



**Committee and Date**

**27<sup>th</sup> February 2025**

**Council**

Item

Public



# Proposal to replace the Children's Improvement Board with a Children's Partnership Ambitions Board

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<b>Cabinet Member</b> (Portfolio Holder):		Kirstie Hurst-Knight	

## 1. Synopsis

- 1.1 The Children's Improvement Board, which was established in early 2024 in response to the Ofsted Focussed visit the previous November has been effective in meeting its aims and it is therefore proposed to replace it with a Children's Partnership Ambitions Board.

## 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 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."
- 2.2 This vision is at the heart of the Shropshire Plan through a council wide focus on supporting families at the earliest opportunity, tackling inequalities, breaking generational cycles through changing historical patterns of behaviours we should enable, where it is safe to do so, children to:
- a. Live safely within their birth families or with connected carers without intervention from Services.
  - b. Lead Full Lives
  - c. Be part of a healthy, safe community with a sense of belonging.

- 2.3 Members were informed in March 2024 that a Focussed Visit had been conducted by Ofsted in November 2023 focussing on children in need, child protection and our pre court work. Whilst the visit did not impact on the judgement from February 2022 (where Children's Services were, of course, assessed as being "Good"), inspectors highlighted widespread systemic failings, leading to weaknesses in child protection practice, which left children at risk of inadequate protection and significant harm.
- 2.4 During the focussed visit the Executive Director of People and the Chief Executive Officer recommended to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Education the establishment of a time limited Children's Improvement Board with the aim to challenge, support and improve Children's Services in response to the Ofsted findings.
- 2.5 The Board has now been in operation for over 12 months and given the progress that has been made over that period, this report recommends to Council to replace the Improvement Board with an Ambitions Board to continue to drive improvements for children and families. The Ambitions Board's proposed Terms of Reference are attached as Appendix 1. It will include a much wider membership from right across the spectrum of services providing support to vulnerable children and their families in Shropshire. Whilst still looking internally at performance, quality and developments it will also have a wider focus on the Shropshire partnership performance, development and how the system aspires to meet the needs of children.
- 2.6 The objective of the Ambitions Board will be to provide robust support and seek assurance from agencies involved in keeping children safe. Additionally, to gain assurance that all partners are working effectively together so that the children and young people of Shropshire have the best opportunities to achieve the best outcomes.

### **3. Recommendations**

- 3.1 That Council approves the replacement of the Children's Improvement Board with the establishment of a Children's Partnership Ambitions Board with the Draft Terms of Reference set out at Appendix 1 and Draft Action Plan set out at Appendix 2.

## **Report**

### **4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal**

- 4.1 The Children's Improvement Board has now been in place for over 12 months. The original intent was for it to be a short-term Board providing robust oversight and challenge inwards for the Council itself. The proposed Children's Partnership Ambitions Board has a singular purpose which includes a wider membership delivering a strong message, that it is not just the Council supporting vulnerable children and their families. It will provide robust oversight of the Ofsted Improvement Plan as well as support, constructive challenge and respond to workforce issues to drive positive outcomes for children and families.

- 4.2 A full Ofsted inspection is expected by March 2025, and there is a significant risk associated with a 'less than good' judgement.
- 4.3 A Children's Partnership Ambitions Board provides an opportunity for ongoing oversight of the Ambitions Action Plan to monitor progress and ensure that positive outcomes for children are effectively sustained.
- 4.4 Given the scope and purpose of the Ambitions Board there is no risk associated with it replacing Children's Improvement Board.

## **5. Financial Implications**

- 5.1 There are no financial implications of formally ending the Board and being replaced with a Children's Partnership Ambitions Board.

## **6. Climate Change Appraisal**

- 6.1 This report does not directly make decisions on energy and fuel consumption; renewable energy generation; carbon offsetting and mitigation; or on climate change adaption.

## **7. Background**

- 7.1 Ofsted undertook a focussed visit in November 2023 with a specific lens on practice relating to children subject of a child protection plan, with a particular focus on the quality and impact of pre-court intervention. They judged practice in this area to have declined, they found delays in outcomes and planning for children as well as weaknesses in the quality of management oversight and decision-making, staff supervision and appropriate challenge by child protection chairs.

### **Action in response to Focussed Visit**

- 7.2. As an immediate action, the Children's Improvement Board was established chaired by Chief Executive Officer with the purpose to collectively drive positive outcomes for children and families in line with the Shropshire Plan through seeking assurance that the quality of practice in all areas of Children's Social Work was maintained and continued to improve. Additionally, the Board has oversight of progress on the Ofsted Improvement Action Plan and provides support, constructive challenge, and a robust strategic response to specific issues.
- 7.3 Representation at Board is made up of Strategic Leaders from across the Council including the Children's Portfolio Holder, the Chair of People Overview and representatives from the political groups. In addition, it includes the Executive Directors of People, and Resources and Assistant Directors for Efficiency and Transformation, Children's Services, Workforce and Improvement and Legal Services. In addition, Board has benefited from both Local Government Association and Department for Education Advisors. Strategic Leaders from Health and the Police have also attended some meetings.

