

Cared For Children and Care Leavers Committee

Date of Meeting:	3 December 2024
Report Title:	Cared For Children and Care Leaver's Q2 score card 2024/25
Report of:	Executive Director of Children's Services
Ward(s) Affected:	All Wards

1 Purpose of Report

1.1 This report sets out the performance for the Cared For Children and Care Leaver's service for quarter 2 of 2024/25 (1 July 2024 – 30 September 2024). 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 in relation to cared for children and care leavers.

2 Executive Summary

2.1 This report provides an overview of quarter 2 performance for children and families services for the relevant indicators for the reporting year of 2024-25

3 Recommendations

3.1 The Cared For Children and Care Leaver's Committee is asked to:

3.2 note the performance of children's services for quarter 2.

3.3 provide scrutiny in relation to performance in relation to cared for children and care leavers.

4 Reasons for Recommendations

4.1 One of the key areas of focus for the cared for children and care leavers committee is to review performance and scrutinise the effectiveness of services for cared for children and young people and care leavers.

5 Other Options Considered

5.1 Not applicable

6 Background

6.1 This quarterly report provides the committee with an overview of performance across cared for children and care leaver's service. This report relates to quarter 2 of 2024-25 (1 July 2024 – 30 September 2024).

6.2 The following indicators have been highlighted for consideration

7 Briefing information

7.1 Cheshire East Council were responsible for 557 cared for children at the end of quarter 2. This is an increase from 536 at the end of quarter 1. The cared for children population changes daily as children enter and leave care. Children cease to be cared for due to several reasons, these include turning 18, returning to their birth family, adoption, and special guardianship. The latest comparable data we have across the region shows that Cheshire East's rate of 68 per 10,000 is slightly below the national average of 70 per 10,000 and is above that of 60 for statistical neighbours.

7.2 We are constantly monitoring the numbers of cared for children and looking at ways to ensure that we are reviewing plans for children to achieve permanence at the earliest opportunity. Positively, the number of children who are discharged from care continues to increase, since April 24, 55 children have ceased to be cared for (in addition to those turning 18). We have several applications currently before the court so we are hopeful that this positive progress will continue. We are demonstrating a commitment to not intervening in children's lives when this is not necessary.

7.3 At the time of writing this report, the cared for service has 9 permanent social work vacancies out of an establishment of 24. These vacancies are filled with agency social workers. Positively, most of these agency social workers have been in post for over 12 months and whilst not ideal they have brought some stability and experience to the service. This is particularly necessary of cases which are before the Court. Locally and nationally social work recruitment is a challenge. Positively, we have been able to recruit newly qualified social workers, but we have not been successful in recruiting any experienced social workers. As we train our new social workers, we hope to be able to reduce the number of agency social workers within the service. Work is being undertaken with HR colleagues and our Improvement Director to consider how we retain our existing workforce and how we recruit experienced social workers. They are looking at neighbouring authorities to ensure that the Cheshire East offer is attractive and competitive. We are also increasing our workforce through 'grow your own' methods such as offering social work apprenticeships and student placements. We are also considering how we can use alternatively qualified staff for those children who do not require a qualified social worker. This would allow experienced social workers to work with the most complex cases.

7.4 The timeliness of cared for children's reviews needs some improvement, as performance has dipped to 72% in Q2. Overall, in 2023/24 the performance was at 94%. We know that most reviews were re-scheduled within a few days and were therefore only marginally out of timescale. However, this decline is not acceptable. There has been some sickness within the safeguarding service which has impacted upon timeliness. Some additional recruitment of Independent Reviewing Officers is underway to ensure that there is sufficient capacity within the service. However, we also know that some reviews were cancelled because social workers had not prepared the report in time for the review to take place. This is now an area of focus for weekly performance sessions. Positively, 93% of children were involved in their reviews. It is important that children and young people are involved in their plan, and we are always looking at how we can develop and improve their participation.

7.5 Q2 data shows that the number of children placed with in-house foster carers has dropped to 116. (126 in Q1). Positively, the number of children placed with connected carers has increased to 130 in Q2 from 116 in Q1. This means that children are living with someone they have an existing relationship with. We are constantly looking at how we can increase recruitment of foster carers, which will mean that we can place more of our children with Cheshire East foster carers. Generally, we want children to remain local and within Cheshire East where possible. For some children, they may live out of the area because they need a specialist placement, or they want to be close to birth family who have moved away. Arrangements for any child who lives at a distance are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure this remains appropriate.

7.6 It is our ambition to have as few children placed in residential care as possible and where they are, this is a matched placement to improve their outcomes. Positively in Q2 the number of children living in residential care has reduced to 40, this is a reduction from 46 in Q1. We remain committed to ensuring that children have the opportunity of living within a family wherever possible and continue to review children's placements to see if there are alternatives. Cheshire East now has its first registered Children's Home open with another home planned to be opened, registered and operational by the end of December 2024.

7.7 The number of adoptions continues to increase with 11 children already adopted since April 2024. In 2023/24 we had a total of 24 children adopted. We have a further 18 children living in their adoption placements. Of the 11 children legally adopted in 2023/24, unfortunately the number of days from entering care to moving into placement with an adoptive family is skewed by a small number of children where there has been delay. Q2 data shows that it took on average 631 days, compared to a national average of 376. We understand the delay involved for some of these children but have remained ambitious in terms of continuing to search for an adoptive family for them. Some of this delay relates to an older sibling group who have now been able to move to their adoptive placement and so the outcome is positive in terms of the fact that they will not remain cared for throughout their childhood. Locally and nationally the timescales for placing children within their adoptive families is monitored to avoid unnecessary delay for children. For those children where delay was experienced, their individual circumstances are well

understood, and we continue to scrutinise planning to ensure that children do not experience unnecessary delay.

