

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report sets out the additional financial support needed over the next 18 months to ensure we can deliver the necessary improvements following the Ofsted ILACS inspection.
- 2 Cheshire East Council's Children's Services has received an inadequate judgement. This inspection outcome has demonstrated that there are areas that must be addressed at pace, to improve outcomes for children and young people. The service is committed to taking the necessary steps to improve all areas identified within the inspection, in a timely way to ensure good outcomes for children and young people and to provide assurance to elected members 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 children and young people of Cheshire East.
- 3 Committee is recommended to approve the financial support outlined in this paper.

Cost of inadequate judgements

- 4 The council is experiencing significant financial challenge and Children's Services recognise the role that it has in ensuring good provision of services to children and young people whilst also demonstrating effective financial management. From the experiences of other local authorities, inadequate judgements bring additional costs. Advice from the sector is that the costs to council's judged inadequate can range from £5m-£15m.
- 5 We estimate that the costs for Cheshire East will not be as significant, as only one of our service areas was judged to be inadequate and we have demonstrated that we already have effective processes in place to deliver improvements.
- 6 There is a significant reputational and financial risk to not delivering improvements. If services remain inadequate at the next inspection, further intervention measures may need to be put in place, for example escalation to a Statutory Direction notice, or Direction that another person or organisation performs the functions on the local authority's behalf. These measures will have a significantly higher cost. The identified funding at this stage is to

reduce the risk of Cheshire East Children's Services moving in and out of inadequate Ofsted judgements and to support the service to achieve good or better outcomes for children and young people.

Additional capacity to support achieving consistently good practice

- 7 Having sufficient frontline practitioners to work directly with children, young people and families is critical in supporting consistently good quality services. Whilst we note that the inspection report identified manageable caseloads, it is also the case that they didn't find consistently good practice. We propose to increase capacity to enable practitioners to have time to conduct good quality work, accurately record this, and have time to undertake training and development and reflect on practice with their managers and teams.
- 8 Additional roles are also recommended to support our transformation to a Children's Services that benefit from tried and tested models of working that support children to be supported within their own families and networks. The Independent Review into Children's Social Care and subsequent government pathfinders [Families first for children \(FFC\) pathfinder programme and family networks pilot \(FNP\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) is leading the way in local authorities supporting families and kinship carers to be able to care for their children at home. Developing approaches around Family Group Conferencing, including lifelong support for Care Leavers, strong edge of care offer and capacity within Connected Carer Services will strengthen our programme to support children at home, reduce demand into services and help to manage the council expenditure on placement costs.
- 9 Additional posts have been costed for 18 months with an approximate start date of 2 September 2024, to allow for time to recruit.
- 10 It is proposed that the core social care posts of social workers, Personal Advisors (PAs), Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and Team Leaders will be recruited to on a permanent basis. This will make the posts more attractive to recruit to in a challenging market and will prevent post holders leaving posts early as they look for new work before their contract ends. It avoids the need to recruit to these posts on a costly agency basis. We know we can expect movement within the system and these posts will be used to fill vacancies created by the normal flux in the workforce as people move to new opportunities, as we come to the end of the 18-month period. There is also an opportunity to utilise posts as part of a bank of workers as an alternative to using agency workers at a higher cost to the authority.
- 11 These core social care posts will be critical in supporting care leavers, by ensuring caseloads for PAs and social workers supporting cared for children and care leavers, are maintained at a sufficiently low level to allow for good practice to flourish and ensuring that there is sufficient time to build and sustain relationships with young people. Having sufficient capacity in the IRO Service will ensure independent oversight of care leaver's pathway plans and

the additional Team Leaders capacity will be used to develop a Family Group Conferencing offer that will include development of an approach to support care leavers to build and sustain lifelong relationships with their birth families and networks.

- 12 Advice has been provided by the DfE Advisor to Children’s Services, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the DfE in relation to the need to consider the current capacity and resources within the Directorate. This report is to ensure transparency to elected members, that in order to progress improvements at pace and deliver services that are good or better for the children of Cheshire East, we need to identify additional funding. The table below sets out what will be required to improve services.

