

Children and Families Committee

3 June 2024

Ofsted Inspection Findings

Report of: Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director Children's Services

Report Reference No: CF/03/24-25

Ward(s) Affected: All wards

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report briefs committee on the findings from the Ofsted inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) conducted in February and March 2024, the plans in place to improve our services in relation to the findings, and monitoring arrangements from Ofsted and the DfE.
- 2 This report relates to the objectives in the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-25 to be a council which empowers and cares about people; that works together with residents and partners to support people and communities to be resilient; protects and supports our communities and safeguards children, adults at risk and families from abuse, neglect and exploitation; to be the best corporate parents to our children in care; and ensure all children have a high quality, enjoyable education that enables them to achieve their full potential.

Executive Summary

- 3 Cheshire East Council received an Ofsted inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) between 19 February – 8 March 2024. The inspection findings are set out in a [report](#) (appendix 1) which was published on 16 May 2024.
- 4 The inspection found that despite improvements identified in some areas of practice, services required improvement as the quality of services children experienced was too variable, and for care leavers services were inadequate.
- 5 Cheshire East's overall judgement is inadequate. When an authority receives a judgement of inadequate in any area, they can only receive an overall

judgement of inadequate. As care leavers was judged inadequate, the overall rating is inadequate.

- 6 As we are judged to be inadequate we are required to submit an action plan (to be referred to as an improvement plan thereafter) to Ofsted 70 working days after publication of the report.
- 7 We will then be subject to monitoring from Ofsted. Monitoring visits will focus on where improvement is needed the most. The first monitoring visit will take place 6 months after the publication of the report.
- 8 We will receive an improvement notice from the DfE, which will require an independently chaired improvement board. A DfE improvement advisor has been appointed to work with Cheshire East to support us to improve outcomes for children and young people and will chair the improvement board.
- 9 We currently have an improvement board to drive the improvements identified within previous inspection reports and other identified areas for improvement and this is chaired by the DfE improvement advisor appointed to support the JTAI improvement, which was signed off by the DfE in December 2023. This will continue to meet to scrutinise and support the development of the new improvement plan and to oversee immediate improvement activity. This meets monthly and membership includes senior officers, the lead member, and the chief executive.
- 10 The draft terms of reference for a new improvement board are attached (appendix 2). The new Improvement board will step up in July to ensure governance arrangements for the delivery of the plan are robust.
- 11 The leadership team have developed a first draft of a new improvement plan, in response to the inspection findings, and this will be discussed at the next improvement board on 30 May. This will then be discussed and developed with Ofsted and the DfE in an action planning meeting on 19 June as part of ILACS framework. The plan is due to be submitted to Ofsted by 23 August 2024. We propose to submit subject to committee and council's approval following full council on 17 July 2024.
- 12 The inspection found that improvements have been made since the last inspection in 2019, when services for children were judged to require improvement to be good.
- 13 The inspection also found that significant improvements had been made for children missing from home or at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation, addressing the findings from the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) in July 2022.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children and Families Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the inspection findings, implications for monitoring from Ofsted and the DfE, and plans to improve services.
2. Agree to hold a task and finish workshop for Children and Families committee on 2 July 2024 to review and scrutinise the draft improvement plan.
3. Agree to the onward referral of the improvement plan for approval at full Council on 17 July 2024.
4. Approve the terms of reference for the Improvement Board
5. Agree the development of the terms of reference for the Corporate Parent Working Group and agree member membership.
6. Include in the committee's work programme receipt of assurance reports updating the committee on progress and impact measured against the agreed improvement plan, to all future meetings.

Background

- 14 Cheshire East Council received an Ofsted inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) between 19 February – 8 March 2024. ILACS inspections review how effectively local authorities support and protect children and young people across early help, child in need and child protection, vulnerable pupils, cared for children and young people, and care leavers. The inspection reviews how well we work together as a partnership and evaluates the effectiveness of leaders and managers. ILACS inspections are focused on the impact we have on the lives of children and young people.
- 15 The inspection team consisted of four social care inspectors, and a social care regulatory inspector, and an education inspector. ILACS inspections are a rigorous process. The inspectors spent almost all their time reviewing children's files, understanding their stories, and shadowing and speaking to practitioners and managers. Inspectors spoke to some children, young people, and families (including care experienced young people and young adults, foster carers, and adopters), schools, and senior leaders (including the Chief Executive and Chair of the Children and Families Committee) to inform their findings. The inspection focused on practice within the last six months.
- 16 The full inspection findings are set out in a [report](#) which was published on 16 May 2024 (appendix 1).

