

Questions from members of the public – Scrutiny management Board, 10 September 2024

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
PQ 1	Ms. Maggie Steel Hereford	<p>388 children were in the care of Herefordshire Council as of December 2022 according to Eleanor Brazil’s initial report to the Children’s Minister.</p> <p>This figure was 84% higher than our statistical neighbours. Eleanor Brazil blamed this astonishing anomaly on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“poor decision making”</i> • <i>“drift and delay”</i> <p>18 months later, in a report to the Children’s Scrutiny Committee, we find out that there are still 386 children in care in Herefordshire.</p> <p>Only 2 fewer children in care after 18 months and millions invested. Our rate for children in care is still 83% higher than statistical neighbours.</p> <p>Either parents in Herefordshire are persistently failing their children, or poor decision making and drift and delay continue to fail children and the taxpayer.</p> <p>Who is responsible for the failure to make any significant progress in reducing the number of children in care in Herefordshire?</p>	Scrutiny Management Board

Response by Cabinet Member Children and Young People

To answer the question “why haven’t our looked after children numbers significantly reduced”, we have to understand not only the number of looked after children but also the overall rate per 10,000 of children in care and the number of children entering and leaving care, both in our authority, and compared to the West Midlands region and nationally.

During 23/24, we received 96 new children into care and 121 left care throughout that year. This gave us a rate of 112 per 10,000 children in care at the end of 23/24. During 24/25 at quarter one, we have seen 26 new children enter care, and 24 leave care. As at July 2024, the rate has reduced to 106 children per 10,000.

Whilst we remain above the national statistical neighbour (SN) rate of 64 (23/24 data), we have to appreciate our own journey and that of our region. For those children that are in our care currently, we need to carefully plan for their exit, so that when they do leave care to

permanency, they achieve a long-term stable family life. During the full year 23/24, we saw 19 children leave care for permanency. During quarter one of 24/25, we have already seen 11 children leave care for permanency, so an improving trend. This is reflective of success in the complex work required to identify those children who were experiencing drift and delay. Some of this work requires discharging care orders, which needs to go through court process, and some is about working alongside families to ensure a safe plan of rehabilitation is in place. Both need updated assessments and good engagement with children, young people, families and the court.

For those children and young people we work with to prevent entering care, we have to do this whilst managing risks within the family home and community. This requires good partnership working and importantly a partnership approach to managing risk. The Restorative Practice model seeks to ensure that, as a children's workforce and partnership, we improve the way we work with families, is strength based and together manages the risk. This can cause great professional anxiety in the children's workforce across the partnership fuelled by local and national media coverage in the style of "who is to blame when something goes wrong". We are rolling out the Restorative Practice model to our partners now and delivering multi agency practice workshops planned to start November/December 24

Across the region in terms of "new" looked after children, we have a rate of 7 per 10k this quarter. Of the 14 local authorities, eight have lower incoming rates; however, their rates range from 4 to 6 and two share the same rate (Sandwell and Telford), the latter being an "outstanding" local authority in our region. There are three local authorities in our region who have greater "new" care rates and their rates are either 10 or 11 per 10k.

Our overall rate of looked after children at quarter one was 115 per 10k (at quarter 1 June 24 - note this has reduced to 106 at July 24) and our regional statistical neighbour Shropshire is 126 and Solihull is 111. So whilst our practice for care prevention is not the best it is certainly improving and reflective of the region.

It is also important for us to recognise the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) we have in our care. During 23/24 we went from 11 (April 23) up to 38 (March 24) and increased our care leavers from 30 up to 80. The vast majority of UASC remain in our care always up until the age of 18 and therefore are not children that will leave the care system at an earlier point. The rising number of UASC in every local authority is in response to the mandatory National Transfer Scheme which expects each local authority to accept 0.01% of their under 18 population, and the number of children and young people who self-present in the region. When we compare our unaccompanied figures to our statistical neighbours within the region, Shropshire have 37 and Solihull 38 so we remain low and below our own mandatory national target.

It is well known that Herefordshire Children's Services is on an improvement journey. The instability that Herefordshire has experienced in social work turnover impacts on our ability to progress children's plans which is why workforce stability is the primary foundation to our improvement journey. In Quarter 1 we can see good progress in workforce permanency and this continues to be our priority.

All social workers

Q4 March 24: 35% Perm. 56% Agency. 9% Vacant. - **Q1 June 24: 46% Perm. 50% Agency. 4% Vacant.**

Team Managers & Above;

Q4 March24: 70% Perm. 28% Agency. 3% Vacant. - **Q1 June 24: 82% Perm. 18% Agency. 0% Vacant**

The question posed also refers to the 'responsibility for failure'. Herefordshire Children's Services are on an improvement journey, which also relies on the contribution from our partners. It is acknowledged that our children in care numbers need to reduce further to reflect the SN averages that we would expect to see in Herefordshire. However, I hope I have explained why there is no "responsibility for failure" as our improvement journey continues and progress is being made, and why there is a need to consider broader areas than just the "number" of children in our care.