

**Committee and Date**

Item

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Public



Annual Report of the Portfolio Holder for Children and Education

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1. Synopsis

- 1.1 This report highlights key achievements and developments within Early Help, Children's Social Care and Safeguarding and Education & Achievement from April 2023 to March 2024, including activity undertaken during the summer term 2024. It includes updates from recent Ofsted focussed visits and some early indications of education achievement during the summer term 2024.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This report provides an update on key achievements and developments within Early Help, Children's Social Care and Safeguarding and Education and Achievement from April 2023 to March 2024, including activity undertaken during the summer term 2024. This includes updates following recent Ofsted inspections and some early indications of education achievement during the summer term 2024.
- 2.2 Children's Social Care and Safeguarding was last inspected in February 2022 when the Service was graded Good overall. The next full inspection is anticipated by March 2025.

- 2.3 The Council's vision for every child in Shropshire is that *"by treating our children and young people with respect, love and trust and with the right amount of encouragement we can inspire them to dream big, build relationships and connections that matter and together with kindness and a sense of belonging we can do great things."*
- 2.4 This vision remains at the heart of the Shropshire Plan, to reiterate what I stated in my last annual report, if we focus our efforts on supporting families at the earliest opportunity, tackling inequalities, breaking generational cycles through changing historical patterns of behaviours we should enable, where possible, children to:
- a. Live safely within their birth families or with connected carers without intervention from Services.
 - b. Lead fulfilling lives
 - c. Be part of a healthy, safe community with a sense of belonging
- 2.5 The 2022 - 2023 Portfolio Holder's report was presented to Council in September 2023 and in the last 12 months to March 2024 we have seen: -
- a. Early signs of positive impact of the Early Help Transformation programme.
 - b. Experienced workforce challenges, some workers have left but there has been continued focus on converting long term agency workers to permanent contracts.
 - c. We introduced a competitive retention package in the Case Management Service where we have had significant recruitment challenges.
 - d. We have seen an increase of 170% in court proceedings and complexity of cases compared to pre COVID data.
 - e. Children Looked After numbers increased by a further 8% on the previous year 2022 – 2023 where the increase was 7%.
 - f. 215 started to be looked after in 2023 – 2024 in comparison to 206 in 2022 – 2023.
 - g. 156 children ceased to be looked after in 2023 – 2024 in comparison to 161 in 2022 – 2023.
 - h. The intensive support provided through Stepping Stones resulted in 17 children stepping down from a residential and 22 children stepping down from foster care either to their birth family, connected family or foster care, in addition to the step downs, 75 children on the edge of care avoided becoming looked after. This achieved a total cost saving to the Council of £4.321 million.
 - i. Following the foster care uplifts in 2022 – 2023 we have continued to see a significant increase in enquiries and applications and have approved more mainstream foster carers than in previous years.
 - j. Children placed for adoption and placements through early permanence has continued to increase.
 - k. A Strategic Lead for permanence was appointed in April 2023 to progress a refreshed "All Children" Permanence Strategy. This was completed in March 2024 and work to embed this is ongoing.
 - l. All our Children's Homes in Shropshire are Ofsted rated Good or Outstanding with two of our homes being rated Outstanding for 2 and 3 years

running. Additionally, we have increased our Children's Homes capacity with the opening of our 7th home Pebble House in March 2024.

- m. Increased numbers of children accessing early education through the expanded childcare entitlements.
- n. Increased attendance across our schools, both primary and secondary.
- o. More families receiving their first, or one of their three, preferences for primary and secondary schools, performing very strongly in both regional, statistical neighbour and national comparisons for primary and secondary applications
- p. Positive improvements in developing the provision available for children and young people with SEND, including those with an EHC plan.
- q. Increases in the number of SEND Hubs and specialist places in state-funded special schools in Shropshire.
- r. Strong support for children and young people supported through the Virtual School, including strong attendance, improving academic outcomes and no permanent exclusions for the third consecutive year.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 To receive the report and raise any issues as appropriate on the performance and activities of the Children and Education Portfolio.

Report

4 Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1 Children's Services and Learning and Skills hold risk registers to identify the key risks, and mitigations, associated with the services provided.
- 4.2 Children's Services, Early Help and Learning and Skills are all actively engaged in service improvement and continuous improvement. This is being supported by the Office of the Chief Executive and wider teams.

5 Financial Implications

- 5.1 Shropshire Council is currently managing an unprecedented financial position as budgeted for within the Medium Term Financial Strategy approved by Council on 29 February 2024 and detailed in our monitoring position presented to Cabinet on a monthly basis. This demonstrates that significant management action is required over the remainder of the financial year to ensure the Council's financial survival. While all Cabinet Reports provide the financial implications of decisions being taken, this may change as officers review the overall financial situation and make decisions aligned to financial survivability. Where non-essential spend is identified within the Council, this will be reduced. This may involve;
 - scaling down initiatives,
 - changing the scope,
 - delaying implementation, or
 - extending delivery timescales.

6 Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1 Energy and fuel consumption – as children's social work has a statutory requirement to see children in their own home, service delivery relies on social workers using their own cars. Similarly, Educational Psychologists, Education Welfare Officers and other front line services visit homes and education settings/schools.
- 6.2 Learning and Skills is actively working with the Passenger Transport Group to reduce and minimise the impact of travel across Shropshire. This is challenging given the increases in demand experienced by the service.
- 6.3. Renewable energy generation – no effect
- 6.4. Carbon offsetting or mitigation – no effect
- 6.5. Climate change adaptation – no effect

7 Background

Children's Social Care and Safeguarding

- 7.1 Whilst the Senior Leadership Team has remained stable there have been some changes at both Senior and Team Manager levels. Positively, these movements have primarily been the result of internal promotions where skill and experience has been valued and recognised.
- 7.2 The Senior Leadership Team has been expanded with the temporary appointment of a second Assistant Director for Services to Children and Families to work alongside the Assistant Director for Safeguarding creating capacity to ensure Ofsted readiness.
- 7.3 There continue to be ongoing challenges in recruiting Social Workers nationally. Whilst the DfE reported a positive increase in Social Workers joining the profession, the challenge continues to be the level of experience required to meet the increasing complexity of need within the families we are working with.
- 7.4 In Shropshire we continue to experience the challenge of recruiting suitably experienced social workers, however, feedback from our staff survey tells us that Shropshire is still a good place to work. Although our vacancy rate remains high, we have a strong retention rate. Our Staff tell us that they feel supported, and their wellbeing is seen as a priority, additionally, our colleagues from the global majority tell us that their needs are supported and understood. In Shropshire, we operate a zero tolerance to racism.
- 7.5 In year, we have had 12 leavers, 9 starters with a turnover rate of 3.27%. we have successfully converted agency staff into permanent positions. Our sickness rate was 2.8% a further reduction from 3.8% the previous year. We have continued to grow our own through our successful Trainee Social Worker Programme of which

10 passed their Social Work Degree in the last year an increase on 6 from the previous year.

