

Cared For Children and Care Leavers Committee Agenda

Date: Tuesday, 2nd September, 2025
Time: 2.00 pm
Venue: The Capesthorne Room - Town Hall, Macclesfield, SK10 1EA

The agenda is divided into 2 parts. Part 1 is taken in the presence of the public and press. Part 2 items will be considered in the absence of the public and press for the reasons indicated on the agenda and at the foot of each report.

It should be noted that Part 1 items of Cheshire East Council decision making meetings are audio recorded and the recordings will be uploaded to the Council's website

PART 1 – MATTERS TO BE CONSIDERED WITH THE PUBLIC AND PRESS PRESENT

1. **Apologies for Absence**

2. **Declarations of Interest**

To provide an opportunity for Members and Officers to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests, other registerable interests, and non-registerable interests in any item on the agenda.

3. **Minutes of Previous Meeting** (Pages 3 - 6)

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 24th June 2025.

4. **Update from the Shadow Cared for Children and Care Leavers Committee**
(Pages 7 - 14)

To receive a presentation from the Shadow Committee on work being undertaken.

5. **Update from the Corporate Parenting Executive Board** (Pages 15 - 18)

For requests for further information

Contact: Jennifer Ashley

E-Mail: CheshireEastDemocraticServices@cheshireeast.gov.uk

To receive an update from the August 2025 meeting of the Corporate Parenting Executive Board.

6. **Cared for Children and Care Leaver Quarter 1 Scorecard** (Pages 19 - 28)

To receive the Cared for Children and Care Leavers Committee Quarter 1 Scorecard for 2025-26.

7. **Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report** (Pages 29 - 46)

To receive the Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report for 2024/25.

8. **Cared for Sufficiency Strategy Update** (Pages 47 - 50)

To receive an update on the Cared for Sufficiency Strategy.

9. **Engagement with Front Line Services from Councillors** (Pages 51 - 68)

To receive details of engagement from Councillors with Front Line Services.

Membership: Councillors M Beanland, S Bennett-Wake, D Clark, L Crane (Chair), R Fletcher, E Gilman, G Hayes, S Holland, R Moreton, B Posnett, B Puddicombe, J Saunders (Vice-Chair)

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Cared For Children and Care Leavers Committee

held on Tuesday, 24th June, 2025 in The Capesthorne Room - Town Hall,
Macclesfield, SK10 1EA

PRESENT

Councillor Laura Crane (Chair)
Councillor J Saunders (Vice-Chair)

Councillors M Beanland, S Bennett-Wake, D Clark, R Fletcher, E Gilman,
S Holland, B Posnett and B Puddicombe

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Dawn Godfrey, Executive Director, Children's Services
Tracy Stephen, Director of Family Help and Children's Social Care
Laura Rogerson, Head of Service, Inclusion
Nicola Wycherley, Designated Nurse
Alison Sollom, Interim Head of Cared for Children and Care Leavers
Kristy Broadhurst, Service Manager, Cared for Children
Samantha Derbyshire, Head of Provider Services
Jessica Hillman, Service Manager, Cared for Children
Annie Britton, Participation Lead
Jennifer Ashley, Democratic Services Officer

1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Laura Crane be appointed as Chair for the 2025/26
municipal year.

That Councillor Jos Saunders be appointed as Vice Chair for the 2025/26
municipal year.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor George Hayes.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

4 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2025 be approved as a correct record subject to the inclusion of Laura Rogerson, Head of Service, being noted as in attendance.

5 REVIEW OF THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The committee received the report on the review of the committee's terms of reference, as required on an annual basis.

RESOLVED:

That the Terms of Reference be noted.

6 UPDATE FROM THE CORPORATE PARENTING EXECUTIVE BOARD

The committee received an update on the work of the Corporate Parenting Executive Board.

Details were provided on three workstream areas:

- Good Homes For All - A housing workshop took place on 22 May 2025 with 10 of housing providers, along with 4 Youth Ambassadors to develop a Charter for Care Experienced Young People.
- Good Health and Wellbeing - 2 meetings of this group had taken place with good engagement and attendance
- Good Educational Skills - An action plan workshop had taken place with partners to map out priorities in relation to this workstream. Task and finish groups will be established to progress actions.

Information relating to performance updates from the virtual school and corporate parenting scorecard were also provided.

In addition, the committee received a presentation from the Cared for Children and Care Leavers Shadow Committee that provided details on

- Care Leavers experiences of moving into Independent Accommodation
- The redesign of Independence Packs, with input from the Participation Team and Care Leaver Service, Care Leaver Ambassadors and partner agencies
- Cared for Children engaging with the recommission of Independent Visitor and Advocacy Service with 20 young people taking part

- Cared for Children and Care Leavers had been involved in the recruitment of Senior Managers across the Local Authority

RESOLVED:

That the updates from the Corporate Parenting Executive Board and the Care Leavers Shadow Committee be noted.

7 FOSTERING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT

The committee received the Fostering Service Annual Report for 2024/25.

It was highlighted to the committee that although the number of Fostering Carers had increased, work was required to recruit and retain more. The service had made improvements and strengthened the service with consistency of staffing.

Members requested information be circulated regarding how they can promote Foster Caring in their wards.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

8 CARED FOR CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS COMMITTEE QUARTER 4 SCORECARD

The committee received the Cared for Children and Care Leavers Committee Q4 scorecard for 2024-25.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 3.20 pm

Councillor Laura Crane (Chair)

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Cheshire East Shadow Cared For Children and Care Leavers Committee September 2025



Participation and the Children's Services Improvement Plan

Actions include:

- Develop and improve Independence Packs
- Be part of corporate parenting workstreams – good homes for all, good education and skills, good health and wellbeing
- Develop and review the local offer with young people

Care Leavers – Independence Packs

- Participation Team and Care Leaver Service along with the Care Leaver Ambassadors and partner agencies such as health are delivering sessions and redesigning the independence packs.
- Weekly sessions have been delivered in Macclesfield and Crewe Care Leaver hubs.
- Sessions were focussed on with young people to update the design, wording, format and evidence collection methods.

Independence Packs – the changes that have been made

- Themed independence pack e.g. “travel”, “finance”, “health” rather than “bronze, silver, gold”.
- The format – young people will be able to upload evidence in a format that works for them. Such as pictures, videos, audio, written text.
- The difference this makes for young people is that they develop the skills needed, rather than what is required in a bronze, silver, gold package. The pack is more engaging and young person led.
- There will be a design update, and new independence pack programme launched in the hubs in Crewe and Macclesfield in January 2026. This will be co-delivered by the Care Leaver Service and partner agencies in the hubs and one to one if required.

Cared For Children and Young People

Young people at My VOICE and our Cared for Children Activity Days through the summer have been working on:

- Developing a pen picture profile project – young people feel that professionals know everything about them, but they would like to break the ice and improve relationships with their corporate parents by finding out more about them.
- Sharing views and experiences with Leaders Unlocked on Cyber Crime to be shared in Cheshire Youth Commission's Big Conversation.
- Taking part in fun and targeted activities including cooking, bushcraft, arts and crafts, water sports.

What's next?

- Care Leavers and the Ambassadors are planning with staff National Care Leaver Month in November 2025, activities include Local Offer Review, social activities, themed workshops, launching the Care Leaver Survey, Takeover Day and young people co-delivering training to staff.
- Christmas celebration for Care Leavers in December
- Star Celebration Day in November
- Discussions due to take place to find out if young people would like Care Experience to be a protected characteristic in Cheshire East
- November Children's Rights Month annual campaign themed around safe spaces for children and young people and "article 31" of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child



Any Questions?



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Corporate Parenting Executive Board Update – August 2025

Overview

The most recent Corporate Parenting Executive Board meeting took place on 30 July 2025. The meeting covered updates from the three workstream areas and performance updates from the virtual school and corporate parenting scorecard. The board also approved the document in relation to care leavers entitlements, subject to some minor amendments.

Workstreams Overview

1. Good Homes for All

The Charter has been shared with our Registered Providers (RP) for comment, and when the final version is agreed, RPs will be asked to confirm their commitment by adding their corporate logo to the Charter. We will seek sign off from within CEC through the most appropriate route. This will provide our young people with a consistent offer across the four key areas of their housing journey.

We have developed a draft 'to be' pathway for first moves from the start of the independence journey to in tenancy support, learning from feedback from the Youth Ambassadors, registered providers, Children's Services and Housing. We are also using a small pot of money to support paying rent in advance to secure the tenancy more efficiently and working with registered providers to help cover this cost.

Workforce development has agreed that CEC volunteering days can be used to support young people to move into their new homes. We have also extended the Lifestyle benefits provided by Vivup to our care leavers when they are ready to move into their home, this will continue until they are 25.

The area of focus for the next period is gaining approval for the Charter from RPs and finalising the new pathway and planning ways to embed the processes for both Housing and Children's Services and continuing to explore Tenancy Ready training options.

Reviewing feedback from the Local Offer Mid Term Review will form a key part of the ongoing activity.

2. Good Health and Well-being

On review of feedback from care leavers at the care leaver offer mid-point review regarding their health and wellbeing, we identified that some requests were for services that are already in place, but young people were unaware of them. We are now focussed on the communication priority including how children and young people would like to have health information shared with them.



The new paperwork for Initial Health Assessment requests has been launched, this will help to improve the quality of health action plans due to the increase in background information provided regarding the child's history.

We have agreed that the Care Leaver Health meeting will continue as this has proved to be beneficial as more partners are involved with this meeting, this will now report back to the workstream.

Sleep has been identified as one of the most significant factors for improving the emotional health of separated migrant young people. A charity has been identified who can provide sleep packs for the cost of postage only, and we are looking at a funding stream for this.

Our next steps will be to implement agreed actions around communication, including updating online resources such as the Junction16+ app and developing leaflets and newsletters, plan events to ensure ongoing engagement opportunities with cared for children and care leavers for the next twelve months.

SDQ remains a significant area of concern, currently rated red on the scorecard due to ongoing issues. Challenges persist around system integration, particularly involving the education element, and meetings are planned for September to address these.

