

Progress Report to the Minister of State for Children and Families on Children Services in Herefordshire

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DfE appointed Commissioner for Herefordshire Children's Services

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The findings from the Ofsted Inspection of Herefordshire Local Authority Children's Services in November 2025 (published January 2026) have served as a pivotal health check for my final review. Ofsted confirmed that Herefordshire Children's Services' overall effectiveness is good, with an outstanding judgement for the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families. This culture of methodical and systematic improvement represents a significant shift away from the more crisis driven culture of the past.

This report focuses on three key themes that demonstrate sustained improvement within children's services.

1. Sustaining Service Improvement: Are effective arrangements in place?

Ofsted explicitly praised the refreshed and appropriately targeted Phase Three Improvement Plan: *'A concise and coherent improvement plan has been embraced by leaders at all levels and owned by frontline staff, who understand their role in the changes needed.'*

'The chief executive, leader of the council and lead member are fully engaged in the improvement plan, providing necessary support and challenge when needed. Children's services are rightly considered to be a high priority for the council.'

Six months on from the inspection, the Phase Three Improvement Plan has been fully embedded within Children's Services' business planning and is now delivered as part of business-as-usual. The Improvement Board was stood down in January 2026, as effective oversight, challenge, and accountability are now provided through existing governance structures, including the Safeguarding Children's Partnership and the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP). These arrangements are robust and well-established.

Independent Scrutiny and External Assurance

Alongside strengthened internal governance, the service has benefited from a range of external scrutiny mechanisms:

- **Peer reviews** confirm the robustness of practice and leadership.
- **Independent audits** commissioned by the council demonstrate sustained improvement in decision-making, supervision, and planning.
- The **Independent Scrutineer** of the Safeguarding Children Partnership provides assurance that multi-agency safeguarding arrangements are strong, mature, and compliant with statutory guidance.
- **Benchmarking** against statistical neighbours shows Herefordshire's performance trajectory is now aligned with, or exceeding, comparable authorities.

This independent validation provides confidence that improvements are real, embedded, and sustainable.

Safeguarding Children Partnership

The Safeguarding Children Partnership has sustained and strengthened its improvement activity, having fully addressed previous areas for development. It now operates with greater consistency, stronger use of data, and more effective multi-agency working. Quality assurance is fully embedded and there is a strong performance reporting routine. Audit and training processes focus on partnership impact.

Social Care Reform

Herefordshire Council are engaging proactively with the reform agenda. The Families First Partnership Programme (FFPP) implementation plan is welcomed by partners and strengthening local relationships, supporting the delivery of social care reforms. There is an effective programme management function overseeing implementation, and at present we should be confident about full operation of the FFP model by the March 2027 deadline.

A Plan on a Page for 2026/27 has been developed to describe how social care reforms, SEND reforms, corporate parenting business plan, SCP priorities and the CYPSP, function together to:

- Strengthen family help pathways and preventative services
- Expanding local placement options and specialist provision
- Deepen co-production with children, young people, and families
- Redefine quality assurance to focus on impact and outcomes through analysis of performance indicators, audits and child and family feedback
- Embed Child Friendly Herefordshire across all departments and partners
- Maintain workforce stability through development and progression

These priorities reflect a forward-looking and mature approach to continuous improvement.

Voice of Children and Families

Children's voices are increasingly shaping service design, practice development, and strategic priorities, with clear evidence of meaningful engagement across the system.

Financial Sustainability

The sustainability of improvement is underpinned by a strengthened financial strategy:

- Improved budget discipline and reduced historical overspend.
- A refreshed placement sufficiency strategy reducing reliance on high-cost external placements.
- Investment in family help and edge-of-care services supporting long-term demand reduction.
- Medium-Term Financial Plan modelling showing a more predictable and manageable cost envelope.

Assurance on Impact and Risk

Sustained improvement is demonstrated not only through inspection findings but through clear, measurable progress in key performance and quality indicators. 2025/26 performance data evidence the impact of strengthened leadership, practice consistency, and governance maturity on outcomes for children and families. Strategic risks are routinely monitored through established governance structures, ensuring early identification and swift action.

2. Addressing Specific Ofsted Findings

In January 2026, Ofsted updated Herefordshire's status from inadequate to good, with outstanding for the impact of leaders on social work. This, alongside positive monitoring visits — notably the 6th and 7th visits in 2025 — demonstrates clear and sustainable improvement.

The ILACS report identified two areas for development:

- Management oversight of the LADO function
- Identification and assessment of children living in private fostering arrangements

Inspectors noted that leaders were already aware of these issues and had arrangements in place to address them. The service has since reviewed the ILACS feedback and identified a further eight areas of focus. All ten areas now form the Ofsted Action Plan, endorsed by the Council's Children's Scrutiny Panel and incorporated into the 2026/27 Business Plan. I have already seen progress across all these areas, and Ofsted's specific concerns have substantively been addressed.

The adoption of **Child Friendly Herefordshire** as a corporate policy further demonstrates a mature, system-wide commitment to sustainable, child-centred practice. Child Friendly Herefordshire means creating a county where children and young people are **safe, heard, valued, and able to thrive**, with organisations and communities working together to put their needs and voices at the heart of decision-making.

3. Stable and Committed Leadership

A new Chief Executive has been appointed and will take up post in mid-June 2026. The current Chief Executive leaves later in June with transition meetings planned. While the corporate centre is in transition, the Leader of the Council, Lead Member, the Director of Children's Services and the senior leadership team continue to provide the stability required to maintain service improvements.

Ofsted noted that social workers feel '*safer and less anxious*' due to stable leadership and management. The senior leadership team works effectively together and acts as a buffer, ensuring that the Chief Executive recruitment and induction process will not distract from frontline practice nor disrupt the improvement trajectory.

The Leader of the Council will ensure that the new Chief Executive maintains the rigorous level of executive oversight required to sustain the recent improvements. Quartet meetings will continue involving the Chief Executive, Leader, Lead Member and DCS to ensure needs of children and young people are recognised and prioritised.

The Leader has articulated mechanisms that he will continue to monitor to provide assurance that the system remains highly effective, safe, and robust against any regression:

- Good transition arrangements
- A clear set of directions provided to the new Chief Executive
- Continuing to empower the children's services leadership team
- KPI dashboards and independent oversight will remain transparent
- Children's Services to remain a political, permanent high priority risk rather than a completed task

These arrangements provide confidence that the transition will be well managed and avoid any disruption to children's service delivery and improvement.

Recommendation

Based on the evidence presented, it is my view that Herefordshire Children's Services has demonstrated sustained, embedded, and measurable improvement. The conditions that led to statutory intervention have been addressed, and the service now operates with strong leadership, effective governance, and a clear focus on children's outcomes. Herefordshire Local Authority are committed to the national reform programme and are well advanced in implementing the FFP model.

Based on the points addressed above, I am happy to recommend that the Statutory Direction is revoked and the formal intervention in Herefordshire Children's Social Care be brought to an end.

Deborah McMillan