17 Cheshire East received the following graded judgements:

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Inadequate
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate

18 The inspection found that despite improvements made in some areas, the quality of practice and the experience and progress of children and young people is too variable, and for care leavers it is inadequate. The inspection graded one of the four judgment areas as inadequate, it graded the other 3 as requires improvement to be good.

19 The inspection identified the following 7 key areas for improvement which are set out on page 2 of the report:

- Senior leaders' oversight of performance to ensure that there is a coherent approach to continuous improvement.
- The quality, consistency and responsiveness of support, advice, and guidance for care leavers, including those who are homeless, with additional vulnerabilities, and those who are over 21 years of age.
- The quality of management oversight and supervision to ensure that consistent, good social work practice is in place.
- The quality of plans for children to ensure that they are more child-focused and drive forward positive change in a timely way.
- The quality and frequency of visits to children so that they are purposeful and in line with assessed needs.
- The sufficiency of suitable placements that can meet children and young people's assessed needs.

- The effectiveness of child protection chairs and independent reviewing officers (IROs) to escalate, challenge and scrutinise plans for children.

Care Leavers Judgement

20 The care leavers judgement was introduced into the Ofsted ILACS framework as a standalone judgement in January 2023. This was the first time that Cheshire East Council received a graded judgement on the experiences and progress of care leavers.

21 The legal definition of a care leaver comes from The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 which states that a care leaver is someone who has been in the care of the local authority for a period of 13 weeks or more spanning their 16th birthday.

22 There are currently 621 care leavers in Cheshire East:

Age	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	Total
Number	55	93	112	69	71	65	61	55	40	621

23 When a child remains in care from 16 until their 18th birthday their support is provided by joint allocation of a statutory social worker and a personal advisor who work together with the young person and parent/carers to plan their transition to adulthood. At 18 the young adult is supported by the Care Leaving service up to the age of 25, dependant on circumstances and the wishes of the individual. The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 3: planning transition to adulthood for care leavers, sets out the requirements for this support.

24 The inspection found significant shortcomings in the quality of the practice with some young adults particularly those who were 21+. The inspection also found shortcomings in the accommodation provided for young people who were unable to secure or sustain permanent accommodation. These key areas for development will be covered in the improvement plan. The challenge in relation to suitable accommodation is a borough wide challenge and will require cross departmental collaboration to progress.

25 We have apologised to care leavers who have not received the service that they deserve and are committed to improve this at pace.

Improvement Planning

26 In addition to the key areas for improvement, the inspection identified other areas for improvement. A new improvement plan is being developed in response to all the inspection findings and is structured under the areas for

improvement Ofsted highlight in their report. Immediate action was taken (starting during the inspection) to respond to the findings, and this is reflected in the plan alongside longer-term actions.

- 27 The new improvement plan and supporting arrangements follow the same model as the JTAI improvement which was shown to be successful. Progress against the plan will be scrutinised monthly by the independently chaired Improvement Board. (Draft terms of reference are included in appendix 2).
- 28 Each section of the improvement plan will have a dedicated lead who will be responsible for the delivery of that area of the plan, achieving and reporting on impact monthly. Actions and impact against the inspection findings will be RAG rated monthly. The sources we will use to assess impact for each area of the plan will be outlined in each section.
- 29 The plan will be a live and responsive plan, so will adapt to incorporate new actions as needed. The plan covers the activity we will carry out over a 12-month period from April 2024 to March 2025. A new plan will be developed after this plan is completed for the period from April 2025 onwards.
- 30 At the action planning meeting with Ofsted, we will discuss the draft improvement plan to refine and develop this in relation to the inspection findings. The council is required to submit the improvement plan to Ofsted by 23 August 2024. However, we propose to complete the improvement plan before this date, with committee engagement in a task and finish workshop for the Children and Families Committee on 4 July and onward presentation to full council on 17 July for approval ahead of submission to Ofsted.
- 31 Committee will have oversight of the delivery of this plan through progress updates at every committee meeting.
- 32 The inspection was a valuable source of detailed learning and immediate action was taken (starting during the inspection) to respond to the findings.