Cost and compliance are also identified as key issues. The issues and barriers affecting SDQ completion will be a focus for the next corporate parenting executive group and will consider any training requirements and cost barriers.

3. Good Education and Skills

This workstream so far has focussed mainly on post-16, but we are now developing a separate action plan for our pre-16 cared for children. We have identified leads for each area in the action plan, and they will now set up task and finish groups to progress work. Our KPI's need refining, and we will be working alongside the data team to finalise this.

Virtual School

The number of Primary pupils with less than 50% and 90% attendance has significantly decreased in June which is great news. We are holding good collective meetings with IRO's, and actions are being dealt with efficiently. Secondary school attendance shows increases but this is due to a lot of year 11's on study leave.

We are still seeing an increase in numbers of suspensions, but we continue to have no permanent exclusions. This is due to lots of support mechanisms in place.



We are pulling data together for the summer exams, primary school children have done extremely well this year. 77% of year 1 pupils have achieved great results, last year this was at 50%. Year 6 achieved 50%, compared to 16% last year which is excellent.

Corporate Parenting Scorecard

A deep dive has been completed into our 16-18 Care Leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and out of 53, 8 young people were identified as unable to work due to ill health, disabilities, pregnancy etc. 11 young people are signed up to the venture with confidence programme and are engaging well. The remaining 34 have individual support plans in place with EET advisors and plans are updated at least termly, these will support with transitions, 1-1s tuition, work experience and employability courses etc.

We have identified some inaccuracies in our system for recording unsuitable accommodation which are being addressed – there are a handful of our 19-21 year olds who are in custody and therefore in unsuitable accommodation. The remainder are in suitable accommodation.

Areas seeing improvement are the increase for children with a dentist, this has gone from 66% to 96% with IRO support, this data shows that when we focus on something we can see a real shift. Our SGO data is at 17%, above our statistical neighbours at 12% and we have also seen a reduction in placement moves.

Continued focus on improving the % of currently cared for children who have had a C&F assessment in the last 12 months as well as a focus on improving SDQ scores.

Care Leaver Local Offer Mid-term Review

Care leaver ambassadors led the local offer review on 4 June, this was well attended by professionals and key stakeholders. Some key highlights/feedback received from young people include:

The co-production element of independence packs was well received.

Pledge 2 of cared for strategy, linking education and childcare.

General support around the implications of benefits, universal credit, wider support available etc. to make sure they're not worse off.

Providing more work experience and employability skills like English and Maths, this is linked to a piece of work currently ongoing.

There is inconsistency around the local offer and the age that some entitlements go up to e.g. care leavers can get a bus pass until 21, council tax free up to 25 - we need to ensure that our local offer is as accessible and clear as possible, unfortunately, there may be



differences between entitlements, but we need to make that clear and simplify any information we put out there.

Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Executive Board will take place on 26 September 2025.

OPEN

BRIEFING REPORT

Cared For Children and Care Leavers Committee

02 September 2025

Cared for Children and Care Leavers Scorecard Q1 2025/2026

Report of: Tracy Stephen, Director of Family Help & Children's Social Care

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report sets out the performance for the Cared for Children and Care Leavers service for quarter 1 of 2025/26 (1 April 2025 – 30 June 2025). The Cared for Children and Care Leavers committee is asked to note the performance for quarter 1 and to provide support and challenge in relation to performance for our Cared for Children and Care Leavers.

Background

- 2 The Cared for Children and Care Leavers Scorecard provides key performance data, reported quarterly, which indicates the trajectory of practice and performance across the service and for our cared for children and care experienced young people. This report highlights key practice areas with supporting narrative for information, assurance and scrutiny purposes.

Briefing Information

- 3 Key strengths and areas for development identified within the scorecard are outlined.

3.1 Strengths

Quarter one of the current year shows a continuing downward trajectory in relation to the number of children becoming cared for in Cheshire East which is positive as it indicates that our work is supporting children to remain living with their parents safely. Our rate per 10,000 of cared for children (66%) sits below the national average (70%) and above that

of our statistical neighbours (60%) so there are further improvements to be made in this area, which should be achieved through our Families First reforms and in progression of discharging Care Orders for children who no longer require us to share parental responsibility.

Over the last quarter, there has been a significant focus, with the support from IRO colleagues, in ensuring children and young people have seen a dentist and the scorecard indicates an excellent improvement since last quarter from 66% to 96%.

There has been good progress in securing permanency and stability for children with an increase in the making of Special Guardianship Orders which is above our statistical neighbours achievements of 12%, standing at 17%, and a small reduction in the number of children who have experienced 3 or more placement moves in the last quarter from 63% to 61%. Aligned to this, there has also been a reduction in the number of children who have had a placement move in the last quarter from 83 to 65 individuals.

The number of children who have a long-term matched placement over the last quarter (119) has remained stable from last quarter (117). We have recently revised how we have oversight of children's permanence plans and the revised permanence panel took place for the first time on 19.8.25. The panel includes representatives from other service areas, such as fostering, the Independent Reviewing Officers and the Virtual School. This will mean information leading to decision-making will be improved and the panel is designed to respond more fluidly to children's needs so should see an improvement in children achieving permanence through SGO, reunification to family or long-term match over the coming 12 months.

3.2 Assurance

The scorecard shows a significant rise in the reported data in relation to 16-18 year olds that are not in education, employment or training (NEET - 51). This is linked to a number of young people not returning to college post Easter, alongside some of our young people leaving their apprenticeship or job. There has also been a change to how the data is being reported, as it now includes those young people who are attending employability programmes. In order to offer some assurance, more detail is provided regarding the current position in this area of practice.

There are currently 145 eligible or former relevant care leavers aged 16-18 years old. Of these, 51 are not in education, employment or training (NEET) (35%). This is in line with our statistical neighbours and the national average.

8 young people are unable to be engaged in education, employment or training (EET) due to ill health, disability or pregnancy. 13 are currently attending a Venture with Confidence employability programme, intended to equip young people so that they are able to enter EET.

The remaining 23% of young people who are considered able to be engaged in education, employment or training are subject to multi-agency monthly meetings to discuss individual young people and how we can support them into EET and an individualised EET plan outlining manageable steps into securing education, employment or training, including work experience which is available through Cygnet, Safe Opportunities and within Cheshire East Council.

Weekly Drop ins are available at the Care Leaver Hubs and 1:1 support is available from the EET Adviser, Apprenticeship Co-ordinator and Post 16 Learning Mentor.

The Virtual School Tutor offers 1:1 and group tuition for English and Maths to those who need support to achieve GCSE's and also to ESOL students.

Equans are commissioned to offer employability courses called IGNITE and two are on offer over the summer break. Work has commenced on securing a further employability course with Cheshire College South and West which would support access to adult education also.

Our scorecard data shows an upward rise in the number of care leavers who are accessing apprenticeships (12) and higher education (29) which indicates that the intervention being offered is having a positive impact.

We have recently (July 2025) undertaken some analysis of our care leavers in unsuitable accommodation and this work established that those considered to be in unsuitable accommodation were all serving custodial prison or youth custody sentences.

- 3.3 Over the coming quarter, our ongoing improvement work will continue, with a particular focus on the below indicators.

There are currently 62% of our cared for children that have an up-to-date Child and Family Assessment. This will be a key area of focus across the service over the next quarter as it is important that we understand our children's assessed needs so that we can ensure their care plans are responding to unmet need. The management team are currently finalising a recovery plan which will support practitioners in completing assessments for children in a timely way.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) has dropped from 52% to 46%. There is a working group already established which includes colleagues from the ICB. There is significant work to do in this area of practice, and this has started over recent weeks and will continue to be a focus across the next 3 months. We are exploring practice in this area across other Local Authorities to consider whether and how we can adapt our practice so that more of our children benefit from an SDQ and so that health professionals have improved access to the information gained in order to meet identified health needs. Importantly, this should, over time, show a reduction in the health related needs of our cared for children. We have identified that the current practice differs to the indicator used to report the data. The data tells us how many children aged 4-16 years and who have been in our care for 3 months or more have had an SDQ, however our current practice is to offer an SDQ to children aged 4-16 years who have been in our care for 10 months or more; this aligns to statutory guidance that an SDQ should be available at a child's review health assessment, completed at 12 months in care and annually thereafter. Performance based on this indicator is currently 71%.

Implications

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 4 No relevant issues identified.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 5 There are no financial implications.

Human Resources

- 6 There are no human resources implications identified.

Risk Management

- 7 There are risks associated with some performance measures as set out above.

Impact on other Committees

- 8 Scorecard information in relation to cared for children and care leavers will also be reported to the children and families committee.

Policy

- 9 There are no direct policy implications.

Commitment 1: Unlocking prosperity for all	Commitment 2: Improving health and wellbeing	Commitment 3: An effective and enabling council
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Other Implications

- 10 No relevant issues identified.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Allison Sollom Allison.sollom@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Cared for Children and Care Leavers Scorecard Q1 25/26
Background Papers:	No background papers

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June2025 - Cared for and Care Leavers Scorecard - This contains a rolling 4 quarters for comparison

Notes: The boxes that are grayed out are where national data is not applicable or data isn't available.

Notes: The column highlighted in blue reflects the most recent quarter being reported on

Notes: Rates from Q1 24/25 are calculated using the new 2023 ONS mid year population estimate 0-17 of 81,634 (Office of National Statistics) and are calculated as a rate per 10,000 children aged 0-17. This enables the local authority to be compared on a like for like basis with different local authorities or groups of authorities.