Early Help

- 7.6 The Transformation of our Early Help Services continued throughout 2023 into 2024, and I am pleased to inform that the restructured Service was launched officially on 1st June 2024. It is widely recognised that transforming the service is critical to increase the number of families receiving family help and support, ensuring that support or intervention at the earliest point would reduce escalating needs. Also recognising that early intervention and support is critical to reducing demand into Children's Social Care and over time reduce our children looked after population.
- 7.7 The Service has a clear focus on collaborative working with a range of internal and external partners. Children and their carers were involved in designing the Service based on extensive service user consultation. The new Service is underpinned by the Early Help Strategy and Partnership Working.
- 7.8 The new Early Help front door was implemented for Children's Services in September 2023 including the Early Help and Support Team (EHAST) which has now been established as a permanent team sitting within COMPASS. This team ensures that all families and professionals contacting Children's Services receive support and guidance where needed to reduce the escalation of need and divert families away from a Social Work response.
- 7.9 This new approach has seen contacts to Early Help increase by 297%, and an 83% increase in families worked with compared to the previous year. Less than 20% of families who receive support from EHAST go on to need support from Targeted Early Help and the referral rate to Targeted Early Help is less than 10% meaning that when families accept support from our Early Help Service it is impactful. We have seen in the last 12 months escalations to Children's Social Care reduced from 11% to 1%. We are starting to evidence that when families receive the right help at the earliest opportunity, this reduces the need for escalation for a Social Work response.
- 7.10 The Service has also achieved its highest Supporting Families claims ever in 2023 – 2024 achieving 428 / 428 claims a significant improvement on the previous year when only 194 / 264 claims were submitted. This is important as the Supporting Families Grant is based on payment by results.

Ofsted

- 7.11 Following the Inspection of Local Authorities Children's Services (ILACS) in February 2022 where Shropshire Children's Services was graded Good overall. There have been two Annual Conversations with Ofsted in June 2022 and 2023. The purpose of these annual meetings is to provide assurance that the Local Authority knows itself well.
- 7.12 During the Annual Conversation in June 2023, the Executive Director of People and Assistant Directors of Children's Social Care and Education, Learning and Skills attended the meeting and told Ofsted about the challenges we were facing in Case Management Teams and the impact this was having for children.

- 7.13 In November, Ofsted conducted a Focussed Visit focussing on children in need, child protection and our pre-court work. This visit had no impact on the judgement from February 2022.
- 7.14 The inspectors did highlight several strengths primarily that decisions are made to bring the right children into care, mostly at the right time, they also highlighted positively, the work of Stepping Stones and TREES (Together reducing and ending exploitation in Shropshire) and the impact of their work on outcomes for children.
- 7.15 However, they also highlighted widespread systemic failings, leading to weaknesses in child protection practice, which leave children at risk of inadequate protection and significant harm.
- 7.16 Whilst this was a particularly challenging focussed visit, the inspectors did not highlight any areas for improvement that Senior Leaders were not aware of, they felt that plans for improvement had not yet had the necessary impact on the quality of practice to ensure that children's needs were being sufficiently addressed.
- 7.17 Our response - during the Focussed Visit, the Director of People and the Chief Executive Officer recommended to me to implement a Children's Improvement Board to address the challenges experienced in Children's Social Care. I am extremely pleased that the Board was supported by Cabinet and the wider Council, I cannot stress how important it is that the Council continues to support our most vulnerable residents especially as we are due to have an ILACS at any time.
- 7.18 The initial meeting was held on 5th December 2023. The Board is chaired by the Chief Executive Officer with attendance from the Executive Directors of People and Resources, a Local Government Advisor, Assistant Directors for Children's Safeguarding and Legal and Governance and I am very pleased that there was cross-party members making up the core membership of the Board.
- 7.19 The Board has met monthly, providing constructive challenge on progress and challenges as well as overseeing progress against the Ofsted Improvement Action Plan. Key decisions have been made through the Board to address high caseloads, e.g. In December 2023 the Board agreed an additional 17 posts to create capacity across Social Work Teams, Child Protection Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers. Alongside this there is a clear focus on Quality Assurance to ensure that not only are we doing the right things to ensure our children in Shropshire get the best outcomes but that we are doing those things right.

Children in Need of Help and Protection

- 7.20 In terms of our contact and referrals into Children's Social Care 11,585 were received in 2023 – 2024. We continue to see a steady decrease with 10.27% fewer contacts than in 2022 - 2023 of which 1,367 (11.8%) progressed to a Social Work Assessment a reduction from 12.61% on the previous year and a further reduction from 2021 – 2022.

- 7.21 A significant contributing factor to the above is EHAAT which has now been established as a permanent team sitting within COMPASS along with the refreshed Early Help Service.
- 7.22 The TREES (Together Reducing and Ending Exploitation in Shropshire) Team were awarded the 2023 Directors Recognition Award at the Annual Staff Awards Event for their work with children vulnerable to exploitation. Shropshire's response to exploitation and missing children is briefly outlined as:
- a. Child Exploitation and Missing Data Reports – which enables the capture of key information that informs the County's exploitation profile and helps to target services and disruption.
 - b. Twice weekly multi agency Exploitation Triage meetings.
 - c. Monthly Exploitation Panels which map the profile of exploitation and missing across Shropshire and identifies actions across the partnership for support and disruption.
 - d. Mapping Meetings as required focus on specific children to identify where action can be taken to reduce risk.
 - e. Disruption Meetings – held county wide to target and focus on the multi-agency response to concerns and how these can be disrupted.
 - f. Children exiting gangs' protocol – held under S47 of the Children Act 1989 and is a child protection response where a young person is voicing a wish to leave a gang.
 - g. Professional Consultations – monthly meetings offered to all practitioners led by a multi-agency panel.
 - h. SSCP Tackling Exploitation Meeting – led by the SSCP and chaired by the Police. This meeting considers the exploitation of both children and adults to deliver a strategic response.
- 7.23 TREES has seen a steady increase of referrals in the last twelve months. In total 369 referrals were received of which only 21% had previously been known to the Team. There has also been a significant increase in the number of children being assessed as high risk of child exploitation going from 17% in 2022 – 2023 to 28% in the last year. Our main exploitation hotspot in Shropshire is Shrewsbury Centre which appears to be the focal point for criminal activity but there are other hotspots around the County including areas of Market Drayton, Whitchurch, Oswestry, and Ellesmere.

Corporate Parenting

- 7.24 In Shropshire we use the secure base model to ensure children develop and maintain secure attachments in order to thrive and be enabled to have opportunities, life-long links and a network of support that will last into and throughout their adult lives.
- 7.25 We have seen an 8% increase in our Children Looked After numbers from 659 on 31st March 2023 to 714 on the same date in 2024. There are 4 reasons for the increase in our numbers:
- a. The rise in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people via the National Transfer Scheme, at the end of March 2023 there were 45 up from 22 in 2022 and at end of March 2024 we had 25 young people with a further 34 who had been looked after and had turned 18yrs old during the year.

- b. An increase in the number of children needing to be looked after due to significant harm particularly babies and under 5's.
- c. An increase in the number of children living with connected carers (extended family or friends).
- d. There are a number of children waiting to have their care plans progressed / discharged

We are maintaining our numbers starting lower and ceasing higher than in previous years.

