

Title of report: Ofsted Monitoring Visit Feedback

Meeting: Cabinet

Meeting date: Thursday 27th March 2025

Cabinet member: Ivan Powell, children and young people;

Report by: Corporate Director, Childrens and Young People

Report author: Corporate Director, Childrens and Young People

Classification

Open

Decision type

Non-key

Wards affected.

(All Wards);

Purpose

To share the feedback letter from Ofsted following their sixth Monitoring Visit conducted in February 2025

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) Cabinet receive and note the feedback and service response from Ofsted Inspectors' Monitoring Visit Outcome letter.**

Alternative options

1. There are no alternative options. Herefordshire Council Children's Service is judged to be inadequate by Ofsted and will be subject to monitoring visits until the next Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) where a re-grading will be considered.

Key considerations

2. Herefordshire's sixth monitoring visit took place 18th and 19th February 2025. The focus of this visit was on Social Work Assessments. Ofsted findings in full can be found in appendix one. The summary of findings is set out below with service response where appropriate.
3. **Focus Social Work Assessments**
 - 3.1 The focus of the inspection centred around the quality and timeliness of social work assessments. This included Children and Family Social Work Assessments, undertaken following referrals into the MASH and deemed to meet need at level 4.
 - 3.2 These include those undertaken under S17 of the Children Act 1989; children who require assessment to determine their needs and level of support and child protection enquires under S47 of the Children Act 1989; children subject of referral into MASH where it is believed the child may be at risk of significant harm.
 - 3.3 Inspectors followed through to the outcome of assessments including those that step down to Early Help or closure, those that stepped into Child in Need planning and those that stepped up to child protection planning and were presented at initial child protection conference.

The headline findings **"timely completion of assessment and support provided by social workers and family support workers in the assessment and support teams has a positive impact which enables the majority of children and their families to progress in having their needs met"** and ***"leaders are now making some tangible progress to improve the quality and consistency of practice within the assessment teams"***

4. **Threshold for intervention – Right Service Right Time**
 - 4.1 Ofsted found that *"thresholds are appropriately applied"* and that *"informed decisions about the level of intervention and decisions and recommendations to meet the needs of children are clearly thought through with a clear rationale"*.
 - 4.2 Ofsted found that for the children they saw being accommodated into care, these decisions were at the right threshold and these children were appropriately brought into care to protect them from further harm.
 - 4.3 Ofsted also found that Strategy Meetings were appropriately held to consider risk of harm to children presented in referrals and assessments.

- 4.4 Ofsted referenced our performance data which has identified re-referral rates have recently increased and that historically opportunities have been missed to identify and understand the needs of these children at the earliest opportunity i.e. at the point of previous referrals.
- 4.5 The service notes that re-referrals, while not being a good performance indicator, is associated with greater confidence in the partnership to refer back into children's social care enabling previously missed opportunities to be addressed to carry out better quality assessments. We also need to continue our work to understand any barriers to effective early help that supports families to sustain positive outcomes they have achieved in any prior intervention.
- 4.6 This is a performance indicator we will monitor and analyse to ensure we understand the drivers for re-referral and ultimately seek to reduce them so that children and families receive "the right help at the right time".

5. **Partnership Working**

- 5.1 Ofsted found that "*a range of professionals and agencies are involved and make an important contribution to assessments as well as provide the support which families need*" and that child protection "*strategy meetings are well attended by multi agency partners*".
- 5.2 In reviewing these multi agency interventions Ofsted found that "*information is effectively shared, and decisions are made together by those that know the family and child to protect children*".
- 5.2 In reviewing our practice and data Ofsted found that our joint work to ensure children's social care and police are working together on child protection enquiries had resulted in a positive increase from 24% to 34% of child protection inquiries being undertaken as joint enquiries with both agencies recognising and acting on their respective threshold for investigation where a child had been identified at risk of suffering significant harm.

6. **Working with Children, Young People and Families**

- 6.1 We were pleased that Ofsted found that "*many social workers developed relationships with parents and children in a skilled way*" and that our social workers and family support workers use the period of assessment to undertake direct work with children and families providing an immediate response to presenting need, enabling parents to address their children's needs or risks quickly.
- 6.2 As part of this inspection our Young Carers work was reviewed, and we were really pleased that Ofsted found that we were supporting more young carers and that "*assessments were comprehensive and child focused*" with staff advocating and supporting young carers to have their needs understood and met.

