



Title of Report: Herefordshire Children's Services and Partnership Improvement Plan

Meeting: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date: 22nd July 2025

Report by: Director of Children's Services

Classification

Open

Decision Type

This is not an executive decision

Wards Affected

All wards

Purpose

To scrutinise the Herefordshire Children's Services and Partnership Improvement Plan Phase 3 and Quality Assurance Framework.

Recommendation

That the committee scrutinise the Herefordshire Children's Services and Partnership Improvement Plan Phase 3 and the service approach to Quality Assurance and make any recommendations to the service that they believe will support the improvement of services.

Alternative Options

The committee agreed to carry out the monitoring of the improvement plan as part of its annual programme.

Key Considerations

1. Children's Services was inspected by Ofsted in July 2022 under the Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework.

2. The inspection report was published on 21 September 2022 and is available at <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50192875>
3. The Secretary of State issued a Statutory Direction (<https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50192875>) to Herefordshire Council on 21 September 2022, and appointed a Commissioner for Children's Services.
4. The overall judgement was that Herefordshire Children's Service was 'inadequate'. The judgements contributing to this outcome are as follows:

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Inadequate
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Inadequate
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Inadequate
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate

5. During Phase 2 of the improvement journey three Ofsted monitoring visits have taken place.
6. October 2024 Ofsted Monitoring Visit focused on The protection of vulnerable children at risk from extra familial risk. The outcome letter headline reads "Since the last monitoring visit in February 24 a new *interim director of children's services has been appointed who has brought renewed focus to areas of the service which needed to improve. A refreshed improvement plan is being implemented and there are some early signs of improvement*" The full report which is at Appendix A provides a detailed summary of the monitoring visit which includes findings that most children vulnerable to exploitation risks who come to the attention of children's services are promptly identified with timely information sharing between partners and that the Get Safe Team work effectively to reduce risks for many children. It finds most work is timely and well-structured with staff forming lasting and trusting relationships and that a collaborative approach across the partnership to risk management leads to reliable decisions.
7. February 2025 Ofsted monitoring visit focused on **Children subject to child protection enquiries such as strategy discussions and section 47 emergency action, including liaison with police use of police powers of protection and emergency Protection Orders, Child in need assessments and decisions to accommodate during initial assessment and Step up and Step down to early help.** The outcome letter headline findings state "*since the last monitoring visit in October 24 the local authority has started to build some momentum in the pace of progress to improve services for vulnerable children. Strategic leaders are beginning to establish the foundations for stronger practice and are achieving greater consistency and the quality of practice by the assessment teams. The implementation of the Herefordshire children's services and partnership improvement plan is making progress.*" The full report found at Appendix B is a very positive report confirming the services are providing timely, comprehensive assessments and that thresholds are appropriately applied and informed decisions about the level of intervention made.
8. June 2025 the 7th and final Ofsted monitoring visit took place with a focus on **The quality of matching placements and decision making for children in care and the Experiences and progress of children in care.** The outcome letter findings state "*The quality of practice for children in care in Herefordshire has improved at pace since the last monitoring visit which focused on children in care in early 2024 where little progress was found. Over the last year, following the appointment of a new interim director of children's services, leaders and senior managers have worked with fresh momentum and conviction to create the conditions for social work to flourish.*"

This is having a positive impact for children in care. Consistently stronger child focused practice is improving the experience and outcomes for children in care in Herefordshire”.

9. The Ofsted Monitoring visits are the independent inspection that provides oversight, challenge and assurance as to the progress of the improvement plan and the difference it's making to the quality of services to children and families. We are pleased that we have now received three consecutive positive Ofsted Monitoring visit reports. The service is now awaiting its full re inspection which will take place before the end of 2025

Development of the Plan Phase 3

10. The Phase 3 Improvement Plan has been developed in line with what has been an effective Phase 2 plan approach and aims to sustain focus and pace to our improvement work.
11. The plan sets out highlights of what has been achieved in the last 12 months and retains the “plan on a page”.
12. Phase 3 incorporates the development and implementation of the Families First programme which is part of the Government's Welfare Reforms. The Families First programme has a local authority lead with a multi-agency steering group and will report independently to the Children Young People Strategic Partnership and the Children's Safeguarding Partnership on its implementation and progress.
13. Phase 3 also sets out our engagement with the region and our contribution to the regional key priorities under the West Midlands Regional Improvement Alliance. It is important for Herefordshire that we have strong representation and engagement in the delivery against these priorities to ensure the Herefordshire voice is heard and taken into account and that we maximise on all regional learning and investment opportunities.
14. During 24/25 the service introduced its new Quality Assurance Programme. The Quality Assurance Programme enables us to:
 - **know ourselves well**, our strengths and our areas for improvement so we can take timely action to improve
 - **understand the experience and impact our services make to the children and families** so we can be sure we are “**making a difference**”
 - understand how it feels to be part of the children workforce, so we are an **employer of choice** giving our children and young people stability and consistency in good quality help, support and protection
15. Our Quality Assurance Framework is made up of three complementary components: Case practice Auditing, Service User Feedback and Key Performance Indicator analysis. The Quality Assurance Framework document can be found at Appendix 4
16. Case Audit – This Is a programme of monthly auditing of random sample cases across the service. Each case is audited by two separate managers, one manager who is case responsible and an independent manager. The audit outcomes are then compared and moderated by a senior manager. The audits are divided into 5 domains to assess the quality of practice in:
 - voice of the child being present in assessment and planning
 - quality of assessment
 - quality of plan
 - quality of partnership working

- provision of supervision and management oversight
- recognition and inclusion of diversity

17. The grade descriptors document provides guidance for auditors as to what constitutes: Outstanding / Good / Requires Improvement or Inadequate practice. This is located at Appendix 5
18. In addition to this monthly programme of case file auditing there is a wide range of targeted auditing that takes place in each service area. The targeted audits are undertaken as a result of service user feedback, KPI analysis, implementation or compliance with policies or practice standards.