In 2021 we had a total of 241 children come into care with 139 ceasing.

In 2022 we had a total of 206 children come into care with 161 ceasing.

In 2023 we had a total of 215 children come into care with 156 ceasing

- 7.26 Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Shropshire Council has seen a dramatic increase in the volume and complexity of cases affecting children in Shropshire. An increase of 170% in court proceedings compared to pre COVID data. This has impacted both Children's Services and the Child Care Legal team who represent the Local Authority in Court.
- 7.27 In addition, there has also been an increase in the complexity of issues that social workers and solicitors are having to deal with. As a Local Authority we have seen many more cases with an international element, complex medical issues and large families with challenging dynamics. The Child Care lawyers have worked collaboratively with Children's Services to manage this unprecedented increase in volume and complexity to ensure the best outcomes for the most vulnerable children in Shropshire.
- 7.28 Stepping Stones was recognised during the November Focussed Visit as: -
"... provides an effective service that has successfully supported and diverted a number of children on the edge of care to have their needs met and remain with their families in the last six months. Workers in this service are resilient, provide effective interventions and make concerted efforts to engage with families."
- 7.29 In the 12 months to March 2024 Stepping Stones has continued to exceed the success of the previous year. The increase in the size of the teams which went live in April 2023 has led to the team supporting 476 children an 80% increase on the previous year where 264 children were supported. The Family Group Conferencing Chairs completed 300 FGC's a 72% increase (174) on the previous year supporting families to develop their own safety plans. Stepping Stones achieved 75 children avoiding becoming looked after an increase of 158% on the previous year where 29 children stepped down achieving a saving of £2.77 million in cost avoidance. 39 young people stepped down into a family an increase of 178% from the previous year of 14 achieving a saving to the Council of £1.6 million exceeding the £1 million MTFs savings Target. Over the last three years Stepping Stones has achieved a total of 130 children avoiding becoming looked after and 59 children have stepped into a home setting achieving a phenomenal saving to the Council of £11.2 million.

- 7.30 The responsibility of being a Corporate Parent is the shared responsibility of the Council as a whole. The aim of the Corporate Parenting Board is to ensure that the Council, supported by our partners, fulfils its responsibilities in terms of improving outcomes for children and young people looked after and care experienced (care leavers) ensuring their voices are heard and considered in the plans we make and resources we use as a Council and with our partners. We should always consider “would this be good enough for my child” when thinking about our Corporate Parenting responsibilities.
- 7.31 Our Corporate Parenting Board brings together representation from elected members, senior leaders, and practitioners as well as our children looked after and care leavers. The purpose of the Board is to ensure that we as a local authority and our partners are discharging our responsibilities towards the children we look after and those who leave our care when they become adults.
- 7.32 The work of the Board has included working closely with health partners to address pathways for early identification of the emotional and mental health needs of children and young people leading to timely interventions put in place.
- 7.33 Between April 2023 and March 2024 there has been a continued growth in our children looked after and care experienced population. The Government’s National Transfer Scheme to enable all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to be looked after arriving continues to have an ongoing impact on our numbers. In addition, we have an ever-rising number of care experienced young people who require leaving care service provisions.
Our Care Leaving Service has seen a 30% increase in allocations of care experienced young people since 2022 as follows: -
Care experienced allocations on 31st March 2022 totalled 178
Care experienced allocations on 31st March 2023 totalled 233
Care experienced allocations on 31st March 2024 totalled 231
- 7.34 In terms of educational achievements in 2023–2024, a notable achievement for the Virtual School has been zero permanent exclusions for Shropshire looked after children for 3 consecutive academic years and in addition to this, 23 permanent exclusions were prevented which has given the opportunity to improve children’s life chances. It is also important to note that this Year 11 cohort would have been in Year 7 when the pandemic took full effect which meant that most of their learning was mainly online at home in the Spring in 2020. However, I am very pleased to report that 17 young people achieved 8 GCSE’s or more compared to 13 in 2022 – 2023. 11 students are studying A levels and for those who completed school or college education this year: -
* 51% have a college or training place.
* 3.2% have a place at university.
* 14% are employed and
* 2% are in an apprenticeship.

Placement Sufficiency

- 7.35 In line with the increase in our children looked after numbers we continue to see demand for foster homes nationally with not enough placements to meet the demand. In Shropshire we have continued to see an increase in the use of external fostering agencies and residential homes because of internal insufficiency.
- 7.36 A project to transform our fostering processes commenced in the last 12 months focussing on improving the foster carer journey from recruitment to approval and beyond. With rebranding and marketing utilising the digital market we have seen a significant 83% spike in enquiries from 192 in 2022 to 352 in 2023.
- 7.37 7 in house carers were approved in the last 12 months, higher than the previous year. The highest approvals within the fostering Service continues to be connected person carers (a person with whom the child has an established relationship with including grandparents, aunts, uncles, close family friends). At the end of March 2024 there were 174 fostering households including in house and connected person carers, 65 (37%) are in house foster carers. It is positive to note that we are seeing a 1% increase on last year of our children living in a family environment (not including foster home) with 43% living with connected carers, placed with adopters or living with their parents.
- 7.38 Shropshire is part of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Together 4 Children along with our regional partners Stoke, Staffordshire and Telford. The Service launched in October 2020. We have maintained our adoption performance since 2021 with 26 children adopted in 2023 – 2024 in contrast to 27 children in previous year. Of the children placed for adoption 53% were placed with foster to adopt carers as part of early permanence decisions a slight increase of 3% on the previous year. Early Permanence is the best option for babies as it reduces the need for children to have subsequent moves from foster carers to adopters, they have the benefit of a forever family from the day they are discharged from hospital.
- 7.39 We have 7 internal residential homes. All our Childrens Homes in Shropshire are rated Good or Outstanding. Ofsted say that we are providing an excellent quality of care to our children. We have increased our internal residential capacity by almost 50% since 2020 we now own 7 homes. Our newest 3 bed home, Pebble House opened in March 2024 providing a home to 3 of our youngest children ages 5 to 12 years to stabilise and move on to a foster home at the earliest opportunity. Our 1 bed home is currently closed.
- 7.40 For the children living in our homes, their needs were such that no external residential placement options were forthcoming for them or the cost to care for them was significantly high. Placement stability in our homes is robust, children are making considerable progress and achieving positive outcomes, they move on as part of planned transitions. In the last year three children returned to the care of their families from our homes with support from Stepping Stones, there are plans for others to also be reunified.
- 7.41 Pebble House is aligned to Stepping Stones and Chelmaren has been repurposed to align with Stepping Stones as short to medium term homes where if a child cannot be supported to remain at home, there will be a planned period where they

will become looked after for an intensive support package to both the young person and their parent / carers as part of an agreed plan of reunification or step down to foster care within 3 – 6 months. It is hoped that this will lead to children becoming looked after for shorter periods and reduce the need for high-cost external residential placements.

Voices of our Children and Young People

- 7.42 Ending with an extract from the voice of a 15-year-old young person who had lived in one of our homes from the age of 12 years and desperately wanted to live with a family. When he was told he would be moving to a foster family, he said: -
 “I didn’t think anyone would ever want me”.
 I think that says it all.

