

OPEN

Children and Families Committee

Monday 8 July 2024

Improvement Plan

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

Report Reference No: CF/22/24-25

Ward(s) Affected: All wards.

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report asks committee to approve the final version of the Cheshire East children's services improvement plan to address the findings from the Ofsted inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) conducted in February and March 2024. It also asks committee to note and approve the approach to providing additional financial investment to ensure we can deliver the plan and the necessary improvements to the quality of services.
- 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. As the inspection found our support to care leavers was 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.
- 4 Additional financial support is needed to ensure that we can deliver the necessary improvements at the required pace. The details of this have been

calculated with support from the finance team and the S151 officer. Committee is asked to approve the approach to funding the delivery of the improvement plan, as detailed in the S151/ finance section of this report and in appendix 2.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children and Families Committee is recommended to:

1. Approve the improvement plan (appendix 1) for referral to full Council on 17 July 2024.
2. Approve the approach to funding the delivery of the improvement plan, as detailed in the S151/ finance section of this report and in appendix 2.

Background

- 5 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](#) which was published on 16 May 2024. Committee was briefed on the findings from the inspection, the plans in place to improve services in relation to the findings, and monitoring arrangements from Ofsted and the DfE in [a paper to committee on 3 June 2024](#).
- 6 In the meeting on 3 June, the Children and Families Committee agreed to:
 - Note the inspection findings, implications for monitoring from Ofsted and the DfE, and plans to improve services.
 - Hold a task and finish workshop for the Children and Families Committee on 2 July to review and scrutinise the draft improvement plan.
 - The onward referral of the improvement plan for approval at full Council on 17 July 2024.
 - Approve the terms of reference for the Improvement Board.
 - The development of the terms of reference for the Corporate Parent Working Group and agreed membership.
- 7 As the inspection found our support to care leavers was inadequate, we are required to submit an improvement plan to Ofsted 70 working days after publication of the report. 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.

- 8 The development of the improvement plan has been informed by feedback from Ofsted and other local authorities' improvement plans. A workshop was held on 2 July for members of the Children and Families Committee and Cared for and Care Leavers Committee to contribute to the development of the improvement plan (appendix 1 – to follow on 5 July following 2 July workshop and any agreed amendments).
- 9 The improvement plan is a live and responsive plan, so will adapt to incorporate new actions as need is identified, for example from quality assurance activity or through external monitoring activity.
- 10 Additional financial support is needed to ensure that we can deliver the necessary improvements at the required pace. The details of this have been calculated with support from the finance team and the S151 officer. Committee is asked to approve the approach to funding the delivery of the improvement plan, as detailed in the S151/ finance section of this report and in appendix 2 (to follow on 5 July as we are working at pace to determine how we can deliver this within budget).

Consultation and Engagement

- 11 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.
- 12 The development of the improvement plan has been informed by feedback from Ofsted and other local authorities' improvement plans.
- 13 This plan has been developed together with and provided with scrutiny and challenge by:
 - service managers and service leads, including partners.
 - the children's social care leadership team
 - the children's services leadership team
 - the council's leadership team
 - the Safeguarding Children's Partnership
 - the Improvement and Impact Board
 - elected members on the Children and Families Committee and Cared for Children and Care Leavers Committee.

- 14 A workshop was held on 2 July for members of the Children and Families Committee and Cared for and Care Leavers Committee to contribute to the development of the improvement plan (appendix 1 – to follow on 5 July). The public will have the additional opportunity to scrutinise to the plan through full council on 17 July 2024.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 15 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.
- 16 In the meeting on 3 June, the Children and Families Committee agreed to the onward referral of the improvement plan for approval at full Council on 17 July 2024.

Other Options Considered

Option	Impact	Risk
Do not approve the improvement plan	We will not have a robust plan in place to deliver improvements which will delay our submission to Ofsted and will delay implementing improvements	There is a risk that improvements are not achieved at the pace needed
Do not approve the financial support to deliver the plan	We will not have sufficient resources or support to deliver the plan at the pace needed	Improvements are not achieved at the pace needed

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 17 The committee report sets out the plans and proposed Improvement Plan for the local authority, in response to the outcome of the Ofsted inspection and inadequate judgement, published on 16 May 2024.

- 18 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.
- (a) Any Improvement Notice served upon the Council by the DfE will be published and have a number of requirements and is likely to require the creation of a focused improvement board, with a Secretary of State (DfE) appointed advisor, a clear Improvement Plan, and regular reviews to measure progress. 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.
- 19 The protection of vulnerable people is a council responsibility. Oversight by members at full Council by way of the proposal to refer the final improvement plan for its consideration and approval, alongside the overall approach to improving service provision, aligns with this obligation.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 20 The revenue costs associated with the improvement plan are expected to be for additional resources required for an 18-month period. The costs are anticipated to start in September 2024, resulting in 7 months of costs in 2024/25 and a further 11 months in 2025/26.
- 21 The revenue costs are estimated to be £1.987m in total, profiled as £628k in 2024/25 and £1.359m in 2025/26.
- 22 The costings are based on Cheshire East Council employed staff being recruited to deliver the plan, and the intention is to recruit on a permanent basis to attract the best candidates. At the end of the 18-month period the staff will then be transferred to any existing vacancies within the directorate to avoid any risk of over-recruitment.
- 23 If the service are not able to recruit to these posts and need to utilise more expensive agency workers, then the service will need to consider how to mitigate any additional costs.
- 24 Funding for these costs is anticipated to be met through existing service budgets, utilising existing growth that had been built into this year's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). It is being targeted to this important work. Currently £1m per annum has been identified within existing budgets, meaning that the total costs over the 2 years could be funded from existing budgets as long as all other savings are delivered to plan and there is no additional growth required for placement costs in-year.

- 25 There are potentially some capital costs that could be required and alongside the use of existing budgets the service will continue to investigate if any alternative funding sources could be identified to support the plan, including S106 funding subject to the allocation criteria of the developer funding received. Finance and the service will continue to work closely together to monitor and manage expenditure and ensure that future years' costs are considered as part of medium-term financial planning.

Policy

A council which empowers and cares about people.

Work together with residents and partners to support people and communities to be strong and resilient.

Protect and support our communities and safeguard children, adults at risk, and families from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Be the best Corporate Parents to our children in care.

Ensure all children have a high quality, enjoyable education that enables them to achieve their full potential

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

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

Human Resources

- 27 Additional capacity has been requested to support the delivery of the improvement plan (as detailed in appendix 2).

Risk Management

- 28 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

29 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)

30 The improvement plan aims to improve the outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people.

Public Health

31 Same as the implication above.

Climate Change

32 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: Improvement Plan – TO FOLLOW Appendix 2: Finance information – TO FOLLOW
Background Papers:	Report on the Ofsted inspection findings to the Children and Families Committee on 3 June 2024 Cheshire East's Ofsted Inspection Report published 16 May Ofsted ILACS Framework The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 3: planning transition to adulthood for care leavers DfE (publishing.service.gov.uk)