7.8 A number of our most vulnerable Care Leaver's continue to be supported under Staying Close as a result of funding from the DFE. Staying Close is a model which provides an enhanced support package for young people leaving care from children's homes and supported accommodation and is designed to be a comparable offer to the option to Stay Put, which supports young people in foster care to remain with their former foster carers until age 21. These bespoke packages of support help young people to develop their confidence and skills for independent living, and for their emotional health and wellbeing. The funding for Staying Close ceases at the end of March 2025. Currently it is unclear if the DFE will mandate Local Authorities to continue with Staying Close projects.

Placement stability for cared for children still needs to improve and we have plans in place to ensure that social workers are prioritising long term matching of children. Q2 data shows 63% of cared for children in care for at least 2.5yrs at the end of the period have been living in their current placement for at least 2 years. We have developed a permanence tracker which is assisting in monitoring and driving forward children's plans and ensures that children exit care if possible.

The number of children with 3 or more placements within a 12-month period has increased in Q2 to 75 children. Sometimes, these moves can be positive, such a move to an adoptive placement. However, there is further work to undertake so that we understand the narrative for each of these children. Audit work will be undertaken to explore this in more detail.

7.9 The NEET data in Q2 for our 19 to 21-year-old young people shows that 45% of this cohort are not engaged in education, employment, or training. This is a decline from 38% in Q1. However, we believe that this decline is an issue with recording rather than a true decline. As of today (18.11.2024) the NEET figure is 36%. The national average for 2023/24 was 38% with statistical neighbours being 37%. We continue to look closely at this data and the circumstances for these young adults which include pregnancy, parenting, or illness, but are not exclusive to this. Within the Staying Close project there are dedicated EET workers and an apprenticeship coordinator, which is positively assisting in terms of supporting our care leavers to access education and employment.

7.10 The number of children who had their annual health assessments within timescales within Q2 was 85%. Positively this is an increase from 83% in Q1. Some of the delay relates to children who are placed out of area and where we are reliant on other health services to undertake these assessments.

7.11 Positively 100% of Care Leavers had Health Passports by the time they left care. Progress in this area is now being sustained.

7.12 Q2 data shows that 74% of cared for children saw a dentist within the last 12 months. Nationally, the average is 70% and our statistical neighbour average is 65%. This continues to be an area of focus, and we are looking at ways to ensure that this

data is captured. This includes the IRO's recording the dates of dental checks within Cared For Reviews.

7.13 Q2 data shows that 89.5% of our care leavers (aged 16 to 21) are in appropriate accommodation. This was a decline from the previous quarter and reflects a period where we had a number of young people in emergency accommodation. As of 18.11.2024, 94% of Care Leavers are in suitable accommodation. This is not 100% because we have a small number of young people who are in prison, and this is never recorded as being appropriate. We have seen a recent increase in young people in Custody. Some of these young people are on remand for serious offences, others have been sentenced. When a young person is in custody, they continue to be supported by a Personal Advisor who visits and advocates on their behalf.

7.14 The number of young people living in emergency accommodation varies on a day-to-day basis. Members will be aware that at the time of the Ofsted inspection there were 3 young people living in hotels. Through intensive work with housing colleagues we have reduced this to 1 young person. Accommodation continues to be our greatest challenge. Young people who end up in hotels are usually our most vulnerable and complex young people and have exhausted all other options. They often present with issues such as criminality and substance misuse. We know that when a young person has accommodation stability, it is much easier to support them with their complex needs. Work is ongoing in respect of widening our offer of accommodation options to young people aged 16 to 25. This work is part of the Improvement Plan and updates are provided to the Improvement and Impact Board monthly and to each Children and Families Committee. Positively there has been an increase in provision with some of our commissioned providers and this has reduced the number of young people in emergency accommodation.

7.15 82% of care leavers have up-to-date pathway plans and 84% of care leavers had their plans reviewed within timescales. We have introduced a new Pathway Plan which was developed with young people to ensure that this is user friendly. We will continue to consult with young people and involve them in the development of service changes.

7.16 Care Leaver hubs are now operational. There are 2 bases, one in Crewe and one in Macclesfield. Young people are attending the hubs for planned sessions such as cooking and education as well as using them as a base to drop into, knowing that there will always be someone there to offer a hot drink and support. The longer-term plan is to have a bespoke hub at the Crewe Youth Zone. Free bus travel for Care Leavers aged 16 to 21 is now operational and will greatly assist our young people to access the hubs.

7.17 We held a review of the Council's Offer to Care Leaver's on 13th November 2024. Young people co-chaired this meeting, and it was an opportunity to hear from young people about how the council can improve its offer to our young people. We are in the process of developing an action plan in terms of the requests from young people and looking at ways in which we can ensure the needs of our young people are met.

8 Consultation and Engagement

8.1 Not applicable.

9 Implications

10 Legal

10.1 There are no direct legal implications.

11 Finance

11.1 There are no direct financial implications or changes to the MTFS because of this briefing paper.

12 Policy

12.1 There are no direct policy implications.

13 Equality

13.1 Members may want to use the information from the performance indicators to ensure that services are targeted at more vulnerable children and young people.

14 Human Resources

14.1 There are no direct human resources implications.

15 Risk Management

15.1 There are risks associated with some performance measures, e.g. increases in demand and timeliness of services.

16 Rural Communities

16.1 There are no direct implications for rural communities.

17 Children and Young People/Cared for Children

17.1 Performance reports enable members to identify areas of good performance and areas for improvement in relation to children and young people, including cared for children.

18 Public Health

18.1 There are no direct implications for public health.

19 Climate Change

19.1 This report does not impact on climate change.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Annemarie Parker
Appendices:	Corporate Parenting Score Card Q2
Background Papers:	None

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