Priority	Indicator	Indicator name	24/25 outturn	Q2 24/25	Q3 24/25	Q4 24/25	Q1 25/26	25/26 outturn	Benchmark National (most recent available)	Benchmark Stat N'bour (most recent available)	Corporate Plan Aim	Acronym
General	G1	Number of cared for children	550	557	551	550	542				Fair	
	G2	Rate per 10,000 cared for children	67	68	68	67	66		70	60	Fair	
	G3	Number of care leavers (aged 16-21)		332	345	343	352				Fair	
Priority 1 - We will care for our Children and Young People as any good parent would	1.1	% cared for children reviews in timescales	91%	72%	73%	82%	80%				Fair	
	1.2	% of children and young people involved in their reviews	96%	93%	92%	96%	92%				Fair	
Priority 2 - Improved Education, Employment and Training outcomes	2.1	Number of 16-18 year old care leavers that are NEET		1	7	14	51				Fair	NEET - Not in Education, Employment or Training
	2.2	Number of care leavers accessing higher education (University)		25	29	26	29				Fair	
	2.3	Number of Cheshire East care leavers in apprenticeships (18+)		9	13	11	12				Fair	
	2.4	% 19-21 year care leavers that are NEET (as per national reporting)	36% NEET at birthday	45%	34%	37%	35%		38% NEET at birthday	37% NEET at birthday	Fair	NEET - Not in Education, Employment or Training.
em safe	3.1	Number of cared for children in external foster care		115	114	119	131				Fair	
	3.2	Number of cared for children in internal foster care		116	116	120	121				Fair	
	3.3	Number of children in care living with relatives and friends (inc reg 24)		130	125	112	102				Fair	Reg 24 -Regulation 24
	3.4	Number of children placed with parents		34	37	37	41				Fair	
	3.5	Number of children and young people in residential care		40	45	47	46				Fair	

Priority	Indicator	Indicator name	24/25 outturn	Q2 24/25	Q3 24/25	Q4 24/25	Q1 25/26	25/26 outturn	Benchmark National (most recent available)	Benchmark Stat N'bour (most recent available)	Corporate Plan Aim	Acronym
Priority 3 - We will work to give all children and young people a forever home and keep them safe	3.6	Number of individuals with 3 or more placements (rolling 12mth figure)	63	75	61	63	61				Fair	
	3.7	% cared for children in care for at least 2.5yrs at the end of the period and living in their current placement for at least 2 years	69%	63%	67%	69%	69%		71%	72%	Fair	
	3.8	Number of cared for children placed over 20 miles from home address (Cheshire East and out of borough)		146	145	147	153				Fair	
	3.9	Number of children living out of borough		209	204	204	197				Fair	
	3.10	Number of cared for children who have been missing in the quarter		36	38	28	45				Fair	
	3.11	Number of children who have a long term matched placement		127	123	117	119				Fair	
	3.12	Number of placement moves in the quarter		120 (88 individuals)	107 (91 individuals)	91 (83 individuals)	81 (65 individuals)				Fair	
	3.13	% of currently cared for children who have had a C&F assessment in the last 12 mths		72%	65%	61%	62%				Fair	C&F - Children and Family
	3.14	% of Cared for Children in care for more than 1 mth who have had a review in the last 6 mths		92%	94%	93%	93%				Fair	
	3.15	% of children ceased to be looked after due to granting of special guardianship order (SGO) - year to date figure	14%	6%	10%	13%	17%		13%	12%	Fair	SGO - Special Guardianship Order
	3.16	% of children ceased to be looked after due to adoption - year to date figure	11%	10%	11%	11%	10%		10%	11%	Fair	
	3.17	Number of children with an adoption decision		38	39	46	40				Fair	
	3.18	Average number of days between entering care and moving in with adoptive family (A10 national indicator) - yearly figure		631	614	609	582		376		Fair	
	3.19	Average number of days between placement order and match with adoptive family (A2 national indicator) - yearly figure		244	236	281	261		185		Fair	
	4.1	Children looked after who had their annual health assessment (%)	92% (OC2 cohort)	85%	89%	89%	84%		89% (OC2 cohort)	86% (OC2 cohort)	Fair	
	4.2	Children looked after who had their teeth checked by a dentist in the last 12 months (%)	91% (OC2 cohort)	74%	70%	66%	96%		70% (OC2 cohort)	65% (OC2 cohort)	Fair	
	4.3	% of 4-16 in care for 3 months or more with a completed SDQ score in the last 12 mths	83% (OC2 cohort)	68%	46%	52%	46%		77% (OC2 cohort)	75% (OC2 cohort)	Fair	SDQ - Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. T

Priority	Indicator	Indicator name	24/25 outturn	Q2 24/25	Q3 24/25	Q4 24/25	Q1 25/26	25/26 outturn	Benchmark National (most recent available)	Benchmark Stat N'bour (most recent available)	Corporate Plan Aim	Acronym
	4.4	% of young people with a SDQ score of 20 or above	45% (OC2 cohort)	33%	31%	31%	30%		37% (OC2 cohort)	40% (OC2 cohort)	Fair	SDQ - Strenghts and Difficulties Questionnaire.
	4.5	Number of care leavers with a health passport		18/18 100%	24/24 100%	15/15 100%	21/21 100%				Fair	
Priority 5 - We will prepare young people for Adulthood	5.1	% of care leavers aged 16-21 with an up to date pathway plan in the last 6 mths		82%	75%	89%	94%				Fair	
	5.2	% of pathway plan reviews completed in timescales in the quarter		84%	68%	80%	86%				Fair	
	5.3	% of pathway plan reviews completed in the quarter where Young persons view were not sent/ gained		3%	10%	7%	7%				Fair	
	5.4	% of former relevant care leaver aged 18-21 that we are in touch with		94%	95%	97%	98%				Fair	
	5.5	% of 16-17 years old currently cared for with a PA allocated		45%	30%	34%	44%				Fair	PA - Personal Advisor
	5.6	% of 17-18 former relevant care leavers in suitable accommodation	96%	93%	97%	96%	93%		90% at yp birthday	88% at yp birthday	Fair	
	5.7	% of 19-21 former relevant care leavers in suitable accommodation	92%	86%	97%	96%	96%		88% at yp birthday	88% at yp birthday	Fair	
	5.8	Number of cared for children in secure/ remand placements		1	1	1	1				Fair	
	5.9	Number of former relevant care leavers aged 17-21 in custody		9	10	7	8				Fair	
	5.1	Number current UASC being cared for	38	34	32	28	34				Fair	UASC - Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker
	5.11	Number current/ former UASC care leavers (aged 18- 24)		116	123	125	124				Fair	UASC - Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker
	5.12	Number of individuals in staying put arrangement		43	45	54	55				Fair	

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Cheshire East

TOGETHER for Children and Young People

Together we will make Cheshire East a great place to be young

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT FOR CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS 2024/2025



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Introduction

The annual report will present a reflective overview of the activity undertaken in Cheshire East in respect of our cared for children/young people and care leavers. It covers the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 and provides information on the role and the responsibilities of the safeguarding service, specifically the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). The report will provide information from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, and how this supports positive outcomes for our children.

As cited in the IRO Handbook the primary focus *'is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration'*.

The IRO's work collaboratively with our Participation team, Corporate Parenting Board and Cheshire East Safeguarding Children Partnership. Our journey continues to model a relational approach based on 'high support and high challenge' to support achieving the aspirations we have for our children, young people, and care leavers.

The IRO's utilise the structures that are in place including informal and formal escalations to support both the improvement of children in care's lived experiences and to better their outcomes.

In line with the IRO's quality assurance role there are a range of activities and performance measures that support care planning for Children in Care. Our performance to deliver timely and effective reviews has seen an 8% decrease during 24/25, identifying that a period of instability and staff vacancies was a contributing factor. This continues to be a key focus area in the coming year.

The report will provide an overview of the performance data including key performance indicators such as timeliness of reviews and children and young people's participation and feedback of their experiences alongside the current profile of our children in care and details around the 'dispute resolution' process and the impact of this.

Despite competing demands the IRO's performance around completing recommendations from the review within the 5 days has continued to increase with the IRO practice standards providing benchmarking to support an improvement in this area for 25/26.

Participation continues to be a strength and at the time of reporting 96% of our children and young people shared their views.



Work has been undertaken to strengthen practice around IRO challenge and escalation to support timely decisions and avoid delay in progressing plans. Whilst in its early stages the newly devised 'Resolution Protocol' has been shared with the service with evidence that this is starting to be embedded in practice seeking timely resolutions in line with the restorative approach that Cheshire East have adapted.

Alongside our cared for children the IRO's have continued to have responsibility for reviewing all care leavers 18-21yrs. The IRO's successfully reviewed 81% of Pathway Plan reviews within timescale and whilst we have seen a slight downward trend from the previous year this is indicative of the instability in staffing that we experienced between September 2024-January 2025 and will remain a focus for 25/26. IRO's continue to build relationships with their young people to support their attendance which this year highlighted that 66% of care leavers attended their reviews.

In person reviews have continued to grow throughout this reporting year with us seeing a 15% increase which currently stands at 55%.

Throughout the year IRO's have supported their continued professional development by attending various training opportunities in areas such as Leadership and management, sexual abuse, reflective supervision and deprivation of liberty. This has not only enhanced their learning but aided them to support the wider workforce and focus on outcomes for children.

The report will highlight the progress on the action set from the previous year and set out our aims and objectives for the next 12 months.

Purpose of Service and Legal Context

The appointment by local authorities of an IRO is a statutory requirement. Their purpose is to ensure that the care plan for a cared for child fully reflects each child's needs, that each child's wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration, and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's statutory responsibilities towards them.

The Children and Young Person's Act 2008, followed by revised care planning regulations and guidance which came into force in April 2011, strengthened the role of the IRO. The statutory duties of the IRO are to [section 25B (1) – Children Act 1989 :

- monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case;
- participate in any review of the child's case;
- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority; and
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.



As corporate parents, each local authority, through their officers and Members, should act for the children they care for as a responsible and conscientious parent would act. There are two clear and separate aspects to the function of an IRO:

- chairing the child's review; and
- monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

The IRO Handbook sets out the statutory roles and duties as well as the strategic and managerial responsibilities of local authorities in establishing an effective IRO service.