Activity to date

- 33 Key improvements that have already been put in place include:
 - Contacting all 209 care leavers aged 21-25 who were not receiving a service to ensure they were aware of the support available to them and to offer them an allocated worker. 184 of these young adults are now being supported by the service. 25 young adults declined a service.
 - Our 21+ offer to care leavers has been reviewed and this is now an opt out offer rather than opt in. We will contact all young adults by phone on a quarterly basis to check if they want or need support.
 - Clear practice standards for the care leavers service.

- A dedicated mandatory training plan for the care leavers service targeted around the inspection findings.
- A new management structure for the care leavers service, ensuring frontline staff are supervised by qualified social workers. The planning for this was already in place pre-inspection and was a nil-cost process.
- Delivering an in-house and bespoke leadership programme tailored to the inspection findings. This will support managers to embed a culture of high support, high challenge leading to improved outcomes for children and young people.
- The quality assurance framework has been revised following the inspection to include more thematic auditing to replicate the areas inspectors consider during inspections, to ensure that there is understanding of the outcomes of all our cohorts of young people. We have also strengthened arrangements to ensure the learning from audits improves practice.
- We will be opening two care leaver hubs in July 2024 at the Lifestyle Centre in Crewe and Macclesfield Youth Hub. These will provide safe spaces for care leavers to access support and advice. These hubs will be sited in existing premises used by children's services and will extend the use of these premises. The care leaver team and care leavers are enthusiastic about this development.

Monitoring

- 34 Due to the inadequate judgement, Cheshire East will be monitored by Ofsted, and we will receive an improvement notice from the DfE, which will require an independently chaired improvement board. A DfE improvement advisor has been appointed to work with Cheshire East to support us to improve outcomes for children and young people and will chair our improvement board. This is the same improvement advisor that supported our work on the JTAI findings, which is positive as we already have successfully established relationships, and our advisor has a strong understanding of our services, which will support us to make progress at pace.
- 35 Ofsted will carry out monitoring activity to assess progress. This includes:

Monitoring Activity	Timescales
Action planning visit	Set for 19 June 2024
Submission of the final action plan (improvement plan)	By 23 August 2024

Monitoring visits	<p>First visit is 6 months after the inspection report is published, so this is expected to be in the autumn term.</p> <p>The timetable for monitoring visits will be agreed between Ofsted and the council. Ofsted will confirm the calendar month of each visit in advance.</p> <p>Up to 4 monitoring visits will take place per year.</p> <p>Between 4 and 6 monitoring visits will be carried out before a reinspection.</p>
Reinspection	After between 4 and 6 monitoring visits have been completed.

- 36 Ofsted monitoring visits will focus on where improvement is needed the most. We expect our first monitoring visit to be on care leavers. The focus of the first visit and the pattern of future visits will be agreed in the action planning meeting.
- 37 Monitoring visits will usually be carried out by two inspectors, with each visit lasting two days. Monitoring visits will involve the evaluation of case work to support children and young people. Feedback on the findings will be given at the end of the second day, and a report on the findings will be published on the Ofsted website. The first monitoring visit is not published. We will update members on the findings from these visits through formal reports to the Children and Families Committee.

Proposal for a Corporate Parent Working Group

- 38 The terms of reference for a proposed new partnership Corporate Parent Working Group are being developed to improve outcomes for Cheshire East's cared for children and care leavers. The LGA have indicated that this approach is recommended, with the Working Group as the strategic 'engine room' and the Committee as the scrutiny, particularly as we wish to raise the profile of corporate parenting. It is proposed to be chaired by the council's chief executive.
- 39 This group will ensure there is a joined up multi-agency and whole-council approach to supporting care experienced children, young people, and young adults, and will include cross-party members and care experienced young people. The group will be underpinned by workstreams on specific areas such as accommodation, health, preparation for adulthood and education,

employment, and training. The working group will determine the workstreams that are required and will receive updates on workstream progress at each meeting. This will also include updates on the staying close project, which provides enhanced support to young people leaving care from children's homes. It is proposed that this will report to the Cared for and Care Leaver and the Children and Families Committees. (The draft terms of reference for this group are included in appendix 3).