- 7.4 The Board has been sighted on progress against the Ofsted Improvement Action Plan at monthly meetings. An Assistant Director's exception report has been provided to each meeting outlining progress against the plan as well as specific issues and Board has also been provided with updating reports around quality assurance and HR to demonstrate the impact of action taken.
- 7.5 Service Managers have led on the delivery of required changes to provide assurance on practice improvement at pace evidencing measurable impact.
- 7.6 The Service has held monthly managers meetings focussing on practice improvement led by an Assistant Director, additionally a whole Service Practice Week took place between 30<sup>th</sup> September and 4<sup>th</sup> October 2024 covering a wide area of practice including Master Classes on specific practice themes.
- 7.7 The Back on Track program was delivered across Children's Services through the Joint Training Team between March and May 2024. The purpose of this training was to refresh and embed our Restorative Approach; (this is the practice model we use to underpin practice, based on building relationships to effect change.) and to ensure all staff had a clear understanding of processes, pathways, policies and procedures to ensure the consistent application of statutory child protection procedures.
- 7.8 With the support of our DfE Advisor Shropshire has successfully bid for two Sector Led Improvement Partnerships (SLIP) with Wiltshire and Warwickshire. The Wiltshire SLIP focused on our PLO practice and our Quality Assurance Framework. In addition to the two SLIP's a successful bid to the DfE was made for Research in Practice (RiP) Leadership Programme which commenced in October 2024. The aim of the programme is to build on the GLR principles of leadership specifically through the lens of Social Work developing resilient managers who work consistently, confidently and competently in a strength based restorative culture with quality at the heart of practice to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people.

## Impact

### Quality of Practice

- 7.9 A significant amount of work has gone into this area over the last 12 months, Service Managers have undertaken monthly dip sampling activity and in addition the Service Manager for Quality Assurance has undertaken dip sampling of themed areas and provided regular updates to CIB including Quarterly Auditing Summary Reports. The Principal Independent Reviewing Officer has also provided reports to CIB on Independent Reviewing Officer and Child Protection Chair activity.
- 7.10 Whilst the trajectory of progress is moving upwards, the quality of practice is not yet consistently good. Audit activity has evidenced a positive trajectory of improved practice in all areas with less Inadequate gradings compared with the same period in 2024, there has also been less Requires Improvement and more gradings of Good.

7.11 Factors impacting sustained improvement can now be addressed as part of business-as-usual including: -

- Recruiting a permanent and stable workforce.
- Reducing reliance on agency social workers
- Addressing and monitoring compliance.

## Performance

7.12 All managers have had access to the Performance Suite of reports since April 2024 which provides live performance data and additionally all Team Managers provide a report on their team's performance and quality assurance to the Executive Director of People's quarterly assurance meeting.

7.13 The Service Performance Scorecard also evidences overall improvement in performance across Children's Services with most children being seen regularly and their plans updated.

