre.
- As well as reviewing practice in the MASH to assure ourselves that children are safe, the review also considered the effectiveness of processes in the MASH and the contribution of partners. The review also looked at a small sample of children where the MASH has been contacted about concerns of child on child abuse.
- This review took place as a live exercise and the review group was based in the MASH. There was another group working on-line undertaking a series of group and individual activities, specifically the collaborative review of the records of 13 children where a contact or referral had been made to the MASH in the previous week, as well as direct observations of MASH practice, discussions with MASH managers about the existing pressures and processes and a whole group



discussion to triangulate preliminary findings, share development ideas and produce recommendations.

- This review found that with all of the contacts and referrals reviewed, all the children were considered to be safe in relation to the work that had been completed, in respect of management oversight and in relation to the necessary timescales. Children's and young people's contacts and referrals were considered on the day they were received, and the team appeared sufficiently well resourced and were steadily becoming a more stable team with permanent rather than agency staff. Furthermore, the atmosphere in the MASH was positive, with staff expressing an appetite to continuing building on improvements in practice.
- The findings from this review with recommendations were presented the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) Safeguarding Partners Board on 24 April 2024.
- Progress continues to be made in relation to the completion of multi-agency audits, however the challenge around auditor's availability and capacity remains across agencies. This presents a challenge to sustaining momentum in undertaking multi-agency audits although three other recent multi-agency audits have been completed, one in relation to strategy discussions, a second in relation to child sexual abuse and the third in relation to cases involving child on child harm.
- The strategy meeting audit initially focussed on learning for Children and Young People's Services, however the audit findings have been strengthened in relation to including learning and actions in relation to West Mercia Police, Health and wider partners including the quality of record keeping and contributions to strategy discussions. The action plan will be overseen by the Quality and Effectiveness Group (Q & E)
- Both the Child Sexual Abuse and Child on Child Abuse audit results have now been reported to the HSCP Q & E Group (January 2024 and April 2024 respectively). There are agreed action plans in place to address the findings and recommendations from all three audits, and progress against these will continue to be overseen by the Q & E Group.

**Multi-Agency Dataset** - The HSCP Quality and Effectiveness Group now routinely receives data from Children's Services, Wye Valley NHS Trust and West Mercia Police, and this multi-agency dataset is now a standing item within each meeting. The dataset also reflects the contribution of other agencies to the child protection process, for example individual agency contributions to strategy discussions and agency referral rates to the MASH. The partnership is committed to reviewing and further developing the dataset and this will continue to be taken forward.

**Section 11 / Section 175 Audit Processes** - Both the Section 11 audit and the Section 175 audit processes have now been completed. Section 11 outlines the safe systems and safe processes that need to be in place; for example by ensuring safe recruitment of staff, by providing appropriate training and by having up to date policies which all staff know how to access. A Section 175 is a deep dive audit review which places duties on a range of organisations, agencies and individuals to ensure their functions, and any services that they contract out to others, are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. In relation to the Section 11 audit, the effectiveness of each organisation's programme of dissemination of the outcomes of internal safeguarding audits and reviews, findings from multi-agency reviews and learning, and the strength of their internal quality assurance framework in relation to measuring the impact of training provided to their staff on practice were examined;

- Agency returns have been further examined by two 'check and challenge' sessions being completed (November 2023 and April 2024) with the authors of the audit returns, led by the HSCP Independent Scrutineer. Particular focus has been given in these sessions to the areas identified as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' and agencies will shortly be asked to update the audit system with progress made to address those.
- The Section 11 returns also identified areas of good and outstanding practice within agencies across the county. Areas of particular strength were to be found within internal accountability arrangements for safeguarding, the availability of written policies and procedures for safeguarding, promoting the wellbeing and protection of children and young people, staff understanding how to report child safeguarding concerns, safe recruitment processes and whistleblowing procedures in place.
- The Section 175 audit process has been completed and is to be presented to the HSCP Quality and Effectiveness Group on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2024.