Consultation and Engagement

- 40 The views of children, young people and families, senior leaders, frontline practitioners and managers, and schools, were sought by inspectors during the inspection and have informed the inspection findings. We will continue to work together with children, young people, young adults, parents/carers, staff, and partners to develop, deliver and evaluate improvements.
- 41 A communications plan is in place to ensure the inspections findings are communicated to the relevant stakeholders at the appropriate times. A statement on the inspection findings was published on the Council website on the day the inspection report was published (16 May 2024). Communications will continue over the year on the improvement plan and progress to ensure stakeholders are informed and shape our improvements, including schools and partners.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 42 Cheshire East Council's children's services has received an inadequate judgement from the recent Ofsted inspection. The inspection demonstrated that there are areas we need to address at pace to improve outcomes for children. The council needs to ensure the findings from the inspection are addressed in a timely way to ensure we achieve good outcomes for children and young people and members need to be assured that the arrangements in place to address the shortcomings and make the necessary improvements are sufficiently robust and will deliver good or better outcomes for our children within a reasonable timeframe.

Other Options Considered

Option	Impact	Risk
Receive annual reports on progress	Committee will be briefed on progress in relation to the inspection.	There is a risk that committee will not have sufficient oversight of progress.
Do not receive reports on progress		There is a risk that committee will not have oversight of progress and will need to undertake this

		independently, for example by reviewing monitoring reports.
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Option	Impact	Risk
Do not hold a workshop to review the draft improvement plan	Committee will not have ownership or oversight of the improvement plan which is critical in supporting the council to improve outcomes for children	There is a risk that committee do not have oversight of the improvement plan which needs to drive improved outcomes for children.

Option	Impact	Risk
Council is not asked to approve the improvement plan	Council will not have ownership or oversight of the improvement plan which is critical in supporting the council to improve outcomes for children	There is a risk that the wider implications of the inspection for the whole council are not understood.

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 43 The Office for Standards in Education Children’s Services and Skills (‘Ofsted’) was created by the Education (Schools) Act 1992. It has a number of legislative powers focused on the inspection of services providing education and skills for learners of all ages and the inspection and regulation of services that care for children and young people. Ofsted is a separate and independent non-ministerial department, not part of the Department for Education (DfE) but it provides assurance to the DfE by monitoring educational and care standards and triggers intervention by the DfE where needed.
- 44 The committee report sets out the plans being put in place because of the Ofsted inspection and inadequate judgement in the report published on 16 May 2024. Members of the committee need to be assured that all requirements of the recommendations within the report and any improvement notice served upon the council by the DfE resulting from the Ofsted inspection findings, are complied with and that the plans in place deliver the improvements required within any timescales set by the DfE.
- 45 Any improvement notice serviced upon the Council by the DfE will have a number of requirements and is likely to require the creation of a focused improvement board. In addition, it will require the following.