Education and Achievement

Early Years

- 7.43 Shropshire Council provides information support and guidance to Early Years providers in line with the statutory duties. As of November 2024, the percentage of good and outstanding early years providers is above national and regional averages:

Area	% of providers rated Outstanding	% of providers rated Good	% of providers rated Requiring Improvement	% of providers rated Inadequate
National	16%	77%	6%	1%
West Midlands	19%	76%	4%	1%
Shropshire	20%	77%	2%	1%

- 7.44 All children from the term after they are 9 months old are entitled to free childcare. Currently this ranges from 15 hours to 30 hours per week. From September 2025 all children from the term after they are 9 months old will be entitled to 30 hours free childcare per week. The Early Years team are working hard to ensure there is sufficient provision to meet demand as the entitlements roll out and that provision remains of a high quality. This is measured using validation of codes issued to parents by providers, take up of the entitlement is above statistical neighbours / regional neighbours and national averages for all ages:

Area	% of issued codes validated at Shropshire providers by age			
	Under 1s	1 year olds	2 year olds	Combined
National	84%	88%	87%	87%
West Midlands	85%	89%	87%	88%
Shropshire	89%	94%	94%	93.2%

- 7.45 Integrated working now means that children and families are now benefitting from a joined-up review of their child’s health and development with input from both Health Visitors and Early Years professionals. This has led to earlier identification of those children who may need some additional support.

7.46 Provisional data for the percentage of children having a Good Level of Development (GLD) in 2024 is above national averages. Children are defined as having a good level of development if they are at the expected level for the 12 early learning goals within the 5 areas of learning relating to: communication and language; personal, social, and emotional development; physical development; literacy; and mathematics. The provisional data for 2024 is as follows:

Area	% of children achieving GLD
National (provisional)	67.7%
West Midlands	66.2%
Shropshire	68.0%

7.47 It is positive to see that the percentage of children achieving the communication prime goals at the end of reception was 76.6% in Shropshire compared with the national average of 74.9%. Communication development was an area significantly impacted by the pandemic and this data reflects the recovery that has taken place in Shropshire.

School admissions

7.48 Shropshire Council continues to meet a very high number of parental preferences in applications for school places, performing very strongly in both regional, statistical neighbour and national comparisons for primary and secondary applications.

7.49 The Summary of Primary Position from DfE data indicates that Shropshire outperformed both regional and national figures with a rank of 1st for 1st preference requests met and 2nd for any preference met across the West Midlands. Additionally, Shropshire ranked 2nd against our statistical neighbours for 1st preference met and 4th for any preference met, which is a significant improvement on previous years.

Primary % 1st Preferences Met	2024
Shropshire	98.25
West Midlands	93.8
England	93.16
Primary % Any Preference Met	2024
Shropshire	99.81
West Midlands	98.86
England	98.79

- 7.50 The Summary for Secondary Position from DfE data indicates that Shropshire outperformed both regional and national figures. Shropshire ranked 1st for any preference met across the West Midlands Region, this is an improvement from being ranked 4th last year. Data also indicates Shropshire being ranked as 3rd for 1st preference requests met across the West Midlands (which is the same position as last year).
- 7.51 Comparisons against statistical neighbours indicate that Shropshire, like last year, is ranked 9th for 1st Preference met and that Shropshire has shifted positively from 9th last year to 5th position for any preference met this year.

Secondary % 1st Preferences Met	2024
Shropshire	89.7
West Midlands	80
England	82.9
Secondary % Any Preference Met	2024
Shropshire	98.4
West Midlands	95.2
England	96

- 7.52 To ensure that parental preferences for school places remain positive, and to continue to secure a strong comparative position relative to our statistical neighbours, we keep the sufficiency of school places under review. This monitoring is completed through our countywide Education Sufficiency Plans drawing on the data in the Local Plan Review, current planning applications and the latest DfE place planning benchmarking. This ensures we continue to have a clear view on the number of school places required in line with planned housing development up to 2038. This work continues to include early years, primary and secondary mainstream, with specialist provision included as a golden thread through all phases.

Schools

- 7.53 There are 151 schools across the local authority (LA): 127 primary phase schools, 19 secondary schools, 1 All-through school, 3 special schools and 1 Pupil Referral Unit.
- 7.54 Approximately 1/3rd of Shropshire primary schools are small or very small. There are currently 3 schools with under 30 pupils. Forecasts suggest that the number of

schools in Shropshire with less than 30 pupils will increase in some areas over the next 10-15 years.

- 7.55 In September 2024, 45 out of 127 primary schools and 18 out of 19 secondary schools are academies. All 3 of Shropshire's special schools are academies. Several primary schools are currently in the conversion process to become academies during the 2024/25 academic year. Once these pending primary conversions are complete, 58% of Shropshire schools will be academies.
- 7.56 Ofsted data published at November 2024 indicates that the percentage of good and outstanding schools is:

	% of good or better (All schools)	% of good or better (Primary schools)	% of good or better (Secondary schools)
National	90%	92%	84%
West Midlands	90%	91%	85%
Shropshire	87%	89%	75%

('All school' data also includes nursery schools of which there are 0 in Shropshire and state funded Special schools, which there are 3).

- 7.57 Due to changes in primary assessments, there were no KS1 assessments completed in 2024. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, KS2 progress measures were also not available as the KS2 2024 cohort did not complete KS1 assessments to enable this measure to be calculated. However, emerging 2024 primary school outcomes data indicates positive aspects around the following areas:
- 7.58 The proportion of pupils achieving the expectations of the phonics screening check in 2023/24 increased by 1% to 78.4%. This figure has risen for three consecutive years. This figure has risen for all groups, including those who are disadvantaged and/or has special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- 7.59 76% of pupils in Shropshire maintained schools achieved the expected standard in reading (cf. 74% emerging national average)
- 7.60 The proportion of pupils achieving a grade 4 or above in English GCSE in 2024 was 73.3%. This compared favourably with the emerging national average of 71.2%
- 7.61 However, there remain areas where we would like to see standards improve further. These include:
- 7.62 The percentage of pupils reaching the expected phonics standard by the end of Y1 compared to national averages. Although this figure has risen, it remains below the national average.
- 7.63 Of particular concern is the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard or better at the end of KS2 in mathematics. 70.2% of pupils in KS2 achieved the expected standard in mathematics in Shropshire, 3.0% lower than the emerging national average figure of 73.2%.

- 7.64 The gap between the proportion of pupils achieving a high score in mathematics also remains below national averages. 18.8% achieved the higher standard in mathematics in Shropshire, 5.2% lower than the emerging national average figure of 24.0%.
- 7.65 Concern around attainment in mathematics is reflected in outcomes in KS4. 67.5% of pupils in Shropshire secondary schools achieved a standard pass (4+) in mathematics (cf. 70.9% nationally)
- 7.66 With respect to the combined measure of English and mathematics, 60.9% of Shropshire secondary pupils achieved a standard pass (grade 4+) in English and mathematics combined (cf. 66.6% nationally).

