

Herefordshire Council Children's Services – an Extraordinary Council meeting.

The meeting can be viewed on the council You Tube channel

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCmSOo_8L84.

If you are in need of support or if you wish to raise any issue relating to children's services please contact the Chief Executive Paul Walker or the Cabinet Member Diana Toynbee or your local ward councillor (for Llangarron Elissa.Swinglehurst@herefordshire.gov.uk).

Background.

Herefordshire Council Children's Services has had several Ofsted visits and focussed visits. The full list can be seen on this link [Ofsted | Herefordshire Council](#). To give a sense of context Herefordshire Council was judged to require improvement in 2014. The overall judgement was as follows:

There are no widespread or serious failures that create or leave children being harmed or at risk of harm. The welfare of looked after children is safeguarded and promoted. However, the authority is not yet delivering good protection and help and care for children, young people and families. It is Ofsted's expectation that, as a minimum, all children and young people receive good help, care and protection.

Despite the efforts of the directorate there was still a very long way to go when Ofsted reported in 2018.

Ofsted 2018 – overall requires improvement

Leaders and managers have not secured an environment in which good-quality social work practice can flourish, and the majority of core practice requires improvement. Senior leaders acknowledge that insufficient progress has been made in key aspects of their service, and many weaknesses found during this inspection mirror many of those identified in 2014. The pace of planning and action to remedy some long-standing deficits has been too slow. This had led to drift and delay for children before, during and after care proceedings, and means that outcomes have not improved for children in a timely way.

Since the last inspection in 2014, senior leaders have made some progress and have improved practice in some areas, for example in strengthening assessments for disabled children and in ensuring that information about children who go missing is shared effectively and is robustly analysed by partner agencies. The vast majority of children in care live in good placements, where their outcomes improve.

Children identified as at risk of immediate harm receive prompt and responsive intervention, ensuring that they are safeguarded. When risks increase, and children are no longer able to live safely at home, the local authority is making increasingly good use of its legal powers to safeguard and protect children. Decisions about whether some children who experience neglect need to become looked after are not taken swiftly enough. The quality of management oversight and decision-making across the wider service is too variable

This was followed by a more positive focussed visit in January 2019* but by 2022 the overall judgement was that Herefordshire Council Children's Services were *inadequate*.

Children and young people in Herefordshire are not protected from harm. Protective responses are too often delayed and are not sufficiently robust. Fundamental areas of social work practice are weak. Assessments across the service are poor. They fail to identify children's needs or effectively assess carers' abilities to provide safe and secure homes. Plans do not ensure children are safer or have their needs met, and for too many children the security of permanence is not achieved soon enough. Drift and delays are endemic, compounded by continuous staff turnover, weak guidance and a lack of management grip. Senior leaders were aware of many, but not all, of the inadequacies and the impact on children until this inspection. The quality and impact of social work practice has significantly deteriorated since the last judgement inspection in June 2018.

The Extraordinary Council meeting was attended by family members who had been affected and they asked questions of the cabinet member. The tragic litany of their stories made the situation very real and poignant for all members in the room. As members we are all 'corporate parents' but in reality we are not sighted on any operational detail of cases – for obvious reasons – which means that we do not know what is happening unless we have personal knowledge. It was salutary to listen to the voices of those who have been impacted negatively by children's services.

I have always said that children's services is a world of imperfect. The only thing we can do is our best but it will never make up for a dysfunctional childhood, the state is a poor substitute for a loving and stable family.

This is the gist of my contribution to the debate:

Improvement is not easy – as we can all see today. We are not where we want to be – and I am going to say 'we' – we are all corporate parents and we are all responsible. I have read the report again and again and am struck by the consistent themes that run throughout.

Looking at the comments of CEO and leaders of councils that have gone from inadequate to good, they all say that stability and sufficiency of staffing is a critical prerequisite to improvement and I have yet to see any real plan to deal with this. I'm not saying that there isn't one, just that it isn't something that members like me have been able to see or, crucially, contribute to. Recruitment and retention is an issue across the council and it feels like it is more of an issue now than it has ever been. I would like to understand why – is there a digest of exit interviews? Are we gathering the views of the social workers we have to see how they are feeling?