**Engagement and Participation of Children, Young People, Parents and Carers** - The partnership has drafted an Engagement and Participation Framework, which explains how children, young people, parents and carers will influence and shape the work of the partnership. The draft Framework includes plans to:

- Provide guidance and training to practitioners on listening to children and young people in their direct work, as well as establishing good relationships with families / parents / carers,
- Be assured that agencies have systems in place to listen to children, young people, parents and carers, and that they can evidence how this has shaped their services,
- Inform and shape HSCP priorities through consultation and collaboration with children, young people and parents/carers
- Include the voice of children, young people, parents/carers in the plan for Annual Scrutiny,
- Ensure that children and young people are part of recruitment to key positions in the partnership, including the Independent Scrutineer and Business Manager.

To date, a children and young people's panel was part of the recruitment for the Independent Scrutineer (2022) and Partnership Business Manager (2024). The partnership has also consulted with the Parents for Change Group about the development of Think Family Guidance, and there are plans to take the Think Family guidance to the domestic abuse Lived Experience of Abuse Group in June 2024 for feedback. Consultation with the Parents for Change Group led to the Think Family guidance being strengthened by emphasising professionals working together in a coordinated way and ensuring that the family are part of meetings about them and are kept fully informed. The partnership consulted with children and young people on the development of the Engagement and Participation Framework on 31 May 2024. This resulted in more emphasis on ensuring that children and young people are aware of their rights, and that cultural considerations are acknowledged throughout the document. The Framework is undergoing final approvals and will be published before the end of July 2024.

**Partnership training, resources and guidance** - The partnership has worked to strengthen professional practice through training, resources and guidance through the following activity. With funding from Public Health and the NHS ICB, the HSCP commissioned trauma-informed practice training in 2023 and 2024, which was/is available for anyone working or volunteering with children, young people, families, and/or adults at risk. As at 15 April 2024, 161 learners had attended and it is expected that in total 340 learners will attend Trauma Informed Practice

training by the end of 2024. There is evidence from course evaluation feedback that the Trauma-Informed Practice course is helping practitioners to understand trauma and its impact on children and families, and how to adapt their support and intervention in these circumstances. This is expected to make a positive difference to how families are supported and helped to develop good relationships between practitioners and children, young people, and parents/carers. Feedback from professional delegates attending the training includes the following;

- “I feel that I am able to write summaries and case notes in a way that is trauma informed and not victim blaming. I also feel that I will be able to discuss trauma with the people that we work with and feel confident in doing so.”
- “Thought provoking session. Particularly powerful section on re-framing the narrative about an individual. Not always sure we can always change the environment.”

**Other HSCP training developments** - In addition, the partnership has expanded its safeguarding training programme with the addition of a course on childhood neglect and a course on understanding mental capacity. The Graded Care Profile 2 (GCP2) helps professionals measure the quality of care provided by a parent or carer in meeting their child's needs. The Graded Care Profile 2 (GCP2) course has also been reviewed, and a GCP2 refresher course offered. The HSCP has also developed a toolkit for professionals to improve identification and responses to child neglect, which is reinforced through the new childhood neglect training course.

**Restorative and Relational Practice** - With regards promoting restorative and relationship practice approaches, multi-agency professionals were invited to and attended the restorative practice launch events in 2023. A more extensive roll-out of restorative practice training to multi-agency partners is being planned with Leeds, and this will be rolled out across the partnership as part of phase 2 of the Herefordshire – Leeds Improvement Partnership Programme.

**d) Question for Consideration 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?**

**SafeLives Review of Domestic Abuse Responses in Herefordshire** - SafeLives were commissioned by the Herefordshire Community Safety Partnership to undertake a review of the domestic abuse system in Herefordshire. The work was funded by a grant from the West Mercia Police and Crime Commissioner. The report from this review was received in March 2024;

- The report indicates that there is a clear commitment and motivation to effectively address domestic abuse in Herefordshire, for example the report commented upon a clear commitment to creative partnership working and strong implementation of good practice from commissioners and domestic abuse agencies, and evidence of some highly knowledgeable and committed representatives locally. The review also found many examples of silo working which hampered multi-agency working, a lack of domestic abuse awareness in agencies where domestic abuse was not the core business but worked with these issues on a day to day basis, leading to families being misidentified as victim and perpetrator, and those that harm not being held accountable for their behaviour. Five key themes were identified for development, these being;
  - Awareness, understanding and training.
  - Multi-agency working.
  - Authentic voice.