NEET (Not in education, employment, or training)

- 7.67 We have been actively working over the last twelve months on how best to support young people aged 16-18 and reduce the number who are NEET or Not Known (KN) across Shropshire, particularly following the closure of two school sixth forms in the South East of the County (Oldbury Wells School and William Brookes School).
- 7.68 We are pleased to confirm that the numbers of young people who are NEET or Not Known (NK) are at the lowest levels for many years. In terms of young people who are NEET or Not Known (NK), Shropshire sits as the best of our statistical neighbours and performs strongly compared to the national average.

Column1	Y12-Y13 NEET %	Y12-Y13 NK %
England	3.64%	4.97%
Devon	3.90%	2.34%
Herefordshire	4.63%	5.19%
Dorset	3.41%	0.43%
Wiltshire	3.18%	1.81%
Somerset	4.35%	3.49%
Gloucestershire	2.83%	1.94%
Suffolk	5.23%	3.98%
Worcestershire	4.22%	1.28%
Cornwall	5.07%	3.18%
Cumberland	3.40%	1.01%
Shropshire	2.88%	0.51%

- 7.69 Shropshire has 3.39% (168 NEET and 30 NK) against a national figure at 8.64% and statistical neighbours at 6.40%, we are positively bucking the trend nationally. This is based on a cohort of c.7000 young people in Shropshire.
- 7.70 Support for students who are NEET comes from a variety of sources. This will include the work of our Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) advisers and Transition Support Workers (TSW).

Virtual School

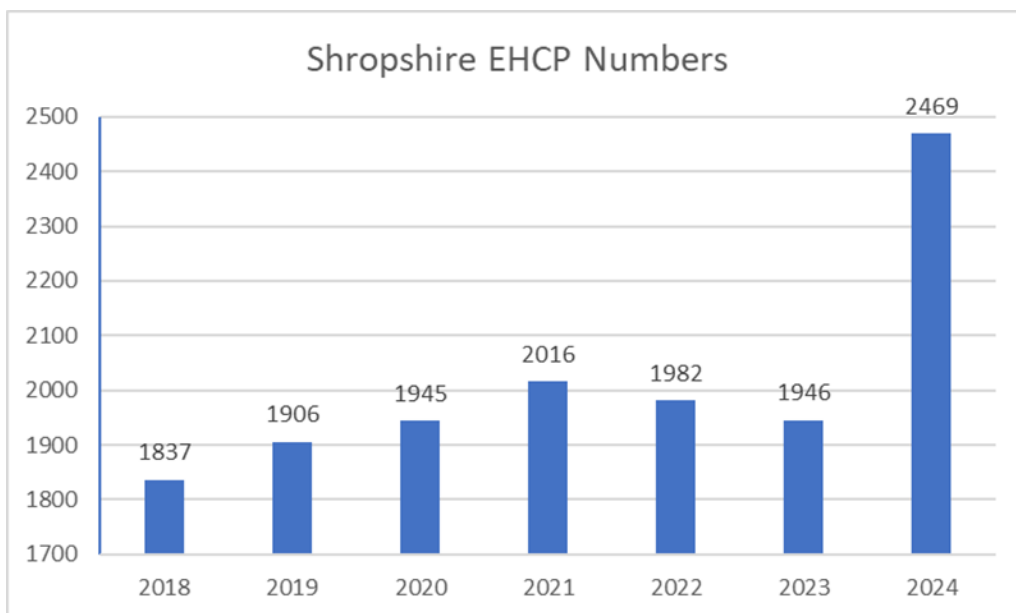
- 7.71 There has been a +17% change in the numbers of looked after children from year – 2 to 11 through this academic year. (Year -2 refers to two years before Reception). Numbers in Key Stage 5 have remained stable through the year since a +22% change in the previous year, mostly from rising numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People (UASYP).
- 7.72 A significant change through this last academic year has been the proportion of our children from year -2 to 11 with an EHCP, this has increased from 23% to 26% of the cohort. Of particular note is the significant growth in the number of CLA with an EHCP who are living outside of Shropshire placed in an out of authority specialist school. These numbers have risen from 25 to 43 in 12 months.
- 7.73 There has been a +31% change in pupils in this age group attending LA specialist or independent schools, however even more of our pupils with an EHCP attend a mainstream setting than last year (42% mainstream compared to 33% specialist).
- 7.74 The majority of postholders in the Virtual School work term time only but the new structure implemented in September 2023 has enabled growth from previously only 3 members of staff working through the school holidays to 9, including the Head Teacher. This has supported a consistency of offer for our partners, children and young people. One Education Advice and Support Officer (EASO) colleague is supporting our new Extended Kinship Duties. In July 2024 the Virtual School Head Teacher moved into a wider role, as the Head of the Virtual School and Access to Education. This role enables the strengths of the Virtual School to be shared across other key areas of the Local Authority.
- 7.75 Overall CLA attendance at the end of academic year 2023/2024 is sitting slightly above 90%. This figure is just 2.88% below that of the National attendance figure for all learners and 1.88% below that of Shropshire all learners. Primary CLA attendance has continued to closely track the attendance figures of Shropshire and National all learners. Secondary attendance tracks below that of Shropshire and National all learners, however, there is a national trend of lower Secondary attendance and for the Shropshire CLA cohort. Our authorised absences continue to track slightly higher than the figure for National all learners, however, they have dropped below Shropshire all learners, which is positive. Our absence due to illness percentage continues to be much lower too.
- 7.76 There have been no permanent exclusions for CLA for three years running with a number being averted through partnership working. This was noted as a key strength in the Ofsted visit in July 2024.
- 7.77 The trajectory on PEP improvement is very positive, with summer term 2024 outcomes as follows: 99.8% PEP completion, 97.7% Good Quality (Year –1 to 11), Post 16 was 86.3% Completion and 96% Good Quality.
- 7.78 The Virtual School organised an extremely well attended celebration event at Shrewsbury School in the Autumn 2024. The event was based on listening to the children and young people in the Virtual School and responding to their ideas and views. A Celebration Festival event has also been delivered for Post 16 and Care Leavers in August 2024 in collaboration with the Care Leavers' Team.

- 7.79 A detailed report on Virtual School performance is submitted to the Corporate Parenting Panel each meeting.