I remember doing this when I was cabinet member and trying to get action on the few things our social workers were asking for – a light in the car park, air conditioning that worked, parking spaces closer to their workplace...none of it unreasonable. If you want people to invest in your company, you have to invest in them. So, what are we doing to invest in our social workers? What more can we do?

What is the current situation with interim, locum, agency staff and what creative actions are in train to establish the quality and permanence of workforce that is essential to make progress?

If we are all part of the problem – corporately responsible – then we must all be part of the solution.

If you want us to all act together then let us contribute to solutions – I do not doubt that we all want to see meaningful improvement but as a member I am not being asked for my view. This is a dismal scenario to spectate when truly collaborative working might get us to where we need to be. We have got to stop trying to own improvement and blaming others for deterioration – we are all corporate parents and we all owe the children of Herefordshire a much better service than we are currently and have historically provided.

What is important is the honest assessment of the problem, the obstacles, the easy wins, the vital wins and a real sense of where we are, and how we turn this around.

We owe it to the children and families that look to us. We've got a long way to go – and the only way to get there is one step at a time but, most importantly, we have to take people with us – we

need to take our officers and social workers and most importantly we have to take the children and families with us. At the moment it might feel as if we are in Dante's dark wood and the straightway is lost. I am hopeful that with the guidance of Ms. Brazil and the honest endeavour of all we may find our way through but my first and final preoccupation is to always consider the welfare of the children – what is right for them? Come what may. We cannot and must not take the easy route of shrugging and saying that the past is to blame for our present situation, – we must have agency – we must have urgency or we will fail.

The families present wanted to speak in the debate but it was not allowed. Some members, myself included, took the opportunity to remain behind and listen to them after the meeting was over.

This was not the first extraordinary meeting called to discuss the state of children's services in Herefordshire. I doubt it will be the last. There is a very real possibility that the council will lose control of Children's services and this could have a detrimental knock on effect on the ability of the council to provide services in other areas due to budget pressures. As it is, Children's services are swallowing millions upon millions every year and the number of children coming into care is rising.

The negative publicity and pace of change will make it harder to recruit and retain staff – what is needed is a steady hand, not a panicky overreaction, just good work and stability over time. Improvement in children's services is not a destination, it is a journey – every day, bit by bit; to quote Tennyson, 'to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.'

*Ofsted Jan 2019 – I am including this as I was the Cabinet Member from March 2018 to the election in May 2019 and so this was 'on my watch'.

Letter from Ofsted in January 2019:

Since the last inspection of children's services in June 2018, and from a very low baseline, actions taken by senior leaders have improved the overall stability of the social care workforce, increased much needed management capacity and reduced overall social work caseloads across the service. This has been achieved very recently and over a relatively short period of time. Plans for improvement are appropriately focused on core areas that make the most difference to the lives of children. Senior leaders and managers have a realistic view of the quality of practice, which remains too variable and is not yet good.

The level of management oversight of casework is improving but does not yet robustly challenge less effective practice in some cases. Key decisions are not always noted on children's case records. Social work supervision is not yet sufficiently regular or reflective, although this is improving. Social workers spoke positively about their supportive team managers and case consultations with heads of service.

- Leaders are implementing ambitious strategic plans for the recruitment and retention of social workers and this is starting to show some early impact in some parts of the service. Social workers are benefiting from an improved training offer, and opportunities to develop, for example by becoming practice educators or by progressing to more senior posts, with mentoring for new team managers.

- Senior leaders have taken steps to understand the experience of frontline practitioners in response to recommendations from the previous inspection. Drop-in sessions with the director and assistant director and spending time in fieldwork teams mean that senior leaders are now more visible. Social workers spoke of the support from senior leaders, such as the reduction in caseloads

to a manageable level. Staff forums provide frontline staff with opportunities to share worries and to contribute ideas, for example the new personal 'learning fund' available for social workers.