The legislative framework regulating services of IROs (Children and Adoption Act 2002, Children and Young People Act 2008, IRO Handbook 2010 and Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010) imposes a specific set of statutory duties which all IROs are expected to execute to improve outcomes for cared for children. It specifies that IROs should:

- be social work professionals with at least five years post-qualifying frontline practice and supervisory/managerial experience;
- ensure that children's views are heard, they are aware of their rights and entitlements and receive relevant services and support;
- consult children before reviews to keep their views and input central to the whole review process (particularly during the review meeting);
- maintain overview and promote meaningful consultation with parents, carers and others with significant involvement with the child and ensure they are involved, and that their views have been considered in relation to the care planning and review;
- monitor the local authority's management of the child's case at any time;
- attend any significant meeting or other type of review for the child;
- identify and challenge drift, delay and underperformance and make attempts to resolve them in a timely manner.

Profile of the IRO Service and Workload

The management of the safeguarding service consists of a Director of Children's Social Care, Head of Service and Service Manager.

This year the team has seen the service gain two additional IRO's as part of the improvement journey taking our structure to 11 FTE cared for IROs along with a parttime fostering IRO (FIRO). To support changes in staffing and key improvement work the IRO's have been both permanent and agency with varied experience. The Service Manager has direct line management responsibility for the IROs who reports to the Head of Service. The background of



IRO experience is varied ranging from CAFCASS, Child Protection, Permanence, Adoption, Fostering and Frontline management.

Caseloads have varied across the year and between September 24 to January 25, we saw them reach an average of 100, this is clearly outside the IRO handbook which suggests a case load of 50-70. Towards the end of the reporting year the workforce had started to stabilise, and caseloads were starting to reduce. Where possible we aim to keep sibling, groups allocated to the same IRO to ensure consistency. Where a child or young person has articulated that they do not wish for this to happen we have, in the main, supported this view and offered an alternative IRO. In such cases both IRO's are in regular communication to ensure they are working collaboratively.

The IRO's have access to independent legal advice that is commissioned from a local legal firm. When this has been used it has been effective and supported the IRO to be confident in their challenge and ensure the best possible outcome for our children and young people. Within this reporting year this has not been accessed with IRO's feeling that our current internal escalations policy has avoided this level of intervention.

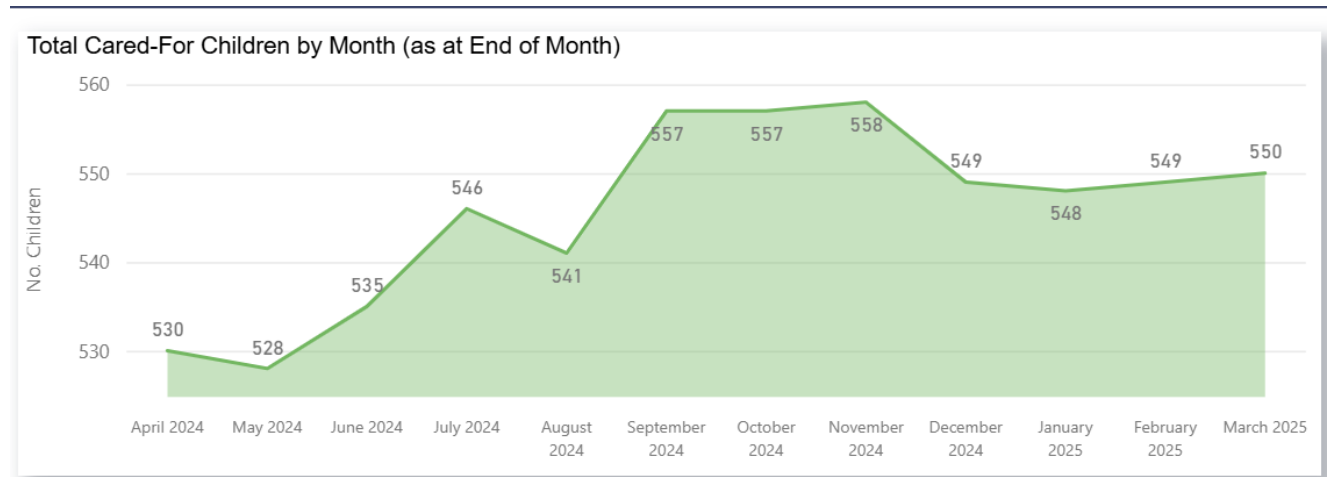
IRO's have links to different service areas such as cared for, care leavers, children with disabilities, adoption, education, and fostering. IRO's attend service meetings for their service on a quarterly basis which allows for the relational based practice to continue and support conversations around themes from both the individual work of an IRO to the collective QA activities that they undertake. This approach also supports timely resolutions, especially in relation to care planning.

The IRO's receive regular supervision and covers personal, performance and practice issues. Within this reporting period there have been monthly team meetings that have taken place which has involved a variety of guest speakers and peer observations to aid learning and strengthen consistency.

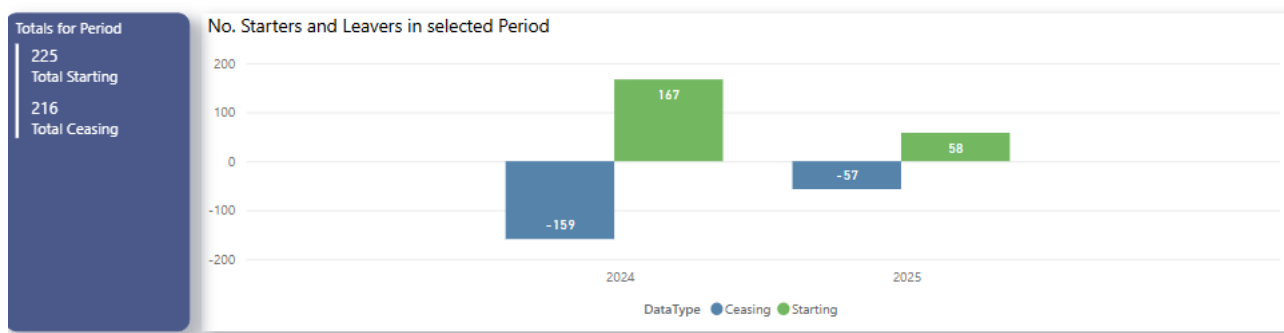
As part of our quality assurance role, we have enhanced our oversight of children in privately fostered arrangements through a dedicated IRO who holds this work. The IRO is alerted when private fostering arrangements have been identified to ensure this is a suitable arrangement. For the duration of the arrangement the IRO will attend regular Child in Need Meetings chaired by operational teams ensuring that the plan is proportionate and meets the current need. Service managers and Head of Service meet at quarterly intervals to raise themes, support awareness across the partnership and strengthen any areas of practice that have been identified.



Profile of our cared for children



This is the current profile of our cared for children within 2024/2025 financial year which highlights the increase in our cared for population at the latter end of quarter three and going into quarter four. It was during this period that the service experienced instability and caseloads significantly increased.



This year has seen the momentum of children leaving care has become more in line with children coming into care however out of these 40% were due to the YP turning 18, therefore they remain allocated to an IRO and the service doesn't see the impact on caseloads that children leaving care can have for IRO services

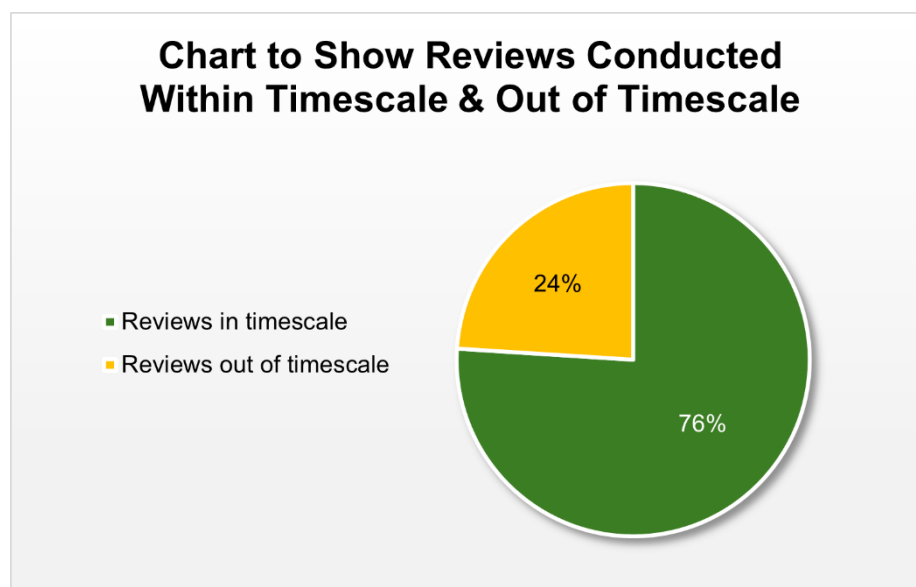
Performance data for Cared for Reviews

The IRO's have chaired 1185 cared for reviews in this reporting period with this year seeing 76% undertaken within timescales. As already highlighted the increased cared for population



and workforce instability has impacted on IRO performance within this area and remains a key focus area. To support timeliness and evidence oversight the IRO's make use of a 'series of meetings' when they are met with unavoidable delay. As a service, we have built in a process to support the improvement of timeliness, and this will continue to be reviewed. There are some operational challenges to ensure care plans are recorded in timescale to support timely cared for reviews taking place and the IROs are working with services to support practice improvement in this area.

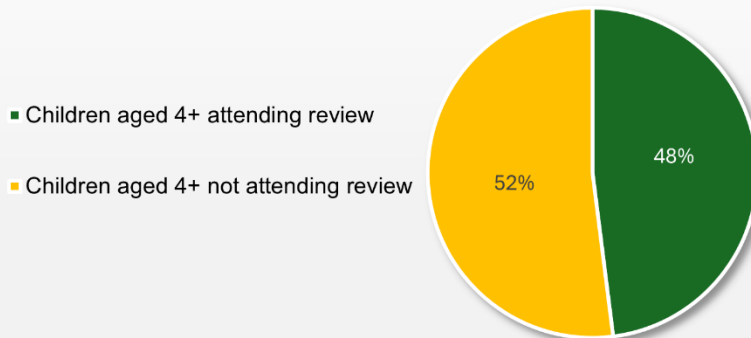
The IROs work hard to keep any rearranged reviews within timescales and work flexibility to avoid delay especially around court timetables. Over the year 249 reviews were rearranged equating to 21% this has remained relatively static from the previous year; however, it is reflective of some of the challenges the service has faced with the instability in the workforce and the impact on operational work



The IRO service work with our children and young people to encourage their attendance at their Cared for Review. In the reporting period, we had 48% of children over the age of 4 attending their review. Towards the latter end of the year the service has developed a platform for children, Young People and their carers to feedback their views and experiences around the review process, this data will be accessible and reflected within 25/26 reporting.