SEND

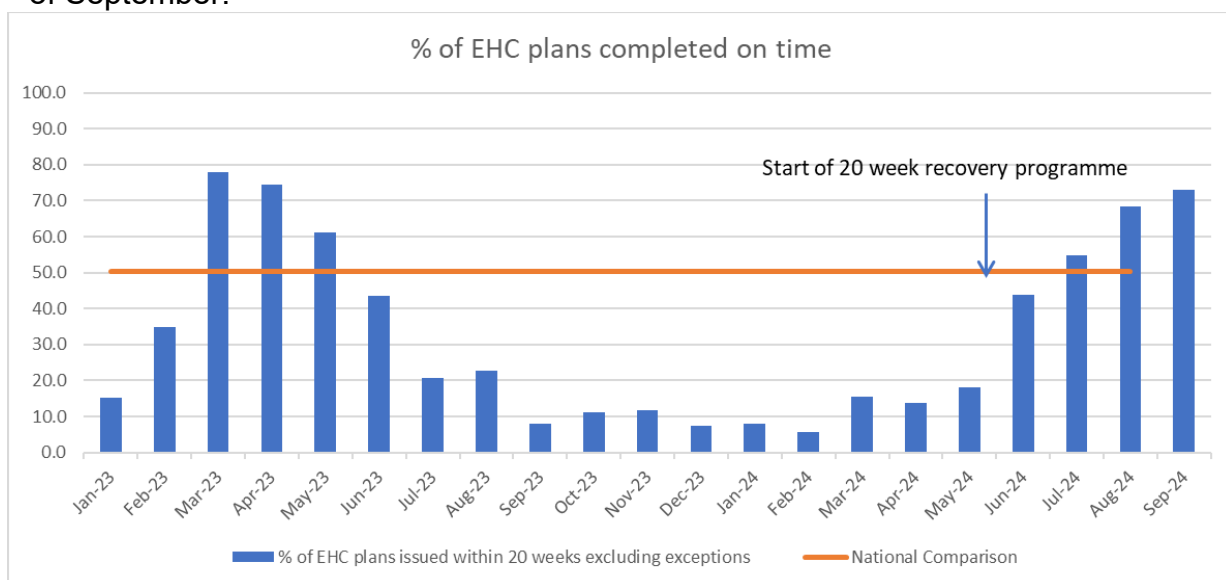
- 7.80 In Shropshire the expectations around what should be available through high quality teaching for all children and young people, and what should be available through SEND Support, are outlined in the Shropshire Ordinarily Available Provision (SOAP) framework. The framework currently covers primary and secondary phases and was co-produced with education settings during 2023.
- 7.81 The SOAP framework is available on the Local Offer here [SEN support | Shropshire Council](#)
- 7.82 To ensure a strong, evidence-based approach to providing support and challenge around SEND and AP for all education settings in Shropshire, the roles of Education Quality Advisors (EQA) were created covering Early Years, Primary/Secondary and Post 16. Through a rigorous recruitment process three very experienced colleagues were appointed to these roles from September 2024. The Education Quality Advisors lead the development, implementation and evaluation of the SOAP framework to ensure strong outcomes for children and young people in Shropshire. This will include further work to develop the SOAP framework covering the Early Years and Post 16 phases.
- 7.83 Since September 2024, the Education Quality Advisors have implemented a SEND and Inclusion newsletter for practitioners and professionals supporting Shropshire children and young people. The first edition was shared in October and will continue to be published on the Local Offer here [SEND and Inclusion Newsletter | Shropshire Council](#)
- 7.84 We are encouraged that the work already underway in Shropshire to support inclusive mainstream provision across all age ranges, appears to be strongly supported as the national direction of travel, to help address systemic challenges within the national SEND system. The recent speech from the Secretary of State for Education outlines this here [Bridget Phillipson's Speech to the Confederation of School Trusts - GOV.UK](#)
- 7.85 In addition, the National Audit Office also published a recent value for money report outlining the challenges present within the current national SEND system. The report is available here [Support for children and young people with special educational needs - NAO report](#)
- 7.86 The education offer for children and young people with SEND across all types of education provision in Shropshire, including mainstream schools, continues to develop, evolve and strengthen. This evolution builds on the co-production and implementation of the SOAP framework outlined above.
- 7.87 The development of the new phase of mainstream SEND Hubs has continued at pace following an expression of interest process open to all education settings across Shropshire during the Spring term 2024. This work has already enabled further expansion of the Hub programme, including the creation of an additional 48 places in the primary phase from September 2024.

- 7.88 This work included the development of completely new SEND Hubs at Ellesmere Primary School, Whitchurch Infants School and Morda Primary School from September 2024. This work remains a key strategic priority and will continue during the 2024/25 academic year, with a particular focus on securing provision in local areas that enable children and young people to transition effectively between SEND Hubs in primary and secondary schools. This will then extend into developing the transition opportunities between secondary and Post 16.
- 7.89 The [Keystone Academy](#) moved into their new permanent purpose-built building in November 2023, enabling the school to successfully support more children and young people up to their total commissioned number of 120 by the end of the 2024/25 academic year.
- 7.90 Commissioning and development work with [Woodlands Special School](#) has also been maintained to strengthen the educational offer and enable the school to achieve the total commissioned number of 82 places by the end of the 2024/25 academic year.
- 7.91 Commissioning and development work has been completed with [Severndale Special School](#) to strengthen the educational offer. This has enabled the school to successfully operate at full capacity of 415 places with an additional 15 places commissioned from September 2024.
- 7.92 As work continues to support the effective identification and ability to meet the SEND needs of children and young people, Shropshire has seen a significant increase in the number of EHCP's. Between January 2023 and January 2024, the number of EHCPs increased by 26.9% from 1946 to 2469. In 2022 new requests increased by 46% (double the national rate), whilst the number of plans we maintain increased from 1946 to 2469 – 26.9%, from January 2023 to January 2024.
- 7.93 This has resulted in significant increases in demand for places in SEND Hub, special school and specialist independent providers, particularly for those children and young people with a Social, Emotional and Mental Health profile of needs.
- 7.94 The following information is obtained from the annual national SEN2 data collection. This collection takes place in January and reflects the caseloads for the previous year.



Source: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-health-and-care-plans>

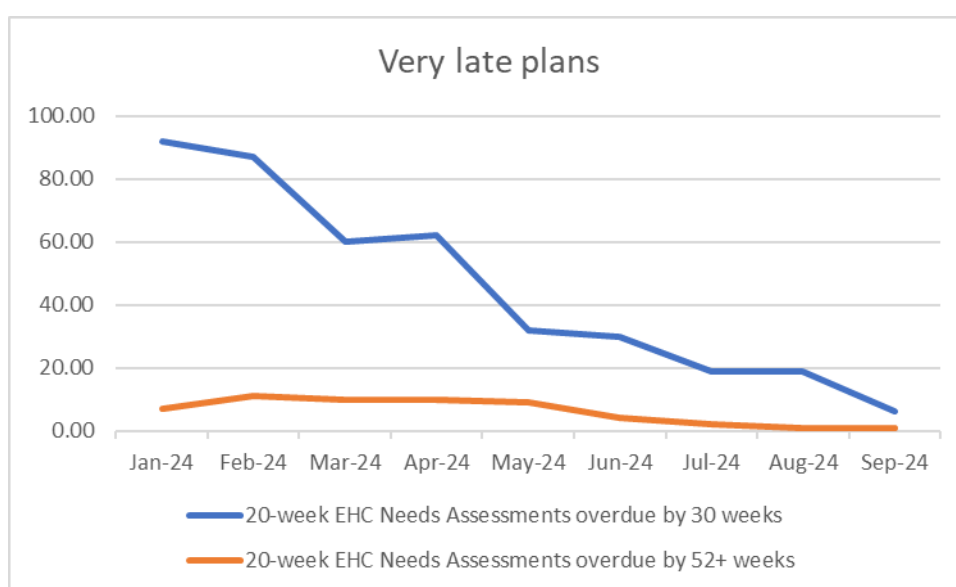
7.95 Since the implementation of the timeliness recovery plan for issuing new EHC plans within 20-weeks, we have seen significant improvement. At the point of implementation in May 2024 was 18.1%, this has now risen to over 70% by the end of September.