- Response to predators.
- Support for children and young people.
- In relation to the final theme, the SafeLives report highlighted that in line with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, children can be victims of domestic abuse even if they were not present when the abuse occurred, and they are to be regarded as a victim of domestic abuse in their own right. This means that local service provision must consider and address the needs of children affected by domestic abuse. Two specific tools have been recommended.
- Safelives has recommended that Herefordshire considers the need for evidenced based provision which supports the strengthening of relationships between, parent and child, educates parents on the impact of domestic abuse on themselves, their children and their parenting, supports healthy coping strategies and recognises the strengths of the parent and the child.
- From this report the following next steps have been identified in relation to this theme, and these are to be taken forward via the Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board (DALPB).
  - Commissioned services include the need to work with children as recognised victims of domestic abuse.
  - DA specialist posts are in place in the edge of care (ECHO) and early help teams within the Council.
  - Recommended evidence based tools to be reviewed and shared with colleagues in children's services and commissioned services.
  - Whole family approach to be integrated into the MARAC response.
  - Whole family approach to be discussed at DALPB for further actions.

**Domestic Abuse Training** - In 2023/24, domestic abuse training for multi-agency staff and volunteers was commissioned by the Community Safety Partnership, with funding from the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and included the following;

- Impact of Domestic Abuse on Children and Young People, Domestic Abuse and Rural Context, Domestic Abuse and Trauma, Domestic Abuse and Young People's Relationships, all delivered by West Mercia Women's Aid
- "Curiosity Saves Lives – Domestic Abuse Multi-Agency Training," delivered by domestic abuse advisor Martin Lakeman. This course included guidance on having difficult conversations, using professional curiosity, non-victim blaming language and understanding why survivors may struggle to seek support.
- "Cut It Out," delivered by domestic abuse advisor Martin Lakeman. This is an awareness course for all professionals who have a unique, one on one trusting relationship with their clients, such as hair and beauty professionals, physiotherapists, chiropractors, tattooists, cleaners, etc., to help them spot the signs of abuse and start the conversation with potential victims. These courses continue to be delivered into 2024-25.
- Other courses also included Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage, Domestic Abuse and Trauma, Domestic Abuse and Learning Difficulties in Adults, Domestic Abuse and Older People plus Domestic Abuse and the Rural Context.
- A total of 432 delegates attended the 27 courses during 2023/24.

The domestic abuse training programme for 2024-25 is being further developed in response to the learning from the Families' Commission, the SafeLives Report on Domestic Abuse Responses in Herefordshire as well as learning from case reviews. The domestic abuse training programme is currently out for Expressions of Interest from potential training providers, with an expectation that training will resume in September 2024, or earlier if

possible. This will build on the extensive programme of multi-agency domestic abuse courses run in Herefordshire during 2023/24

**e) Question for consideration 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?**

**Children's Services Directorate Leadership Team (DLT)** - DLT has focused on leading and a range of activities over the past year to ensure that social workers are well supported and clear about the desired practice standards and expectations to re-build trust and confidence. The following sets out a number of highlights which evidence this approach with some related performance reporting.

**Workforce** - Recruitment is Herefordshire's number one priority to gain a stable, permanent and well trained workforce as this will provide the best opportunity to ensure priority improvements and developments are embedded. Recruiting and retaining a knowledgeable, skilled and experienced workforce is critical if Children's Services is going to deliver the best possible social work services to local children, young people and their parents. One of the challenges associated with having a level of dependency on agency social workers is the risk associated 'churn' in the workforce as this undermines progress and improvements due to the lack of traction this brings. It also adversely impacts on the level of trust and confidence in relationships with children, young people and their parents. Changes in social workers means children, young people and their parents are less likely to achieve and maintain meaningful relationships, are more likely to have to re-tell their story and receive a lack of continuity and inconsistency in service delivery and decision making. These are recognised risks which Herefordshire is working hard to address and over the past year there is evidence to indicate that progress has been made, although further work is required.