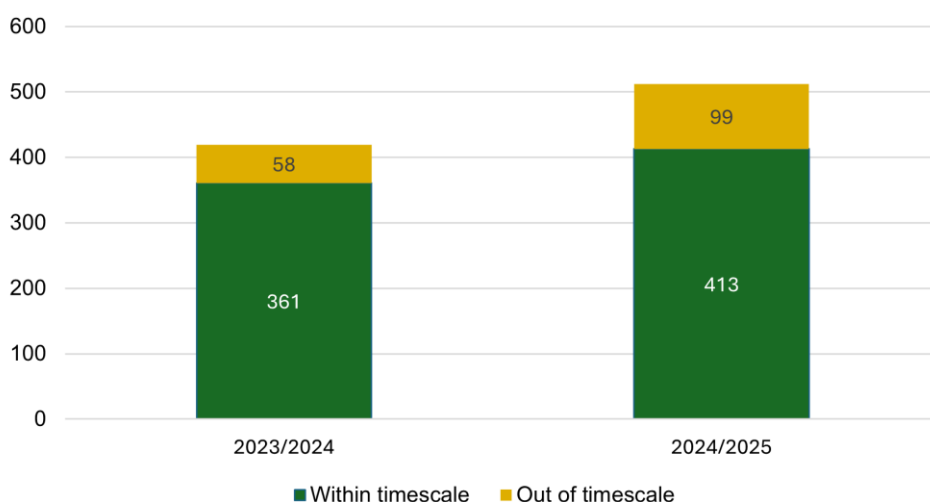
Chart to Show Number of Children Aged 4+ Attending Their Review



Performance data for Pathway Plan Reviews 18-21yrs

IRO's continue to support care leavers within Cheshire East and have this year completed 512 Pathway Plan Reviews with 81% taking place within timescales. Whilst this highlights a decrease from 88% from the previous year this is reflective of the workforce stability from September 24 to January 25.

Graph to Show Pathway Plans Completed Within Timescale & Out of Timescale, with Comparison to 2023/2024



Annual data for Key Performance Indicators

Task	Total Number	Percentage	Comparison to 23/24
Cared for reviews taken place	1185		1233
Cared for reviews held in timescale	1078	76%	84%
Cared for reviews with recommendations completed within 5 working days	776	65%	55%
Cared for reviews with minutes completed within 15 working days	850	72%	46%

There will be some variation to the figures from the monthly performance data that is scrutinised with the IRO's; where the recording of the reviews on the child or young person's records has not been completed, this will not be reflected within the snapshot above. Performance clinics with the IROs continue to address timeliness of IRO recording.

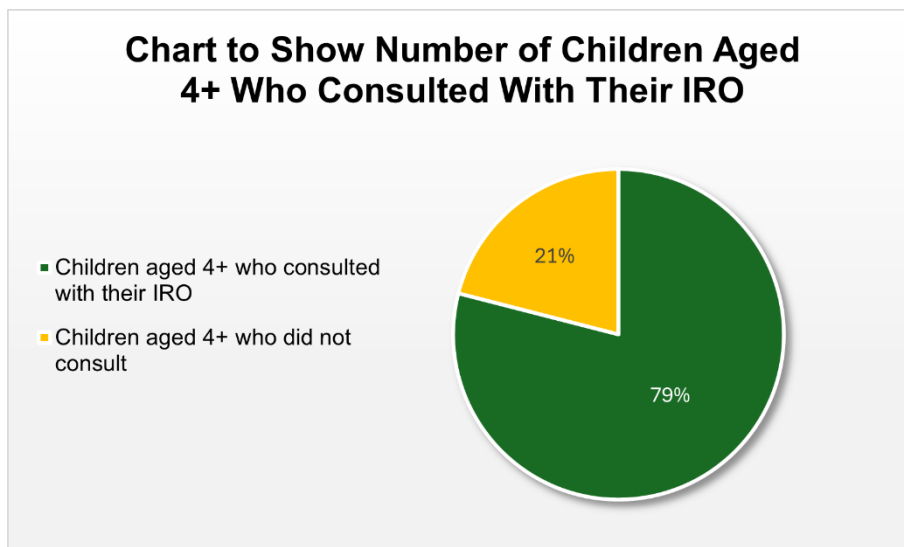
Participation

Children and young people sharing their views for cared for reviews has continued to increase this year and currently stands at 96%. This is something the safeguarding service are incredibly proud of and highlights the efforts that go into building positive relationships with our children and young people.

The IRO's remain committed to support children and young people in attending their reviews; with this year showing that 79% were consulted by their IRO. We do have to acknowledge that some children and young people do not wish to participate in their review. There is an expectation that IRO's ensure where suitable that the children/YP are offered an advocate to support with this.



Furthermore, a proportion of reviews that took place were for children under 4 years old where it was felt it would not be suitable for them to participate in this way, however there is an expectation the IRO's use alternative methods in a manner best suited to the children's needs and abilities to ensure a greater understanding of the children's lived experiences. This is generally through direct observation in home or education settings or through discussion with professionals working with them.



Attendance

The IRO's have continued to work hard to ensure children and young people attend their reviews with them consulting or visiting their children and young people prior to the review. While this is still not where it needs to be this year has continued to see improvements in this area with 48% now attending their cared for reviews. What we see is high levels of engagement with the review, but young people aren't always wanting to attend their reviews. This is something that we continue to explore through the support of our Participation team.

For our Care Leavers, this reporting year shows that 66% attended their pathway plan review, our aspiration is that this figure will continue to grow and again, through work completed with our participation team and feedback that the service receives, we can develop and strengthen the reviews to support this.

Children and young people who are new into care receive an IRO passport which has a picture and small narrative about the IRO, along with information regarding the review. This continues to be well received. Alongside this, consultation forms are also sent to provide our children and young people with the opportunity to express how they wish their review to be conducted and how we can support them to attend. If children and young people have experienced a change with their IRO, we have ensured that they have received an updated passport to support with this transition.



Feedback about the service

- A young person who was due to turn 21yrs sent a message to their IRO: *'I wanna say thank you though. I know we barely speak but I appreciate everything u do in the background. Will be disappointed when you're gone'.*
- Feedback from a foster carer: *'I was thoroughly impressed with the way she conducted her visit. The visit was completely child focused, she engaged with A, spoke to him in a way he could understand but not in a way that felt demeaning, and she seemed genuinely interested when he told her about his interests. Her demeanour brought out the best in him and want them to get recognition for their professionalism and commitment'.*
- Feedback from a parent: *'The kids have said they have spoken to you and said how nice you are and thank you for helping B understand better about the process and what happens after it has really helped him'.*

The IRO's held a session with several of our young people who shared:

I wouldn't focus on the meeting if it was on Teams.

WhatsApp or message would be best.

I prefer face to face meetings, more personal.

Review one hour max.

I don't like Teams, it's too long.

Through the development of an online portal, we are hoping to build on the feedback that we receive to aid learning and strengthen practice with one area being to deliver more reviews face to face in line with the children/YP wishes. We have set a Target of 85% for 25/26.

Our children and young people have also voiced some key themes through the consultations they have with their IRO's as part of their review including;

- Multiple changes in social workers impacting on the ability to develop those key relationships.
- Their plans not always being effective with at time lacking timely progression.
- A feeling that things are 'done too not with'.

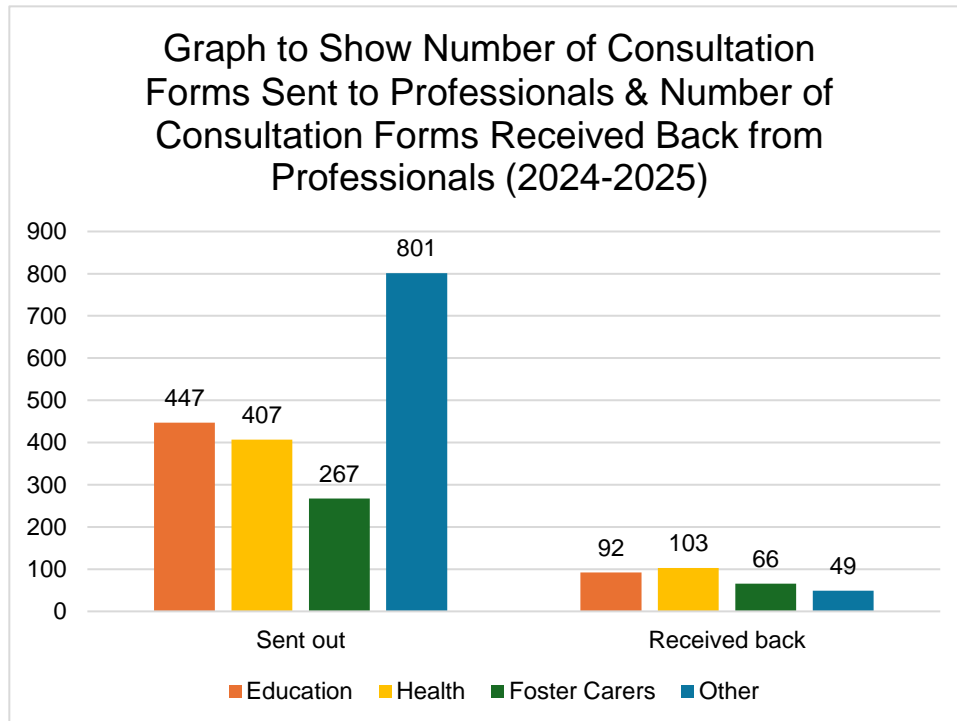


IRO’s advocate for our children and young people and in sharing key themes with the social work teams support them feeling involved and listened too.