	Total	On time	% on time
Aug 2023	22	5	22.7%
Sep 2023	63	5	7.9%
Oct 2023	36	4	11.1%
Nov 2023	59	7	11.9%
Dec 2023	41	3	7.3%
Jan 2024	63	5	7.9%

Feb 2024	70	4	5.7%
Mar 2024	65	10	15.4%
Apr 2024	51	7	13.7%
May 2024	72	13	18.1%
Jun 2024	89	39	43.8%
Jul 2024	95	52	54.7%
Aug 2024	60	41	68.3%
Sep 2024	74	54	73.0%

- 7.96 In addition, we have also significantly reduced the number of EHC plans classed as 'very late' (already over 30 and 50 weeks), which demonstrates a clear focus across all areas of key activity.



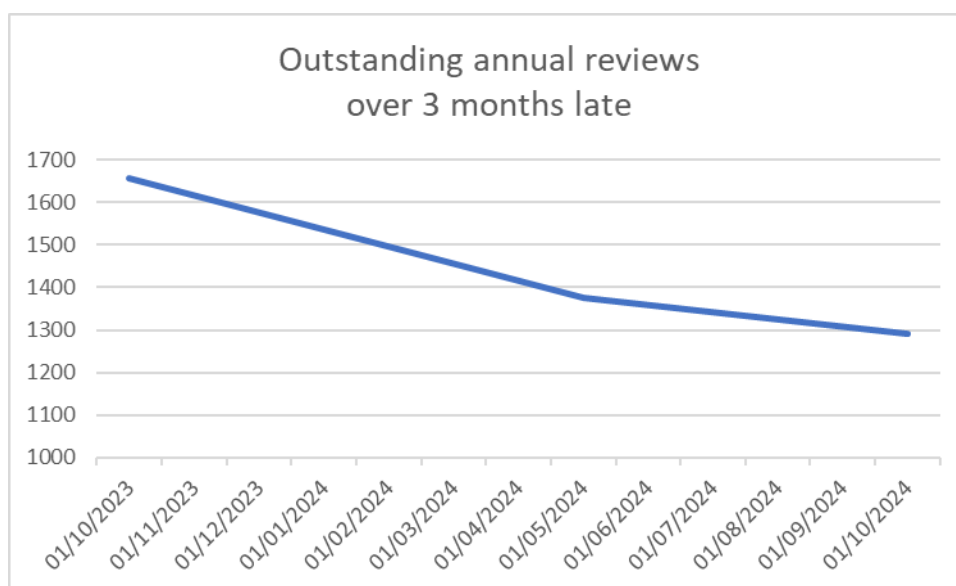
- 7.97 Whilst we are encouraged by these improvements, we recognise that our recovery work must continue to ensure these improvements are embedded into business-as-usual practice moving forward so that we consistently deliver as close to 100% of EHC plans within 20 weeks as possible. This information is included in the Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) monitored by the DfE and NHSE.
- 7.98 EHC plan advice monitoring takes place weekly to monitor advice requests and the timeliness they are provided in. This enables strong advice timeliness and provides opportunity for follow up by area leaders where required.

Annual Reviews

- 7.99 Annual Reviews continue to be a key priority for the Local Authority and SEND and AP Partnership Board, following the review and updating of the Annual Review recovery plan in June 24.

7.100 The recovery plan has resulted in some fixed term additional capacity being provided for the SEND team to ensure that we accelerate the process of ensuring every EHC plan has received an annual review (within 12 months) and where necessary amendments to the EHC plan have been made and a final EHC plan issued. This team has been in place since the middle of November 24 and is focused on the c.1300 EHC plans that have not either received an annual review and/or the EHC plan has not been amended following the review. This work will focus on prioritising children and young people approaching phase transfer points (e.g. key stage moves, including primary to secondary) and those with the most complex needs.

7.101 An indication of the impact of the work that has already been completed is outlined below, with monthly monitoring underway within the Local Authority and shared with the SEND and AP Partnership Board each meeting.



Quality of EHC plans

7.102 Despite the challenges around the significant increase in EHC plans maintained by Shropshire Council, positive work has taken place as a partnership to improve the quality of advice and the overall quality of EHC plans.

7.103 The partnership developed and implemented a consistent EHCP Quality Assurance Framework in October 2023 for all new EHC plans and those amended through the Annual Review process. The framework is based on regional and national good practice, including peer review with a local authority consistently identified as delivering high quality EHC plans.

7.104 The framework is available on the public Local Offer site through the link [EHCP quality assurance standards | Shropshire Council](#)

7.105 The table below outlines the improvements and percentage of EHC plans rated good or better during the last four months.

EHCPS RATED GOOD OR BETTER	MAY-24	JUN-24	JUL-24	AUG-24
% DRAFT EHCPS	86	94	96	93.75
% AMENDED EHCPS	98	93	90	91

7.106 This improvement continues to be monitored and evaluated through the multi-agency panel and strategic quality assurance processes.

Feedback from children, young people, families and professionals

7.107 Whilst we recognise that the experience for children, young people and families is not yet consistently positive based on the feedback received from the APP survey completed in preparation for the October 24 APP review meeting and PACC (Parent Carer Council). We can see that the improvements are starting to be recognised in the direct feedback collected by the services, for example, APP parental satisfaction survey results showed an increase in overall satisfaction from 46% to 51%.

7.108 We remain committed to securing consistently positive experiences for children, young people, and families.

7.109 Some examples of direct feedback from families and professionals are included below.

"This was more straightforward than I thought it would be. I was consulted at various points though out the process of putting it in place and I was able to get questions answered quickly by the early years team" Parent Carer feedback Sept 2024

"Overall, the process to gain my child's EHCP was very straightforward and helped him get into a school that is able to help him so more than happy with this." Parent Carer feedback Sept 2024

"Everyone I have contact with has been helpful and supportive. My son's EHCNA was produced very quickly, which has made a big difference. I have been very pleased with the service I have received, Many thanks." Parent Carer feedback October 2024

"Very helpful team. Felt supported and included all the way. Thanks." Parent Carer feedback July 2024

"Very grateful that all the information was accurately collected and the outcome was as I hoped it would be and in the best interest of my Son ." Parent Carer feedback June 2024

"One particular case worker goes above and beyond and works incredibly well with other professionals. sets a perfect example of how working together can achieve the best for the child/ young person." Quote from OT Sept 2024

7.110 We are also increasingly engaging directly with children and young people to gain their views, including their views on their EHC plan and the impact this is making. The latest feedback provided is included below and we will continue to embed this approach to increase the numbers of children and young people sharing their views.