13 Revenue costings

<u>Roles required</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Rationale</u>	<u>2024/25</u>	<u>2025/26</u>	<u>Improvement plan ref</u>
Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) x 2	11	Additional IROs will bring Cheshire East in line with the IRO Handbook recommendation for the number of children allocated to an IRO. This will ensure independent reviews of Care Leaver’s Pathway Plans. Further work in relation to reunification, edge of care and support to families will reduce Cared for Children numbers.	£82,842	£133,434	IP Ch.1, S. 6
Connected Carer Assessors x 2	10	Additional capacity to build on existing work to support children to remain in the care of Connected and Kinship Carers, as per the recommendation of the Independent Review into Children’s Social Care. This will ensure that we can reduce reliance on the external market, providing long term sustainable homes for children in care and care leavers.	£71,212	£114,702	IP Ch.1, S.3, P.5
Social Worker x 6	10	Manageable caseloads for social workers across the system, with responsibility for cared for children, is essential to ensure time for good care	£213,636	£344,106	IP Ch.2, S.6

		<p>planning and permanency planning.</p> <p>Having the capacity for good planning at the earlier stages of a child coming into care, will ensure that where children can be supported to return home to family or family networks, this will be achieved in a timely manner. This will result in the right children remaining in our care.</p> <p>Where children do need to remain in our care and become our care leavers, social workers and their Team Managers, will have the capacity to develop good relationships with them and provide quality support as they progress into adulthood.</p>			
Team Leaders x 2	11	Additional Team Leader capacity is needed to support transformation work of Edge of Care and Family Group Conferencing.	<i>Starting in April 2025</i>	£133,434	IP Ch.2, S.6
PAs x 3	7	The Care Leavers Service was inadequate in the recent Ofsted inspection. Additional PA support is needed to ensure that the service has sufficient capacity to support care leavers, including 21+ appropriately.	£77,517	£124,860	IP Ch.1, S.2
Quality Assurance Officer	11	<p>Having an effective quality assurance framework is essential to truly know ourselves and understand the quality of practice across services.</p> <p>The QA Framework has evolved to ensure that a wider range of QA activity is taking place, including themed practice audits of the support and</p>	£41,421	£66,717	IP Ch.1, SL1

		intervention being offered to care leavers.			
Family Group Conference (FGC) Support Workers x 4	7	FGC and lifelong support to care leavers, is important to improve the numbers of children remaining with and in contact with their birth family/networks.	<i>Starting in April 2025</i>	£166,480	IP Ch.1, S.3, P.5
Edge of Care Support Workers x 5	7	Strengthening our Edge of Care Service to offer support to children, young people and families, where they require additional support to care for their children at home and to manage risk in the community.	<i>Starting in April 2025</i>	£208,100	
Project Manager to lead development of 18-25 accommodation	11	To develop accommodation sufficiency for 18-25 year olds as identified by Ofsted. Lack of sufficiency in Cheshire East is leading to higher costs for accommodation.	£41,421	£66,717	IP Ch.1, S.2, D
Specialist expert support		Additional expert capacity as and when necessary, to support quality of practice in specialist areas	£100,000		P Ch.1, S.1
Total Cost over 2 years			£1,986,599	£628,049	£1,358,550

- 14 Where possible, we will utilise any free resources that are available from the DfE, LGA or Sector Led Improvement Partner (SLIP) arrangements, to support the improvement journey. We are keen to continue learning from best practice elsewhere.

How this will be managed within the current budget

- 15 The additional costs to support the improvement programme will be met through the diversion of underutilised growth, achieved through prudent budget management of a commercially sensitive area.
- 16 If there are any in year adjustments within the budget for children's services, any surplus will be returned to offset any pressures due to the improvement activity.
- 17 As part of the MTFs, Children's Services will continue with work to reduce the costs of placements through developing robust edge of care services, permanency and reunification to families and connected carers.

Capital investment to improve placement sufficiency

- 18 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, at pace within the parameters of the challenging financial situation.
- 19 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. We are exploring the use of s106 funding and capital receipts to increase sufficiency for young people aged 18+, which was a key deficit highlighted within the inspection.
- 20 Any proposal, as required will be presented to the necessary committees.

Access to Information	
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