Consultation with partner agencies

Consultation with partners is important to triangulate information for young people and ensure we have the right information to support planning. The Safeguarding Service endeavours to consult with all key professionals supporting the child or young person. One of the ways we do this is through consultation forms for partners. The performance in this area has remained low with this not being where we would like it to be. Children and young people often voice that they wish for just a select few professionals to attend their review, however it is still important that the IROs consult with wider networks to inform future recommendations and to support plans being progressed. As a service we recognise that foster carer consultations is low however through review of this what we can evidence is that they attend reviews and provide verbal feedback which is then captured within the recordings. This remains a key focus for 2025/2026.

As a service we continue to share this data with our partners so they can also aid the strengthening of this.



IRO’s are also proactive in liaising with professionals outside of the consultation process, often through telephone calls to ensure that they are capturing their views and key information that



can be fed into the review and support recommendations and forward planning. This reporting year has seen several partner escalations to police, health, education and housing which have supported progression of children and young people's plans along with ensuring collaborative working where risks have been identified.

Dispute Resolution and Quality Assurance Alerts

One of the key functions of the statutory role of the IRO is to seek resolution to any problem or disagreement arising out of the care planning process. It is a core part of their role to scrutinise practice and challenge the local authority to ensure good and timely outcomes for children. To do this, IROs must establish good working relationships with social workers and their managers to ensure the dispute resolution process is effective. This also requires senior managers positively supporting this process. Alongside this responsibility, IRO's in Cheshire East are committed to identifying good practice to support the system to learn from what works well for children and young people, so that it can be understood and replicated across services.

In line with legislation, and guidance around the planning for cared for children, local authorities are required to have a formal dispute resolution process in place. Whilst this may look different in each local authority, all systems must have a 20-day maximum time limit to resolve any disagreement from the beginning of the process to its conclusion. In Cheshire East, this commences with an Informal Quality Assurance Alert being raised by the IRO with resolution at this level within five working days with the team manager. If this is not achieved, then the IRO will escalate to a formal alert, allowing a further ten days to reach resolution with a senior manager. If there is still no resolution after 15 days, then the IRO may escalate concern to CAFCASS.

This reporting year we have developed a Resolution Protocol in line with the restorative model that Cheshire East are working with to support timelier resolutions, with this involving IRO's holding reflective discussions with social work teams and partner agencies. This helps to understand barriers in progressing plans and supporting statutory compliance and aid timely actions that IRO's track as part of their quality assurance function. This new approach is in its early stages.

In line with the revised protocol, we are working towards developing a reporting system which will enable data to support the narrative around this area and will be available for 25/26 reporting.

The IROs have continued to highlight good practice with this year seeing 60 being raised where robust and detailed assessments have been completed/where children and young people achieved good outcomes in a timely manner, and where the development of positive relationships with both children/families and partners have been evidenced. There is acknowledgement that Cheshire East are going through an improvement journey and that some areas of practice need strengthening with a key focus for 25/26 being permanence planning.



IROs are also expected to provide escalation to partner agencies as it is recognised that drift in planning does not always sit with the social work teams. In the year 2024/2025 there were 20 partner escalations raised which in the main were across health, education, police and housing services, the key themes centred around ensuring that adequate safeguards and collaborative working were in place for our children and young people who go missing, ensuring that when difficulties with housing have been identified that these are rectified in a timely manner and don't delay progression of plans and requesting further information from health colleagues to ensure that health needs are captured appropriately within the reviews. Partnership escalations are cited within the IRO practice standards as a key strand of IRO practice to ensure positive outcomes and we will focus on the impact of such escalations in the coming year.

Progress against targets 2023/2024

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Progress</u>
Strengthen the timeliness of reviews, recommendations and letters to children/young people	<p>The IRO's have continue to write to children and this is embedded in practice.</p> <p>There is acknowledgement that as a service we haven't made as much progress regarding the timeliness of reviews and therefore this will remain a key priority for the coming year.</p>
Embed the IRO practice standards	<p>The IRO's are clear around the expectations outlined within the practice standards and continue to embed these in practice.</p>



Improve challenge around drift and delay	This needs to remain a key priority in line with the introduction of the Resolution Protocol to ensure this is fully embedded.
Increase the focus on consultations from partner agencies	Within the year we have developed an online portal to assist with the consultation process. Full embedding of this during 2025/26 is a priority

Key priority areas 2025/2026

1. Strengthen the timeliness of reviews

Due to the workforce instability, we have not made progress in this area and acknowledge that this needs to be a key focus for the coming year. As a service we recognise the importance stabilising the workforce and implementing an increased performance management structure.

2. Strengthen performance around in person reviews

Whilst we have seen an increase in IRO's holding reviews in person It is important that this continues to be a focus. Some of our children and young people within their feedback that their preference would be online meetings. IRO's through consultation will offer this flexibility and ensure children and young people's views are being considered.

3. Improve challenge around drift and delay

The IROs will be consistent in completing mid-point reviews as highlighted in the practice standards to ensure oversight and tracking of recommendations to avoid any delay. Escalations will continue to be a consistent feature with the themes from these being pulled together in a quarterly report and shared service wide to aid learning and strengthen practice.



4. Increase the focus on consultations from partner agencies

As a service we routinely send out consultations and invite our partner agencies to feedback and inform our children and young people's reviews. Whilst there has been an increase, we are keen to strengthen this further as sharing information and working collaboratively not only ensures plans are progressed but ensures identified needs are being met and supported by the right people. We are hoping that the introduction of an online portal will assist partners in providing timely consultations.



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Cheshire East

TOGETHER for Children and Young People

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**Cheshire East**
Council

Cheshire East Council – Sufficiency Strategy 2025 Update August 2025

Over the past year, Cheshire East Council (CEC) has made careful and deliberate progress in implementing our 2024–2027 Sufficiency Strategy, with a clear focus on increasing local placement choice, improving stability, and delivering earlier, more sustainable interventions for children and families.

Progress Made

We have taken a proactive and strategic approach to addressing sufficiency challenges, particularly those affecting placement stability and access to the right provision at the right time. Among our most significant achievements this year:

- Joining Foster4

CEC joined the Foster4 collaborative, working closely with eight North West local authorities. This strategic move has given us access to a wider pool of potential carers, increased marketing reach, and enabled us to align our fostering offer with regional best practice. Early indications show an uplift in enquiries, and we're now focused on conversion and retention.

- Two in-house children's homes opened

We now operate two CEC-run residential homes. These two homes offer high-quality, stable care and have already reduced our reliance on out-of-borough placements for some of our most vulnerable children. The homes were commissioned in response to specific local need and provide therapeutic support alongside day-to-day care. Flude House is rated by Ofsted as Good in all areas and is at full occupancy, this home opened in May 2024. Cherry Tree House was registered in early June 2025 and has one child living there, with a further child planned to move in at the end of August, its first graded inspection visit is due around Christmas.

- Expanded supported accommodation for 16–25

Recognising the unique needs of care leavers and our increasing population of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), we have expanded our supported accommodation offer, including properties with tailored wraparound support. These services are vital in preparing young people for independence and preventing homelessness. We have contracted 10 new beds, 4 are emergency beds, 6 for our UASC children, with a further option of 1 emergency bed should we need this. It is also important to mention our new panel the 'Good Homes for All project' which was established to improve the support available to our Care Experienced Young People when they are ready to move into Independent living.

Since the inception of the Project Group we have:

- Assigned two Designated Cheshire Homechoice Officers to work with Care Experienced Young People Leavers to ensure they understand the process and provide them with support to access social housing. The officers are the link between Housing and the new Children's Housing PA.



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- Developed a draft pathway, which outlines the start of the journey to independent living and the support which can be accessed through this journey, which both Housing and Childrens will follow.
- Undertook a workshop with Registered Housing Providers to work to develop a Housing Charter which outlines both Cheshire Easts and Registered Housing Providers commitments to support our Care Experienced Young People as they access social housing.
- Put in place additional support when moving into or living in independent living including:
 - Access to the Council's Handyperson services to assist with small jobs, putting up shelving, curtains, decorating.
 - Agreed the use of CEC staff volunteering days to support Care Leavers with moving and decorating.
 - Extending the Lifestyle benefits provided by Vivup to Care Leavers when they are ready to move into their homes and this will continue until they are 25
- Edge-of-care framework

Our framework of early support and edge-of-care providers has supported 46 families (approximately 90 young people) in the last year. The support has enabled families to remain together within their homes and in the community they were raised. Many of the young people have required specialised support for Children with Disabilities, which is an area within which we require more providers.

Examples include: supporting young people who have been open to Police and probation services with positive behaviour support and engagement in education, working with families who require support with routines, attending medical and care planning meetings and behaviour management.

As part of our children's transformation programme – Right Child Right Home – we are scoping an in house edge of care service, which will complement the work being done within the Families First implementation. This will offer a range of services tailored to different age needs such as adolescence and pre-school.

- Introduction of a Court Team

To ensure timely permanence planning, we launched a dedicated Court Team. The teams purpose is to streamline our legal casework and improved timescales for achieving permanence — particularly Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and Adoption. There are signs of improved timeliness but there remains a significant capacity issue and need to stabilise the team to ensure progress is made more quickly.

- Adoption Counts partnership growth

Our partnership with Adoption Counts continues to go from strength to strength. Increased collaboration has led to improved family finding, more matches, and faster transitions for children in need of permanence (7 adoptions made 2024-2025), including supporting Foster for Adoption carers, of which 5 out of the 7 adoptions made in April 2024-March 2025 were carers supported as FFA carers, compared with only 2 the previous year.



- Commissioning redesign in progress

We are establishing a Children's Commissioning function within the Directorate which will be responsible for all commissioning activity including placements commissioning. This will include quality assurance functions and provider relationship management. This is a direct response to market pressures and reflects our aim to be a more intelligent, proactive commissioner.