- (a) Advisor requirements – the Secretary of State (DfE) will appoint an advisor to both the DfE and the Council who will continue to work with the Council until the DfE is satisfied they are no longer required.
 - (b) Improvement Plan – the plan must set out the actions to deliver appropriate and sustainable improvement covering the areas in the report and recommendation together with how this will be evidenced.
 - (c) DfE Reviews – these are likely to be at least every 6 months and
 - (d) Improvement Against Measures Set - the advisor will provide the regular reports on progress and areas of concerns.
- 46 The improvement notice will be published and failure to comply or poor progress can result in the imposition of directions to secure performance, which can include that the DfE can intervene and nominate a person to act on its behalf to secure performance.
- 47 The protection of vulnerable people is a council responsibility and oversight by members at council of the overall approach to improving service provision aligns with this obligation.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 48 We know from other areas that there may be financial implications for inadequate judgements, as additional funds can be required to support improvements. This can often be for external consultancy and/or expertise in supporting improvement, additional service capacity, an improved retention offer, and training. We expect that the financial implications for Cheshire East will not be as significant as in other areas as only one of our service areas was judged to be inadequate as opposed to widespread failures, and we have demonstrated that we already have effective processes in place to deliver improvements.
- 49 However, the challenges associated with sourcing suitable accommodation should not be underestimated and interdepartmental and partnership work will be required to ensure that the right solution is arrived at pace within the parameters of the challenging financial situation. There may be a strong case for invest to save propositions which will need to be considered in year to avoid any drift in delivery. Any proposal, as required will be presented to the necessary committees.
- 50 External advice and support are provided through our DfE advisor, funded by the DfE. We are also accessing support at nil cost from other authorities through the DfE sector led improvement programme, including our roll out of the restorative practice model, and from the LGA who will provide corporate parenting support and training.

- 51 Improvement activity will be prioritised within services to ensure that improvements can be delivered by existing services and within our existing budgets wherever possible. Inadequate judgements often result in the loss of staff, and there are some areas where we may need to boost capacity, including leadership capacity to ensure that improvements can be delivered at pace. We will ensure that critical posts are covered which may incur additional costs. If any additional costs in 2024/25 can't be managed within the existing wider service budgets, then these pressures will be reported as soon as possible for inclusion in the services in year budget monitoring and reporting.
- 52 Any service improvements that would require ongoing additional funding will have business cases developed for inclusion within the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2025/26 onwards.

Policy

- 53 The draft terms of reference for the Improvement Board and the Corporate Parent Working Group are included in the appendices. Any policy implications will be reported to committee as part of updates on progress against the improvement plan or updates from the Corporate Parent Working Group.

	<p>A council which empowers and cares about people</p> <p>Work together with residents and partners to support people and communities to be strong and resilient.</p> <p>Protect and support our communities and safeguard children, adults at risk, and families from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.</p> <p>Be the best Corporate Parents to our children in care.</p> <p>Ensure all children have a high quality, enjoyable education</p>	
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	that enables them to achieve their full potential	
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Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

- 54 Good quality practice with families ensures that all children and young people’s needs are considered and supported.

Human Resources

- 55 Colleagues within children’s services and across the partnerships work tirelessly to support children and families. The inspection found staff enjoy working in Cheshire East and feel well supported by managers, that there is a strengthened and stabilised workforce and that caseloads have been reduced to manageable and sustainable levels.

- 56 The outcome of the inspection is disappointing to all who work in the service. Leaders have worked closely with teams to focus on using the inspection findings to continue to improve our support to children, young people, and young adults. Staff have been offered support around their wellbeing and made aware of the different support options available should they need or want this.

- 57 The leadership team will be meeting with the unions as appropriate to discuss any staffing implications.

- 58 We are committed to support this workforce deliver good and better outcomes for children and young people in Cheshire East, however it is well documented that the challenges of scrutiny and intervention can prove onerous to staff groups, and it is vital that this does not cause the improvement journey any drift or delay. This will be monitored within the improvement board.

Risk Management

- 59 There are reputational and financial risks to not providing good quality services, as well as risks to individual children and young people. The council must continue to ensure that these risks are mitigated by ensuring effective plans are in place to improve and that these make an impact on children’s outcomes. The risk of failing to deliver the improvement plan will be added to the council’s corporate risk register and this risk will be monitored quarterly through the Corporate Policy Committee.

Rural Communities

60 Vulnerable children and young people are present in all communities in Cheshire East.

Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

61 The improvement plan and Corporate Parent Working Group aims to improve the outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people.

Public Health

62 Same as the implication above.

Climate Change

63 There are no implications for climate change because of this report.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Lauren Conway, Business Manager Lauren.conway@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix 1: Ofsted report Appendix 2: Draft Terms of Reference for the Improvement Board Appendix 3: Draft Terms of Reference for the Corporate Parent Working Group
Background Papers:	Ofsted ILACS Framework The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 3: planning transition to adulthood for care leavers DfE (publishing.service.gov.uk)