	I feel happy	I feel safe	I feel that I am learning	I feel listened to by the adults around me	I feel that my strengths are recognised
% Very like me	50	60	50	50	50
% a little like me	30	30	30	40	40
% Neutral/not sure	10	0	0	10	0
% Not much like me	10	0	20	0	10
% Not at all like me	0	10	0	0	0

	I feel that people understand me and what helps me	I feel welcomed and included by other people	I feel that I am moving towards goals that are important to me	% Overall
	40	70	70	55
	40	30	10	31.25
	10	0	10	5
	10	0	10	7.5
	0	0	0	1.25

7.111 The DfE and NHS England (NHSE) completed formal monitoring of the SEND Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) during October 2024. The monitoring report produced by DfE and NHSE noted the many positive aspects of the work underway in Shropshire including that:

“The Leadership, Governance and partnership approach in Shropshire remains a strength. The partnership demonstrated having robust systems in place which supports oversight and accountability. They have a clear vision for a continued cycle of improvement.

The evidence submitted prior to the review meeting and the discussion on the day supported strong intentions by the leadership in Shropshire and commitment of all partners to SEN system improvements.

This alongside the feedback from partners and parents demonstrated the range of actions you have taken to accelerate improvement.”

7.112 The Area SEND action plan outlines the key areas of priority improvement work underway and includes the areas identified from the APP. This will continue to be reviewed, monitored and updated via the SEND and AP Partnership Board to improve SEND and AP services across Shropshire (0-25).

Education Access and Inclusion

Pupil Attendance

7.113 Based on the national DfE Attendance Data portal, overall pupil attendance for the 2023/24 academic year and the start of the 24/25 academic year is strong and improving. Primary school attendance is above the national average and Secondary school attendance is now in line with the national average. Whilst not yet back to pre-pandemic levels there has been an encouraging increase across both primary and secondary phases, particularly as we started the new academic year.

Elective Home Education (EHE)

- 7.114 Robust monitoring and tracking arrangements are currently in place through the Education Access Service to ensure statutory duties are delivered to ensure children and young people who are EHE receive suitable education, this includes supporting and challenging families to re-access school-based education provision where appropriate. A weekly multi-agency meeting takes place to review new de-registrations and contact is made with families by the Early Help and Support Team where appropriate.
- 7.115 EHE rates are lower than statistical neighbours but above national averages. The service continues to support children and young people return to school and access education.
- 7.116 Parents/carers do not have to give a reason for de-registering their child to be EHE but the second highest recorded reason is 'philosophy' followed by 'medical - physical and mental health' then 'dissatisfaction' (general and SEN).

Inclusion

- 7.117 Through a continued focus with school leaders and multi-agency partners there has been a significant reduction achieved in the number of permanent exclusions in the Autumn term so far. When compared with permanent exclusions in the same period of 2023 there has been a reduction of 65% in 2024. Additionally, there was a decrease in the number of children with SEND being permanently exclude compared to last year.
- 7.118 There is work underway to support children and young people to successfully reintegrate back into mainstream education following permanent exclusion. The Fair Access Protocol (FAP) was reviewed with all the Secondary Headteachers in 2023-24. FAP now operates with a triage process at the LA to ensure FAP is firstly the most appropriate place to bring a young person's situation, followed by a collaborative meeting with Heads which includes time for discussion as well as a vote to support decision making. The Working Group includes Secondary Headteachers, the Executive Headteacher of TMBSS, as well as LA officers. The group continues to meet to build on effective practice.
- 7.119 Suspensions have declined with a 9.52% reduction across all phases compared to the same period last year. The number of repeat suspensions has also reduced by 20% and the number of days is down by 25%. The Education Access Service remains fully committed to working together with school leaders to reduce the suspension and exclusion rates at all phases, particularly secondary.
- 7.120 We would like to acknowledge the hard work, dedication, and commitment demonstrated by education settings and schools across Shropshire in keeping children safe and improving their outcomes.

Shropshire Music Service

- 7.121 Shropshire Music Service developed significantly during 2022/23 and made further progress in the academic year 23-24. The service now engages with 98% of Shropshire schools, 3% above the Arts Council England target of 95%.
- 7.122 Philanthropic donations from private entities and successful grant awards have ensured activities can be offered free of charge: this has included 15 more schools engaging with the service, plus over 300 children now regularly engaging with our weekly free ensemble and workshop activities. Around 45% of these children are new engagers i.e. they are not currently in receipt of instrumental tuition. The service has also increased engagement with Shropshire Virtual School through a range of workshop activities.
- 7.123 We have also seen increased audiences attending public events: over 600 in attendance at most events. This direct engagement with performing live music is an excellent way of building the confidence, communication and team working skills of the children and young people participating.
- 7.124 The service is now more inclusive, offering a range of free ensembles weekly at various locations around the county, resulting in attendance trebling and more new engagers in music. More children are now engaging in the South and East regions of the county as a result of weekly ensembles. In addition, in 23-24, the service was delivering activities in all AP settings in the county.
- 7.125 The service will continue to develop the provision across the county and will be increasing the range of different musical activities available, including the development of music technology and the use of assistive and adaptive instruments to ensure all children can participate in music-making activities.

8 Conclusions

- 8.1 Learning and Skills services have provided effective and cost-efficient support to children and young people in Shropshire that has led to improved outcomes as outlined in the report. This demonstrates positive impact towards delivery of the Shropshire Plan. Further developments and improvements across a number of services within Learning and Skills are underway to manage the increases in demand whilst maintaining or improving the quality of services.
- 8.2 Further improvement work is also underway across the Area SEND and AP system in Shropshire, driven by the SEND and AP Partnership Board, which includes all partner agencies across education, health and social care in partnership with children, young people and their families. This work continues to be informed by the national SEND and AP Change Programme that has enabled best practice and additional financial resources to benefit children, young people and their families in Shropshire. We are committed to enabling Shropshire children, young people and their families to live their best life.

8.3 Key Priorities for Children Services in 2024 – 2025.

- Delivering on the MTFs savings plan and addressing in year budget pressures.
- Embedding the Early Health Strategy.
- Reducing the number of families involved in statutory services.
- Further increasing our pool of in house foster carers
- Stepping children down from residential homes into a family environment when it is safe to do so.
- Growth Business Case for Residential Services to increase our internal capacity.
- Expanding the work of Stepping Stones linking with Early Help and Fostering to: -
 - avoid children requiring a social worker
 - Working with our Fostering Team to support children placed with parents and with connected carers for orders to be discharged at the earliest opportunity when it is safe to do so.

8.4 Children's Service have had a challenging year, where demand and complexity have continued to have an impact on service delivery. Within that context, a lot has been achieved and progress made with service development. Cabinet and Councils continued support for children and family's needs to be met mean that we are seeing many children achieve positive outcomes despite the adversity they face. Focusing the service on supporting a child to return to a family that love them and where they have made the changes needed to be able to care for that child safely is the best possible outcome we all, as a corporate parent, can hope for and achieve for the people of Shropshire.

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

Local Member: All

Consultation with Local Member – Please consider the Local Member Protocol (see page E60 onwards of part 5 of the Constitution) and determine whether it is necessary to consult with the local member over the proposal set out in this report. This may not always be applicable (e.g. where the proposal affects all of Shropshire), but it should always be a consideration and in some cases a necessity so as to comply with the spirit of the Protocol.

Appendices [Please list the titles of Appendices] none