As part of this endeavour, Children's Services strives to become an employer of choice, which is additionally challenging for any local authority judged to be 'inadequate' by Ofsted. Nonetheless the workforce approach commits to creating the conditions within which social workers will be attracted to come and stay working in Herefordshire, hopefully on a permanent basis, although there remains a reliance on agency staff, particularly in some front line operational teams. The type of conditions that are important to grow confident and competent social workers who are best placed to establish and maintain healthy, positive relationships with children, parents and their parents, include having manageable caseloads, proactive, responsive and nurturing line managers and supervisors, visible and accessible senior leaders as well as opportunities for professional learning as well as opportunities for career development. These conditions have been increasingly evident since the publication of the Families' Commission report in June 2023, although more still needs to be done. The workforce 'churn' has slowed, there is more stability in the management group and evidence of some conversions from agency to permanent contracts, although there is still a level of reliance on agency social workers particularly in some front line teams.

**Culture** - Creating a workplace culture that is compassionate, respectful and positive for everyone remains at the core of the refreshed workforce strategy, which includes the following that have a direct bearing on social work practice values, attitudes and behaviour;

- We will keep our working relationship with children, young people and families at the heart of everything we do.
- We will work together with families' wider network of support and our partner agencies
- We will keep our focus on making a difference to improving outcomes for children and young people

**Implementing Restorative Practice** – As mentioned elsewhere in this report, this has been the focus of the Herefordshire – Leeds Improvement Partnership since July 2023, and will continue to be so until March 2025. In line with the delivery and development of restorative practice in Herefordshire, the evidence of emerging better practice, as determined through a recent practice review undertaken by Leeds, includes the following summary of key feedback;

- Whilst some of the families in the good practice cohort had experienced less than perfect support and an interventionist approach in the past, there was evidence of a changed approach for some families in the sample and they were positive about the more recent support from children's services.
- The good practice cohort emphasised the impact of effective engagement and strong relationships between workers and families – key relationships and good direct work had made a big difference
- There was evidence of effective help from a wider range of services such as ECHO, and good use of Family Group Conferences to engage and involve wider family networks.
- Some examples of effective partnership working e.g. in Core Groups and Child Protection Conferences which were well led and had good partner engagement.
- Examples of effective leadership management in supervision, decision-making and grip.
- Progress was made within a challenging context – there were obvious difficulties due to high turnover of social workers and challenges in partnership working, particularly around a tendency to early escalation

**Families for Change Group** - The Families for Change Group, which has been initiated since the publication of the Families' Commission report, includes parents with children who have previously received support and intervention from Children's Services, including some of the parents who previously made representation to the Families' Commission. As was the case with the Families' Commission process, the engagement and participation of parents in the Families for Change Group has proved to be helpful, influential and informative. To date, the Families for Change Group has supported changes within the service. For example, the Families for Change Group have developed family friendly guidance for families in respect of section 20 accommodation, as well as a feedback form to be routinely used by families to provide real time feedback about the services they are receiving plus undertaking a review of letters which are sent to families to ensure these are strengths based. This activity has already had an influence on social worker's practice and it is anticipated that this will continue to have impact as the group continues and develops moving forward.

**Use of Family Group Conferences** - There is evidence of fewer families now subject to pre-proceedings as part of the Public Law Outline (PLO). This is partly due to improved management oversight and better social work practice, but it is also the result of investment and increased use of Family Group Conferencing (FGC). FGCs, which are an integral part of a restorative practice model and strongly advocated by Leeds, is a strengths based approach which enables and supports families to find their own solutions by acknowledging and utilising the strengths and resources within the family's own network. Previously, in Herefordshire the FGC approach was only used in family court proceedings, with time the focus shifted to pre-proceedings and currently there is now also a focus on the use of FGCs during child protection plan, and if at all possible even before child protection planning. This more restorative way of working with families has meant that the performance reporting since September 2023 has shown that the number of children in pre- proceedings has reduced from 47 per 10,000 to 10 per 10,000. The relevance of this is that the more restorative way of working, as seen in the use of FGCs, ensures parents are engaged at an much earlier stage when safeguarding concerns emerge and can, and have, been able to influence different family based solutions which in many instances can, and have, resulted in different outcomes.