Date	CiN first visit in timescale	CiN 6 weekly visit in timescale	CiN reviews in timescale	CP first visit in timescale	CP 4 weekly visit in timescale	CP 4 weekly visit (child seen)	CP 4 weekly visit child 2+ seen alone	CP core group meetings in timescale	CLA first visit in timescale	CLA 6 weekly visit in timescale	CLA 3 month visit in timescale	CLA core group meetings in timescale	Leaving care in touch visits in timescale	Plans updated in last 6 months	Cases with regular supervision recorded
16 August 2024	93%	80%	84%	99%	82%	92%	92%	74%	100%	93%	98%	68%	82%	90%	81%
23 August 2024	95%	83%	84%	99%	83%	93%	92%	77%	100%	92%	98%	66%	83%	90%	81%
30 August 2024	91%	80%	83%	99%	85%	95%	90%	72%	100%	91%	98%	66%	82%	89%	81%
06 September 2024	91%	82%	84%	99%	84%	94%	92%	75%	100%	90%	98%	62%	76%	89%	75%
13 September 2024	93%	82%	82%	100%	85%	94%	90%	75%	100%	90%	98%	64%	78%	89%	77%
20 September 2024	95%	82%	83%	100%	87%	94%	89%	77%	100%	90%	98%	66%	76%	90%	78%
27 September 2024	92%	82%	80%	100%	80%	95%	87%	77%	100%	91%	98%	65%	76%	90%	78%
04 October 2024	92%	82%	79%	100%	79%	95%	90%	76%	100%	91%	98%	64%	76%	90%	79%
11 October 2024	91%	83%	75%	100%	83%	94%	87%	77%	100%	92%	97%	65%	78%	90%	77%
18 October 2024	92%	81%	78%	100%	84%	93%	86%	79%	100%	92%	97%	65%	82%	91%	77%
25 October 2024	92%	83%	81%	100%	83%	93%	89%	78%	100%	92%	97%	65%	93%	90%	78%
01 November 2024	92%	83%	82%	100%	84%	92%	90%	76%	100%	92%	96%	65%	91%	90%	81%
08 November 2024	94%	82%	82%	100%	83%	88%	90%	78%	100%	92%	96%	68%	89%	91%	79%
15 November 2024	96%	81%	81%	98%	77%	93%	88%	83%	100%	92%	96%	67%	87%	91%	74%
22 November 2024	95%	82%	82%	100%	77%	92%	89%	85%	100%	90%	97%	68%	87%	91%	76%
29 November 2024	95%	84%	82%	100%	79%	92%	89%	85%	100%	89%	97%	69%	86%	91%	78%
06 December 2024	96%	83%	80%	100%	89%	94%	89%	82%	100%	92%	97%	71%	89%	92%	79%
13 December 2024	96%	85%	79%	100%	92%	92%	91%	82%	100%	92%	97%	73%	86%	92%	83%
20 December 2024	96%	87%	80%	99%	91%	89%	88%	85%	100%	93%	97%	74%	83%	93%	86%
27 December 2024	97%	85%	80%	99%	86%	89%	90%	80%	100%	92%	97%	74%	82%	93%	82%
29 December 2024															
03 January 2025															
10 January 2025	96%	84%	82%	99%	87%	95%	90%	79%	100%	91%	96%	68%	91%	93%	78%
17 January 2025	95%	87%	83%	100%	89%	96%	88%	81%	100%	90%	97%	69%	90%	93%	73%
24 January 2025	95%	90%	83%	100%	92%	92%	91%	78%	100%	91%	98%	70%	91%	93%	78%
31 January 2025	95%	89%	82%	100%	93%	94%	89%	78%	100%	93%	98%	72%	88%	93%	81%

## Quality Assurance

7.14. Feedback from the Wiltshire SLIP gave assurance that the Service has a clear vision for quality assurance that provides a strong foundation for delivering consistent and effective quality assurance activity. They have made recommendations for how this work can be improved and will be supporting to refresh our Quality Assurance Framework and develop a management reporting system.

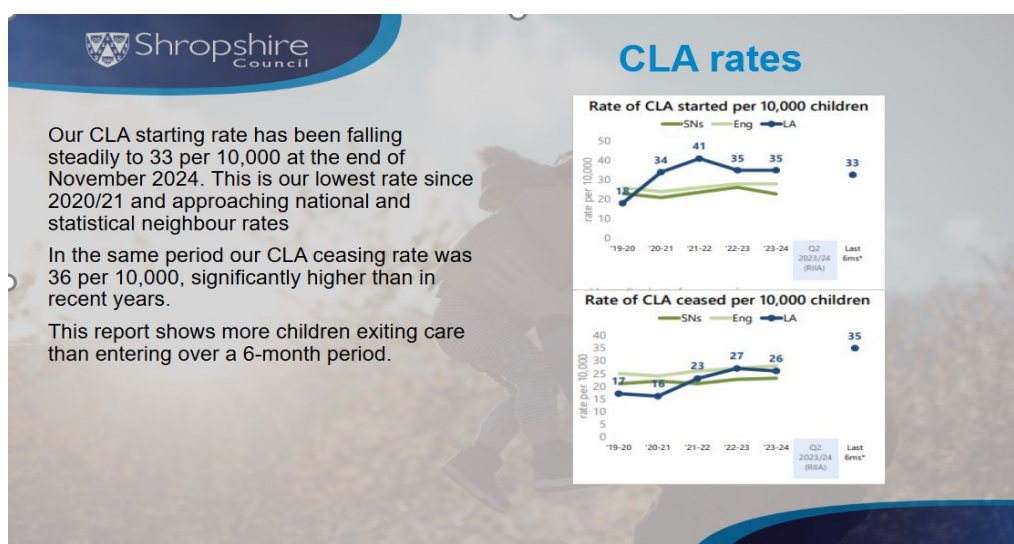
## Public Law Outline (PLO)

7.15. Audit activity evidences a clear shift with more children being diverted away from becoming looked after. Since April 2024 50% of families entering PLO were diverted away from Court.

- 7.16. Our Wiltshire SLIP partners have highlighted areas where practice can be strengthened to be more consistent, and work has already begun to develop an action plan to redesign and implement an amended PLO process which will incorporate our Health and Education colleagues.