Areas for Continued Focus in 2025

Despite real progress, we acknowledge that several sufficiency priorities still require significant work. These include:

- Expanding our kinship care offer

We must strengthen our kinship support pathway, from early assessment and training to long-term support. This is a key pillar in reducing reliance on external placements and ensuring relational continuity for children. In order to achieve this we must support Family Group Conferencing (FGC) and Family Network meetings at the earliest opportunity.

- Growing our in-house foster carer base

While Foster4 has helped improve reach, we must convert this into more local households offering long-term, short-term, and specialist fostering, reducing our dependency on IFA provision.

- Reviewing residential capacity

We are reviewing our need for further residential growth particularly for solo placements and children with complex emotional and behavioural needs. This is in tandem with our review of specialist edge of care support so that our strategy is to prevent more children from entering our care and to successfully remain within their home communities where safe to do so. This may include the use of more shared care options or short breaks.

- Collaboration with regional markets

Through the Appropriate Places of Care (APoC) regional group, we're working to address cost inflation and inconsistent availability across the North West. We are supporting a proposed fixed uplift agreement with private providers to stabilise the market and improve forward planning.

- Post-18 accommodation strategy

We are strengthening partnerships with housing providers and adult services to develop a more coherent and affordable post-18 accommodation pathway. The aim is to ensure no young person leaves care without a clear and safe housing plan, which is the forefront of the 'Good Homes for All' agenda.

The Way Forward

Our strategy is underpinned by a commitment to early help, permanence, and place-based care. We know that the closer our provision is to home, the better outcomes are for children. With dedicated investment and clear governance through our Improvement Board, we are confident in the next steps:

- Embedding a quality-assurance culture in commissioning to drive improvement and accountability across our provider base.
- Expanding our regional work to jointly plan capacity, increase leverage with providers, and prevent cost escalation.
- Embedding the plan for our Families First launch in March 2026, which will include a restructure of how our services operate to support children remaining with their families where possible.
- Further consideration of our post 18 offer, including options to work with local projects is needed.
- Continued growth of our in house foster offer through Foster4, as well as a full review of our Kinship offer.
- Review further in-house residential provision in line with edge of care development

We remain committed to delivering a responsive, ethical and financially sustainable placement strategy that reflects the individual needs of our children and young people, and we welcome continued collaboration and oversight from partners in delivering on that mission.

OPEN

BRIEFING REPORT

Cared For Children and Care Leavers Committee

Date: 02 September 2025

Engagement with frontline services from councillors

Report of: Allison Sollom

Purpose of Report

- 1 To summarise and report on frontline visits undertaken by Councillor Bennett-Wake, Councillor Holland and Councillor Wye to the Cared for Children and Care Leaver service throughout July 2025.

Background

- 2 On the 14th of July, Councillor Bennett-Wake visited the Cared for Children service; on the 17th July 2025, Councillor Holland visited the Care Leaver service and on the 24th of July, Councillor Wye visited the Court team.
 - 2.1 During each visit, the Councillors undertook four meetings. The first was with the Service Manager, the second with a frontline practitioner, the third with a team manager, and the last meeting was a focus group of approximately 6 practitioners. After the visits, each councillor completed a report of their findings.

Briefing Information

- 3 Summary of the strengths identified in relation to quality of practice:
 - Staff are dedicated and passionate and enhance the lives of children and young people and the child's voice is at the centre of practice
 - Social Workers feel supported by managers who want to develop staff and also by peers sharing best practice and expertise

- The implementation of the Court team has had a positive impact on staff in the cared for children service and in the court team
- Experiences of supervision have improved through preparation or through focus and task centred approach
- AI is helping to reduce workload in report writing and to produce higher quality work.

Summary of the areas for development identified in relation to quality of practice:

- Finding time to attend training is a challenge, as is the paperwork required for some process related tasks
- Family time is an area of challenge, both in relation to the lack of supervisors and lack of suitable locations
- Practitioners would like Personal Advisors to be allocated to young people at an earlier stage to support transitions work and support from adult services for care leavers to be improved
- Consistency of practice needs to improve and staff broadly recognise this and the areas of practice which need to be better
- Sufficiency of foster carers means children are not always living in their local area and staff are travelling long distances to visit children, working long hours
- There are not enough good accommodation and care providers for children
- Improved processes are required relating to work moving into the court team.

Summary of the strengths in the experience of working for Cheshire East:

- Progression routes within their careers
- Staff feel supported by managers at all levels and by their peers
- Everyone focuses on getting the best outcomes for children
- Clarity about the improvement journey and what is best practice.

Summary of areas for development in the experience of working for Cheshire East:

- Lack of space in Delamere House and conditions are too hot with insufficient fans
- Meeting rooms are used by other services resulting in a lack of private space and a lack of confidentiality

- Long working hours and long travelling time due to out of area placement
- The tone of Cheshire East feels to be funding and data driven
- Pay not always correct; agency Social Workers paid more
- Turnover of senior management creates changes
- Delay in appointing a Head of Service meant staff felt alone in making important decisions
- Would like purpose built care leaver Hubs and family time space
- Would like training on the use of AI (Co-Pilot).

The Councillor feedback forms can be found as appendices to this report.

3.1 Service response to the findings

It is positive to know that staff feel well supported within the service and that the commitment, passion and care that practitioners within the service demonstrate on a day-to-day basis was evident to the Councillors during their visits.

Staff spoke positively of their interactions with the Councillors and appreciated the time dedicated to listening to them talk about their experiences in Cheshire East.

In reflecting upon the areas identified for improvement, it is apparent that some practitioners have highlighted issues that may have been a concern for them personally, such as their pay being incorrect, but that are not widespread issues experienced by the majority.

Other challenges shared are as a result of challenges within the wider context of social work, such as sufficiency, which is a nationally recognised challenge and through the Families First reforms, should improve to some extent. We have a Cheshire East sufficiency strategy which outlines the work we are doing to improve in this area, including being part of a regional fostering offer, Foster4, and our 16-25 accommodation strategy aimed at growing our own commissioned services for accommodation for young people. The work within the strategies is ongoing and takes time to demonstrate impact.

Other concerns identified relate to resource driven decisions, such as the availability of buildings and space and the request for purpose built buildings. There is ongoing work underway to implement a purpose built family time centre which is due to be online around summer 2026 and a bespoke hub at the Crewe Youth Zone is a longer-term plan. The care leaver improvement plan is being used to constantly improve on our

offer to care leavers, and it is reassuring to receive positive feedback from our Sector Led Improvement Partners in North Tyneside Council that we are making good and timely progress in this area.

All of the feedback is being considered in relation to our cared for service improvement plan which is in the early stages of being drafted.

Finally, sincere thanks to the Councillors who took time to join the service in these visits.

Implications

Monitoring Officer/Legal

3 There are no direct legal implications.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

4 There are no financial implications.

Human Resources

5 There are no human resources implications identified.

Risk Management

6 There are risks associated with staff satisfaction which are outlined in this paper.

Impact on other Committees

7 There is no known impact on other Committees.

Policy

8 There are no identified policy implications.

Commitment 1: Unlocking prosperity for all	Commitment 2: Improving health and wellbeing	Commitment 3: An effective and enabling council

Other Implications

9 No relevant issues identified.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Allison Sollom Allison.sollom@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Frontline Visits reports
Background Papers:	No background papers

Councillor Frontline Visits Form

Name of Councillor	Sarah Bennett-Wake
Date of visit	14/07/2025
Team visited	Cared for Children Team

<p>Quality of practice</p> <p>Strengths:</p> <p>All staff are dedicated and passionate about working with children and young people. They are not just safeguarding children but enhancing their lives in the best possible way. Staff shared case studies of how their work and persistence in finding the right care and multi-agency support leads to positive outcomes for individuals.</p> <p>It was clear that the child's voice is at the centre of practice, as well as a core belief that impact is evidenced by happy, healthy young people who thrive and achieve according to their needs.</p> <p>A new court team has reduced some of the workload for social workers and caseloads are at a maximum of 21. This was felt as a positive move by all the team.</p> <p>The consistency of recording the child's voice has improved as everyone is using the same template. This was easier for managers to measure consistency for audits, supervision meeting and visits. This meant that managers have better oversight of the children and young people in our care.</p> <p>Social workers now prepare for supervision meetings with relevant information, making the process more efficient.</p> <p>It was evident that social workers not only receive support from their managers but also from other team members sharing best practice and expertise.</p> <p>Managers are curious and are keen on the development of their staff, sharing best practice and praise.</p>
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Improvements have been made to the number of visits reaching 90% with plan completion at 94%.

Areas for development:

Work with frontline staff to develop workable paperwork and systems, for example a social worker expressed that the long-term matching form/process is too long compared with other councils such as Stoke.

Specific time for training, social workers felt they did not have time to attend lunchtime sessions.

More family workers are needed to provide contact time with parents and children throughout the court process. Social workers are still picking up some of these visits (although one social worker has chosen to keep her remaining court cases for continuity).

More sharing local knowledge of safe places for families to meet children out of school hours. Social workers sometimes find it difficult to find suitable venues to meet out of office/school hours.

More suitable, local foster carers required to meet the needs of children and young people, especially groups of siblings and those with specific additional needs. Although social workers understood there is a decline in foster carers nationally, they questioned the quality of some foster carers.

Personal Assistants need to be matched with care leavers earlier to encourage better transition. Social workers stated young people were worried who would look after them through transitional periods. Again, social workers felt they were picking up this work.

It was acknowledged by all that the team were still on journey with pathway plans.

Case summaries could be improved so that everyone could pick up a case if necessary.

The team expressed that other agencies did not always appear to understand the nature of their role and the needs to be more joined up working.

It was also acknowledged by managers that there needs to be more consistency across the board with practice and plans.

Experience of working for Cheshire East Council

Strengths:

There are a number of managers and social workers who had worked at the council for more than 10 years and had made progression in their careers, stepping up into management roles or taking part in apprenticeships or higher education. Staff were actively encouraged to do this.

Peer and management support was a strength with all members of staff expressing they felt supported and could go to a variety of team members with technical or personal issues sharing best practice.

Monthly meetings outside the office were seen as a positive.

Everyone's focus was on the needs of children and young people and despite the pressures everyone enjoyed their work getting the best outcomes for children and young people.

