



Committee and Date

Cabinet

13 March 2024

Item

Public



Children’s Social Care Improvement Plan

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1. Synopsis

Cabinet are asked to approve the Improvement Plan prepared by the Director of People and endorsed by the Children’s Improvement Board to address the issues identified by the Ofsted at their Focused Visit in November 2023.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The Shropshire Plan aims to ensure that the needs of children are met through the Healthy People objectives, specifically that “providing early support and interventions that reduce risk and enable children, young people, adults and families to achieve their full potential and enjoy life.” The work of Children’s Social Care and Safeguarding intervenes in the lives of children and families at the point where harm has already happened or there are concerns about a child’s welfare. The service aims to work with families to reduce risk and enable the family to go on to achieve their potential.
- 2.2. The focus visit from OFSTED was part of their Inspection Framework, (Inspection of Local Authorities Childrens Services – ILACS). Following the full inspection in February 2022 where the service was graded Good overall, with Requires Improvement for Safeguarding, the focus visit was expected. During the Annual Conversation with OFSTED in June 2023, our Self Evaluation highlighted that there were areas of weakness in practice, the reasons for which were understood,

by the service and subsequently by inspectors. It was therefore anticipated that the Focus Visit would be in relation to Child in Need, Child Protection and Pre – Proceedings (known as PLO).

- 2.3. Cabinet has had sight of the published letter (see Appendix C) from OFSTED and the concerns that were highlighted.
- 2.4. This report brings to Cabinet the role of the Children's Improvement Board and the Improvement Action Plan. Appendix A attached is the Terms of Reference for the Children's Improvement Board and Appendix B is the Improvement Action Plan.

3. Recommendations

That Cabinet

- 3.1. Approve the Improvement Plan (Appendix A) and recommend to Council to approve the Terms of Reference of the Childrens Improvement Board (Appendix B) . The plan will be submitted to OFSTED as required.
- 3.2. Recommend that People's Overview Committee receive quarterly updates in relation to the plan and its progress.

Report

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. There is a risk that without targeted and focused intervention, with clear objectives defined and the ability to measure progress, that the current issues will continue to escalate and the practice issues will become systemic and entrenched.
- 4.2. There is a risk that without full council support to address the challenges, especially in relation to recruitment and retention of staff within and directly related to the service, then the concerns raised will not be addressed and the next full inspection by OFSTED risks identifying an inadequate service. This could identify serious and widespread failings in the services to children leading to poor outcomes.
- 4.3. Risk table

<i>Risk</i>	<i>Mitigation</i>
Failure to recruit permanent experienced social workers	Project in place to develop an effective recruitment strategy.
Managers /Leaders do not undertake the oversight required.	Clarity of expectations and role.
Failure to deliver the improvements in practice identified by OFSTED.	Delivery of the action plan, attached as Appendix B.

5. Financial Implications

5.1.

The Action Plan attached at Appendix B was created ahead of the Medium Term Financial Plan receiving approval at Council on 29 February 2024. The financial implications, as far as they can be identified, have been considered in the preparation of the 2024/25 budget. As such this report identifies no further financial implications.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. The role of social work intervention requires face to face contacts with children and families in their homes, schools and meetings in the area in which they live. There is a high use of cars for visits due to the rural nature of the county.
- 6.2. Several children are cared for by family or are in children's homes/foster care out of Shropshire and they must be visited face to face, as a statutory requirement. Attempts are made to manage visits and make them an effective use of time and vehicle miles.
- 6.3. Staff are encouraged to travel with care, use public transport where possible, use council fleet vehicles where practical and limit unnecessary journeys.
- 6.4. The service has a strong working relationship with the Council's affordable Warmth Team, referring families for support where needed.

7. Background

- 7.1. During the Focused Visit in November 2023 the Executive Director of People and the Chief Executive agreed that to ensure a Council wide response to the challenges faced that a Children's Improvement Board would be formed. The Board is in place which the Chief Executive Chairs and the Executive Director of Resources is be a key attendee, along with other Assistant Directors to support the key challenges. The first Board met 5th December 2023 and agreed that cross party representation from members with experience of children's services would be of benefit, providing additional challenge and support.
- 7.2. The Board met again in January and February 2024 and will be considered at full Council on 21 March so that it can be included in Part 3 of the Council's Constitution.
- 7.3. In addition there is an Independent Member on the Board from the Local Government Association (LGA) who is an Improvement Lead.
- 7.4. The Children's Improvement Action Plan is attached at Appendix B. The improvement plan has been written to address the areas identified by the Inspectors during the focused visit. The domains address the themes identified.

Also included are actions that reflect further learning from the visit and seek to provide assurance about practice service wide.

- 7.5. The first draft of the plan was shared with managers and staff and feedback received. An early draft was shared and a near completed draft was shared with EMT and Children's Improvement Board members week commencing 26 February for comment and agreement. The final version will be shared with the Safeguarding Partnership Executive Board.
- 7.6. The issues raised by OFSTED are well understood and reflect an accumulation of several key factors occurring at the same time. The most significant causal factor is the recruitment and retention of experienced Child Protection Social Workers. This is a national issue, with currently over 7,000 vacancies in Children's Social Work roles, and particularly those in Child Protection and Court Work. Over the last 12-18 months the service has experienced significant challenges recruiting experienced workers as either permanent staff or agency workers. In addition, several individuals have not met the appropriate standard and have not been retained. This results in a direct impact on the child and family; changes in social work results in 'start again' syndrome, drift and delay and the loss of the trust of the child and family. It also results in Team Managers working to fill gaps and produce reports rather than remain focused on the necessary elements of management oversight.
- 7.7. In the Autumn of 2022 there have been changes in three out of four Team Managers and a Service Manager. This level of change, at such a challenging time, has clearly contributed to the challenges being faced.
- 7.8. The Improvement Plan is split into seven Sections which focus on the areas of improvement required:

Quality of Practice and Quality Assurance
Capacity, Caseloads & Demand Management.
Management Oversight
Recruitment & Retention
Decision Making
Public Law Outline (i.e. the stage before legal proceedings are commenced)
Resources.

There are defined measures for progress as well as clearly identified desired outcomes and the ability to identify the impact for children. The plan will be RAG rated for progress.

8. Additional Information

- 8.1. There is no requirement from OFSTED or the Department of Education for the Council to have a board or action plan in place at this early stage. This is currently a voluntary and proactive decision by the Executive Director of People and Chief Executive in response to the significance of the findings and to ensure that progress is made and that the council is committed to ensuring the issues raised are fully addressed.

- 8.2. An Action Plan must, however, be formally submitted to OFSTED by the beginning of April. The Department of Education visited on the 26 February 2024 and the draft plan was shared with them. The feedback was that they were assured at this time by the actions being taken.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. The Children's Improvement Action plan is a key document that will track the progress and identify any areas of challenge that need resolving.
- 9.2. Cabinet will be updated at regular intervals, as agreed about the progress.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Local Member:

All Members

Appendices [Please list the titles of Appendices]

Appendix B – Children's Improvement Board Terms of Reference

Appendix A – Children's Improvement Board – Improvement Plan (currently Working Draft)

Appendix C – Published Ofsted Letter