**Public Law Outline Pre-Proceedings** - There has been a focus on ensuring that parents are supported to know their rights and to obtain independent legal representation at the earliest point whenever a decision is made to enter pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline. The trigger for parents to access free independent legal advice is the receipt of a letter before proceedings. A letter before proceedings is the letter that Children's Services must send to a parent to start a pre-proceedings process. It should also be sent to anyone else who has parental responsibility for the child. Current performance reporting shows that 85% of parents receive a letter before proceedings within expected timescales which is much improved. In 2022/3, only 46% to 53% of children subject to court care proceedings were subject to pre-proceedings immediately prior to issuing a court application. Current practice improves the opportunity for parents to be informed, engaged and supported to participate. In April 2024, performance was just under 90% and this evidences that social workers are much better at working with and alongside parents to ensure they have the opportunity to engage, with the support of their independent legal advisor, and make appropriate changes to address the identified concerns about their parenting prior to Herefordshire making a decision to apply to Court.

**Family Friendly Child Protection Suite** - There is now a new family friendly child protection suite based in Plough Lane where conferences can be completed in a more relaxed environment where there are additional break out rooms if required. Child Protection Conference Chairs have been trained in facilitating restorative conferences and, according to our performance reporting, the overall the numbers of children on Child Protection Plans has significantly reduced and we are now closer to our statistical neighbours. The proportion of children starting a Child Protection Plan has halved and the rate of children whose plan is ending has doubled.

**Children in Care** - Performance reporting shows a consistent pattern of positive progress with the rate of children becoming looked after by Herefordshire being less than half what it was in 2021/22 and the proportion of children leaving care being 50% higher. Herefordshire has developed its Reunification Practice Guidance and in 2023/24, 22 children and young people had their Care Orders discharged and were reunified with their birth parents as it was determined that it was safe and in their best interests to do so. A further 4 children and young people are subject to court applications to also have their Care Order discharged. The Reunification Practice Guidance (2023) states includes the following which acknowledges the message received the Families' Commission;

*"We are seeking to address the feedback and criticism that has been received from those who have felt 'done to' in the past. Whilst we will continue to adhere to the paramountcy principle and place children 'first and foremost' we will actively seek to identify children who are 'potentially suited' to reunification, work restoratively and in partnership with their birth families and together with our partners to achieve lasting impact and improved outcomes."* (Page 3)

**Complaints:** Stage 1 complaint responses are now more consistently met within timescales, although stage 2 complaint responses currently take too long.

**f) Questions for consideration 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** - A draft of Think Family guidance has been produced. This is being consulted on with parents and carers groups (the Parents for Change and domestic abuse Lived Experience of Abuse Group), as well as with professionals. This is taking place with support from both the Safeguarding Children's Partnership and Safeguarding Adult's Board. The draft guidance explains the Think Family approach, why this is important

in the Herefordshire context, and sets out expectations for professionals and organisations. The guidance will also provide a reference to different services and confirms the appropriate policies and procedures that can be used to help provide support for the whole family.

- The roll-out and implementation of Think Family approaches will include practitioner briefings, as well as single-agency dissemination.
- In relation to the work of the Joint Case Review Group, a Think Family approach has been incorporated into the consideration of learning from case reviews and is being included within scoping and terms of reference for case reviews.
- The HSCP is working with the Herefordshire Safeguarding Adult's Board to strengthen transition pathways for young people at risk of exploitation. This includes further developing the response to young people and adults at risk of exploitation, particularly where they do not have eligible care and support needs to receive adult social care. The Complex Adults Risk Management Framework, which provides a multi-agency approach to support adults with complex needs, is also being reviewed as a tool to support young people at risk of exploitation as they transition into adulthood.

**g) Question for consideration 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?**

Within the HSCP single agency check and challenge processes, all of the single agencies have been able to provide reassurance to the HSCP Independent Scrutineer that there are robust complaints processes in place which are accessible to the public (normally via their organisation's website). Assurance was also sought that the outcome from complaints then influences practice. Agencies attending were able to provide assurance that this was the case, however securing specific examples from each agency of how findings from complaints are acted upon will need to form part of the follow up from the Section 11 audit challenge sessions. The HSCP has now linked agency complaints processes to the partnership website, to support easier access to these procedures.

**Gail Hancock**

**Interim Service Director (Corporate Parenting)**

**26 June 2024**