Managers and a newly qualified social worker I spoke to were extremely positive and had a clear view of the improvement journey and what counts as best practice.

Areas for development:

Staff felt their working environment could be improved by working in pods, or teams. There isn't enough room on the 7th floor of Delamare House to accommodate the whole team at the same time.

Many staff prefer to work from home even though the whole team recognised the benefits of working together.

Not all monitors work, the room is too hot, with not enough fans and a water cooler. (It was a particularly hot day when I visited.)

Meeting rooms are used by other workers in the building resulting in a regular lack of private space for supervision or safeguarding conversations. Both managers and social workers highlighted this as an issue. All staff felt they should have their own small private meeting room for confidential conversations.

Out of area placements meant that social workers work 50+ hours per week, completing many tasks at home in their own time. This also impacted on the mileage they could claim for visits. More quality local foster carers are required.

Turnover of senior management meant that systems had changed frequently. Sickness and maternity leave had also impacted on the team's sense of security.

There seemed to be resentment towards agency staff who are perceived to get more pay for the same work, although it has been highlighted that these are experienced social workers.

Some social workers complained their pay was not always correct.

Social workers could not attend lunchtime training sessions due to lack of time – most said they didn't get enough time for lunch.

Some staff felt the tone of Cheshire East was funding and data driven rather children.

Overall, I felt like the team had been through the mill with a lot of changes in senior management, Ofsted, and office location and they valued the opportunity to express their concerns. More work needs to be done ensuring frontline staff have a suitable place to work together as a team with reassurance and praise that they are making progress and that their work and commitment is valued.

Perhaps there could be more formal peer mentoring as a positive training opportunity.

Issues to be escalated to Head of Service

Please provide any areas where you require a response from the Head of Service

How do we assess the quality of new foster carers?

Do we record travel time to out of area placements/visits? Is this paid back?

Please send this completed form within one week of the visit to childrensdevelopmentandpartnerships@cheshireeast.gov.uk

Councillor Frontline Visits Form

Name of Councillor	Sally Ann Holland
Date of visit	17/07/25
Team visited	Care Leavers Team

<p>Quality of practice</p> <p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dip sampling, pathway plans, care leaver plans, care leaver ambassadors, feeling supported. - Only two agency staff within team is a positive. - Decisions are thorough with children at the forefront. - EET at 64% is a positive direction. - Supervision is regular and focused, staff feel trust towards the information that is shared, task-centred, child-focused. - Virtual school is brilliant, Pure Insight is good but PAs should be allocated earlier. - One agency staff member explained that they have enjoyed the placement over the past year at Cheshire East so much so, that they intend to transfer permanently from the agency. - Explained that there is positive progress since managers sit in on care plans. - Drop-ins are good. - Everyone brings a different talent to the team and uses skills. - Management support is much better now. <p>Areas for development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changeover from adults is still not getting the required support. Transition is still not straightforward, transition should be at 17 but this is when a care leaver is allocated. - The care leaver hubs would benefit from sexual health sessions, CGL, police and cooking sessions as well as providing plenty of activities. Links to Government/Local Government apprenticeships. Make efforts to stem mixed messages between foster carers, PAs and social workers. - Through the care leaver ambassadors complete feedback on annual summary with participation team.

- Junction 16 app is great but could be progressed, several in the care leavers team mentioned looking at the Manchester equivalent for some ideas which has more information.
- Don't discard automatic translation.
- Ideally the care planning meetings should be 4-6 weekly, lack of confidence in Blinded Faith and believed individuals were left vulnerable to exploitation with such accommodation providers. Felt that the £11,000 per week fees were not good value for money.
- Schooling one time per week, 1-1 tutoring.
- Collaborative agency working, service providers are failing the children, young people that are being placed in them don't get the tools they need, pushed back onto PAs, won't engage.
- Not enough quality service providers, more about the money as opposed to the care.
- Service breakdowns.
- Need a pay grade discussion and teaching/training to progress staffing

Experience of working for Cheshire East Council

Strengths:

- Inviting care leavers to their care plan meetings does help engagement.
- Data and performance care plans are now efficient, strategy visits, 16+ risk assessments and pathway plans, level of information. Team is getting feedback, no last IROs.
- Having Jess back has offered stability and she understands the service, delivery and data. Massive positive change since Jess has returned from maternity leave.
- Strong team, having the pods.
- Homeless supporting and realistic with timescales. Through supervision, speak to the team managers and look to escalate. See people in the hub.

Areas for development:

- They felt left on their own to make large decisions, Annemarie's position was not replaced.
- Risk assessment rational, regular supervision, if someone doesn't want service. Conversation around workload duty caseload of 25.
- Feel that hubs need improvement, purpose-built buildings would work better so they can gain better experience. But feel that hubs play a really important role.
- Struggled with the Ofsted report and how delivery of findings was handled.
- More team managers have now helped support the team, previously disjointed.

- Adult social work role; asylum seeking needs more legal knowledge.
- Visits for some care leavers take all day just for one visit because of the distances/travel time.
- Mileage caps unfair, e.g. 500 miles covered in two days, when the mileage compensated drops when 800 miles has been completed.
- Social workers genuinely care and really do take their corporate parenting role to heart. Visits are more meaningful but lack of time due to number of caseloads, and there should be less paperwork.
- Instruction on how to use AI (copilot) to assist with document writing/paperwork.
- Mobile phones desperately in need of an update.
- Reinstate credit cards for PAs as going shopping for homewares for young care leavers is difficult under the current procedures, setting up their accommodation for the first time is just totally impractical and doesn't add value for the whole experience for the care leaver.
- Setting up an allowance, teaching budgeting is better for the young person.
- They are happy to reuse and repurpose by shopping in charity shops, etc, but the system does not enable this.
- Having to go through admin takes so long that they often lose good deals and offers.
- Suits any PA, signpost to EET this team is trusted and is looked upon as somewhere to go to.
- Apprenticeships need to have job offer at the end, and Cheshire East should be offering apprenticeships to care leavers.
- More staff, need PAs from age 16 years, ambassadors are more present, forum meetings.
- Credit cards, more on accommodation, housing shortage.
- Convert Mountview in Congleton into a care leavers accommodation hub (care leaver team). Dangerous to be placed in an environment that they are not ready for, if they were living independently but close to each other for support this would work.
- Getting management to understand.
- Foster carers need educating on the transition process.
- Difficult to work with agency staff when transitioning from young person to adult.
- Pathway plans - action on how the young person achieves, review offers until 21 years.
- Caseloads are 25 but ideally they should be around 20/22.

Issues to be escalated to Head of Service

Please provide any areas where you require a response from the Head of Service

Please send this completed form within one week of the visit to
childrensdevelopmentandpartnerships@cheshireeast.gov.uk

Councillor Frontline Visits Form

Name of Councillor	Ben Wye
Date of visit	24 th July 2025
Team visited	Children and Families Court Team

A personal note: Thank you and the court team for your time, welcome, candour and commitment to our children and young people. I felt quite emotional at times at the genuine desire to improve outcomes. You do excellent work under significant challenges and stresses.

Quality of practice
<p>Strengths:</p> <p>Since inception in February 2025 the Court Team has enabled dedicated Social Workers to work with children without the interruption that mandatory and short notice court appearance necessitated.</p> <p>Team members are developing specialist expertise and practice in court work that has resulted in increased compliance reflected in the reduction of costly C2 extensions (is there a record of these costs to help reflect on other approaches to preparing for them?).</p> <p>There was a feeling that small, early interventions could be more effective and allow a child to stay with their family and avoid costly and traumatic court work and decisions to remove a child. A simple example was to use a worker as a proxy grandparent through difficult times e.g. pick a child up from school, help the parent cook tea and tidy up. It was felt that the Families First Partnership legislation would enable this more flexible and creative response. It would be interesting to hear how that is affecting actual practice now to be more efficient.</p> <p>All four workers in the forum found AI help in report writing reduced workload and improved formats.</p>
<p>Areas for development:</p> <p>Everyone was convinced of the need to reduce the number of children presenting, but the court team necessarily picks up from other teams who may still be working on recording etc. While there is great respect for colleagues work there was a frustration that different teams were not streamlined. One solution could be to have greater clarity about respective roles and responsibilities (I could find nothing online about</p>

the Court Team work). Sometimes a child was not presented to the Court Team for a month into the 26 week window due to lack of records. There was a feeling that if they could start earlier, they would not incur the cost of C2.

Experience of working for Cheshire East Council

Strengths:

Every worker I met is committed to improving children's outcomes and wanted a more streamlined process. The lure of agency work was clearly a pull factor, not only because of the pay difference but it was felt that some agency workers did not feel the same commitment as permanent staff.

The pressures of time and workload was a strong theme, reflected in the fact that workers had to leave to deal with issues during the visit. The arrival of a senior head of overall service, who can coordinate and streamline the different teams was very much welcomed.

Areas for development:

Half of the team, including the team leader, work for agencies rather than being a permanent staff member, some for many years. While this does bring in outside experience and good practice churn is a real issue. Half the team have left since it started in February. The anxiety of protection work, with strict deadlines means that some work almost double the 37 hours, often waking at night thinking about a child.

"In adult care you can turn your laptop off at 5pm confident that no one is likely to die from your decision that day. In child protection that is always on my mind".

It was felt by some that to retain good permanent staff and reduce stress we should invest in clinical supervision and consider narrowing the pay gap with agency staff which would save money in the longer term.

A final, personal thought: Some placements are unavoidably far away; examples cited were rural Wales and East Anglia. This means expensive travel and time, sometimes overnight and the same burden on families to come here. Would it be possible for more local or independent social workers to cover this work, as we have half agency staff internally anyway. Perhaps on the Uber Model; putting caseloads on a shared platform for qualified independent or agency social workers to cover?

Issues to be escalated to Head of Service

Please provide any areas where you require a response from the Head of Service
Whilst I do not 'require' a response it would be helpful to get feedback and comments.

Please send this completed form within one week of the visit to childrensdevelopmentandpartnerships@cheshireeast.gov.uk

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