Feedback from Children and Families

19. is the second crucial part of our quality assurance framework and it enables us to understand how children and their families are experiencing our services and the impact they make.
20. Introduced in September 24 we send via closure letters a survey to all parents at the end of an intervention providing each family with the ability to complete this survey online. However we also put in place a regular programme of calls made directly to parents and your people at the point of closure, and we have found this approach to be far more productive in terms of take up.
21. Throughout 24/25 through this method, we obtained the feedback from 109 different parents. In Q1 of 25/26 we have received an addition 52 responses. An analysis report on the feedback is provided each quarter as part of the improvement plan progress reporting.
22. In addition, we also seek parental, and children young people feedback for each of the case audits that we undertake monthly. Again, we developed our process where we contact parents/young people as soon as the case for audit is identified and agree a time slot for them to feedback to the auditor. We have again found that this has increased contribution. In Q4 we received 17 contributions and in Q1 of this year we have received 33 contributions.
23. A third method of receiving feedback from children and families is through our compliments and complaints processes. These are incorporated into our quarterly and annual Complaints and Compliments reports and learning bulletins
24. The above mechanisms for seeking feedback from parents, carer and children and young people is separate from the individual engagement of these parties in our case work assessments and planning.

Analysis of Key Performance Indicators

25. Key performance indicators (KPI) is the third part of our Quality Assurance framework. This enables us to monitor workload, workflow, demand and timeliness. An Improvement Board KPI Dashboard was developed under Phase 2, and this has been updated to reflect phase 3 of our improvement plan.
26. The Dashboard consists of approximately 60 key indicators that are individually and collectively analysed and cross referenced with England, Statistical Neighbour and Regional averages, where these are available, to give us an understanding of the Herefordshire position.

27. It is however always important that we understand our own pattern and trends within these KPI's and have an ability to respond dynamically to what they tell us. For example, a drop in Social Work Assessments completed in timescales cross referenced with the leaving of three staff at a similar time at the beginning of last year was identified. This led to swift action by the services manager to seek support from colleagues across the services to re-allocate assessments to prevent drift and delay and snr managers reviewed additional data to seek assurance there was no "backlog" of open assessments.
28. The Phase 3 plan sets out the quality assurance measures within each domain against the Ofsted Recommendations.
29. The remaining part of the Phase 3 plan updates the list of activity that will take place to implement the plan through 25/26. Governance remains under the improvement board there will be reporting progress reports and quality assurance reports on a regular basis. The full Phase 3 plan is available at Appendix 6.

Community Impact

30. The Ofsted inspection judgement of 'Inadequate' has a direct and indirect effect on the lives of both current and future children and families in Herefordshire.
31. Effective scrutiny enables the committee to reflect community concern, one of the four purposes of scrutiny as outlined by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

Environmental Impact

32. There are no direct environmental impacts resulting from scrutinising this report.

Equality Duty

33. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. There are no direct equality impacts in scrutinising this report. However, any recommendations made by the committee may have an equalities impact if agreed by Cabinet or the portfolio holder. These risks will need to be evaluated and if necessary mitigated before any recommendation is accepted.

Resource Implications

34. This report constitutes part of the typical function of this committee. Similarly, a programme of work undertaken by committee is an integral part of the council's 'business as usual'. Therefore, there is no resource implication in setting or agreeing a work programme. However, any recommendations made by the committee may have a resource implication if agreed by Cabinet or the portfolio holder. These risks will need to be evaluated and if necessary mitigated before any recommendation is accepted.

Legal Implications

35. The remit of the scrutiny committee is set out in part 3 section 4 of the constitution and the role of the scrutiny committee is set out in part 2 article 6 of the constitution.
36. The Local Government Act 2000 requires the council to deliver the scrutiny function.

Risk Management

1. In producing the plan, the Director or Children's Services has considered and mitigated the following risks.

Risk / Opportunity	Mitigation
Partnership buy in to the plan – recognising a joint responsibility to deliver an improved childrens services.	Extensive partnership engagement activity and involvement, focus groups with children and young people and key stakeholders. Quartely partnership summits.
Plan is not adopted or endorsed.	Continuous engagement throughout the development of the plan and the governance process. Engagement with Corporate Leadership Team, Department Leadership Team, the Improvement Board, the Commissioner and the Department for Education.

Consultees

40. There have no consultations required to produce this report.

Appendices

Appendix A Ofsted Monitoring visit October 24
 Appendix B Ofsted Monitoring visit letter March 2025
 Appendix C Ofsted Monitoring visit letter July 2025 (to be publicly available 17th July)
 Appendix D Quality Assurance and Learning Framework
 Appendix E Audit Grading Descriptors August 2024
 Appendix F Improvement Plan Phase 3

Background Papers

None