## Capacity, Caseloads and Demand Management

- 7.17. Average allocations have fluctuated between 15 and 17 children in the last 12 months. Work continues, to manage demand through the front door, but also to exit children who no longer need to be looked after by the council. Our data evidences that we are starting to turn the curve with more children ceasing to be looked after than starting.



- 7.18. Following the last Focussed Visit in July 2024 which looked specifically at the experience of children looked after, Inspectors challenged the length of time some children remained subject to a Care Order. A temporary team has been established to focus on exiting children from care orders who live with connected carers or have returned home to live with parents. This team commenced in September 2024 and to date 21 children have had an application filed to discharge their Care Order, 9 of those have been since the Team started. This does not change the current plan or outcome for these children who are settled but removes the statutory court order and looked after child status. It means there is clear evidence that the child is no longer at risk of significant harm and can safely live with birth family – either parents or extended family / connected carers.

## Recruitment and Retention

- 7.19 The Office of the Chief Executive has supported the development of a Social Care Recruitment Pilot Project that went live in November 2024. The purpose of the Pilot is to streamline the recruitment process making it more efficient and easier for qualified social work applicants. So far, this new process has yielded 6 new Social Work appointments.



- 7.20 There has been additional capacity across the Service as follows:
- a. 8 additional Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) which has brought caseloads back in line with the IRO handbook recommendations for IRO's of between 50 and 70 children.
  - b. 4 Specialist Child Protection Social Workers were agreed of which only 2 have been able to be appointed to.
  - c. The Board agreed an enhanced retention payment of £15K for Hard to Recruit Teams along with the ongoing retention payment. There has been some response to this, but it has not yet yielded the return we would like for the Case Management Teams. Overall, the retention rate in Shropshire is good, Social Workers tell us they like working here. We have a good career progression process. Our challenge is the same as it is nationally that it is difficult to recruit experienced Child Protection Social Workers.

## Legislative Changes

- 7.21. Changes in legislation e.g. Working Together 2024, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024, along with the government's recent Budget Settlement will have significant implications on how we provide services to children and young people going forward. It is essential that we get the basics right to ensure that as we continue to build the Service it is not only effective, but efficient. The next stage for the council is to consider the wider child population and the duties the local authority has to them to ensure system oversight of children's experience.

## 8 Conclusions

- 8.1 The purpose of the Children Improvement Board has been to oversee progress in relation to the action plan following the Focussed Visit in November 2023. The plan demonstrates progress in all areas, with some actions completed, others continuing whilst consistency of progress is embedded.
- 8.2 It can be concluded that the purpose of the Board has been achieved, and the next step is to transition into the proposed Ambitions Board that will take over responsibility for oversight of practice, progress and Service development in relation to the local authority's duties to meet the needs of children and young people. The purpose of the Ambitions Board is to support, and challenge seek assurance that all agencies work together to deliver the absolute best for all children, young people and their families in Shropshire, especially those who are disadvantaged and / or vulnerable. The test of success in improving services is improvement in outcomes secured for and achieved by children and young people. This Board will seek to ensure that the voices and experience of Shropshire's children and families are central to all its work.
- 8.3 The Board will be strategic, ambitious, support innovation and work at pace to deliver the best outcomes possible for children and young people and their families.
- 8.4 The Board will invite all partners and stakeholders in Shropshire who will own these Ambitions.

- 8.5 The Board will review and monitor the Ambition plan. The plan (to be agreed) will set out the actions which the Council and partners are committed to take, the timescale for completion and lead officer responsibilities, and the qualitative and quantitative measures which will be used to evaluate success and impact.
- 8.6 The Ambitions Plan will be subject to ongoing review, to take account of the outcomes of any peer review work, recommendations from Ofsted focused / JTAI visits, and any other emerging issues.
- 8.7 Progress against the Ambitions Plan will be regularly and rigorously reviewed by the Board through a high-level set of key performance and quality assurance indicators.
- 8.8 The scrutiny and challenge of improvements will be primarily the responsibility of the People Overview Scrutiny Committee and the Shropshire Safeguarding Children Board for the multi-agency working aspects.
- 8.9 There are some elements of the Improvement Plan that will need to be carried forward should Council agree the proposed transition to an Ambitions Board, these include: -
- a. Quality Assurance
  - b. Recruitment & Retention and workforce planning
  - c. Allocations / Capacity across the system.
  - d. Statutory Compliance
  - e. Performance
  - f. Partnership

**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]

### **APPENDIX A - DRAFT TOR SHROPSHIRE AMBITIONS BOARD FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**



ITEM 4 - Draft TOR  
Shropshire Ambition

### **APPENDIX B - DRAFT ACTION PLAN**



ITEM 4 - Action Plan  
- Ambitions Board.oc