- 6.3 Our drive to ensure we receive feedback from children and parents was recognised as more embedded into audit activity giving us a more meaningful insight into the experience and impact of our practice on the children families we work with.

7. **Quality of practice**

- 7.1 Ofsted found good quality and timeliness in our social work assessments with findings that:

- Most assessments are comprehensive and provide an evaluation of children's needs.
- Assessments were completed in a timely way.
- Social workers understand the model of practice.
- Social Workers are cognisant of issues such as disguised compliance.
- Safeguarding concerns that emerged during assessment were responded to, with timely strategy meetings being held to consider the risk of harm to children.
- Section 47 enquiries were thorough, and risks fully understood.
- Safety plans were recorded and shared in a timely way.
- Children's ethnicity considered to help understand their lived experience.

- 7.2 In reviewing our approach to pre-birth assessment and decision-making Ofsted found this had been strengthened with "*more recent practice producing thorough assessments and timely decision-making*".

- 7.3 Ofsted feedback to us that our social work assessments are not usually written in a way that they are addressed directly to the child, which is recommend good practice and some of our assessments are unnecessarily lengthy and repetitive.

- 7.4 The service accepted these findings and were able to assure Ofsted that the development of the social work assessment, alongside training for social workers and development of practice guidelines, was part of our Families First implementation programme.

8. **Management & Leadership**

- 8.1 Ofsted found that there was a stronger understanding and commitment across the council to children who need the support of children's social care and that this was reflected in its corporate plans, priorities and the commitment to developing "Child Friendly Herefordshire".

- 8.2 Ofsted recognised our positive development and application of "*strengthened Quality Assurance activity*" and were more assured we were using these outcomes to improve our practice, ultimately knowing ourselves better. The service acknowledges there is still more to do to have quality audits that provide succinct findings to address and improve service learning.

- 8.4 Our workforce continued to report that they enjoy working for Herefordshire and were positive about.

- Feeling engaged and supported by managers and leaders

- Receiving regular supervision that provides helpful reflection and direction
- Being supported by a good quality Learning and Development offer, including the role out of a management development program.
- Being supported as newly qualified social workers.

- 8.5 Our success in permanency recruitment and reduction in short term agency turnover was recognised. However, Ofsted noted that establishing greater permanency in our workforce remains a priority.
- 8.6 The outcome findings letter will be shared and discussed with our partners through the Children's Safeguarding Board to identify any further partnership actions required as a result of this focused monitoring visit.
- 8.8 This Monitoring Visit outcome letter will be available to the public via the Ofsted website on 20th March 25. It will also be available via the Council website.
- 8.9 The next monitoring visit will be our seventh monitoring visit and is likely to be our final visit before we are subject to full re-inspection. This is expected before the end of 2025.

Community impact

9. The County Plan 2024–2028 includes the ambition to 'enable residents to realise their potential, to be healthy and benefit from communities that help people to feel safe and supported' and more specifically, the council aims to:
- a. We want to support children and young people to thrive, be safe, and for families to be supported.
 - b. We believe that children and young people are best supported in their family networks and within highly effective schools and flourishing communities. Our children are the future. Sometimes children and families need our help.
 - c. We are committed to improving children's services and providing support to families who need it. Acting on Ofsted monitoring visits are part of our drive to improve our services to children and families.

Environmental Impact

- 10 There are no specific environmental impacts arising from this report.

Equality duty

- 11 There are no equality issues arising from this report.

Resource implications

- 12 There are no specific resource implications arising from this report.

Legal implications

- 13 The Ofsted inspection in July 2022 was undertaken under the Framework, Evaluation Criteria and Inspector Guidance for the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS). This contains provisions regarding actions to be taken after an inadequate inspection report. These include monitoring by Ofsted, an action plan, a number of monitoring visits and a re-inspection.

Risk management

- 14 There are no new or additional risks arising from this visit. Risks associated with the wider improvement plan are monitored by the Improvement Board.

Consultees

- 15 None

Appendices

Appendix A: Ofsted Feedback Letter.

Background papers

None identified.

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.