

OPEN

Children and Families Committee

Monday, 13 January 2025

Improvement Plan Progress Update

Report of: Theresa Leavy, Executive Director of Children's Services

Report Reference No: CF/35/24-25

Ward(s) Affected: All wards

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report is part of our regular updates to committee on the progress of the children's services improvement plan.
- 2 The improvement plan addresses the findings from the inspection which was agreed at the Children and Families Committee on 16 July and Full Council on 17 July. As agreed at the Children and Families Committee on 3 June, committee will receive updates on progress against this plan at each meeting so it can scrutinise the impact on outcomes for children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children and Families Committee is recommended to:

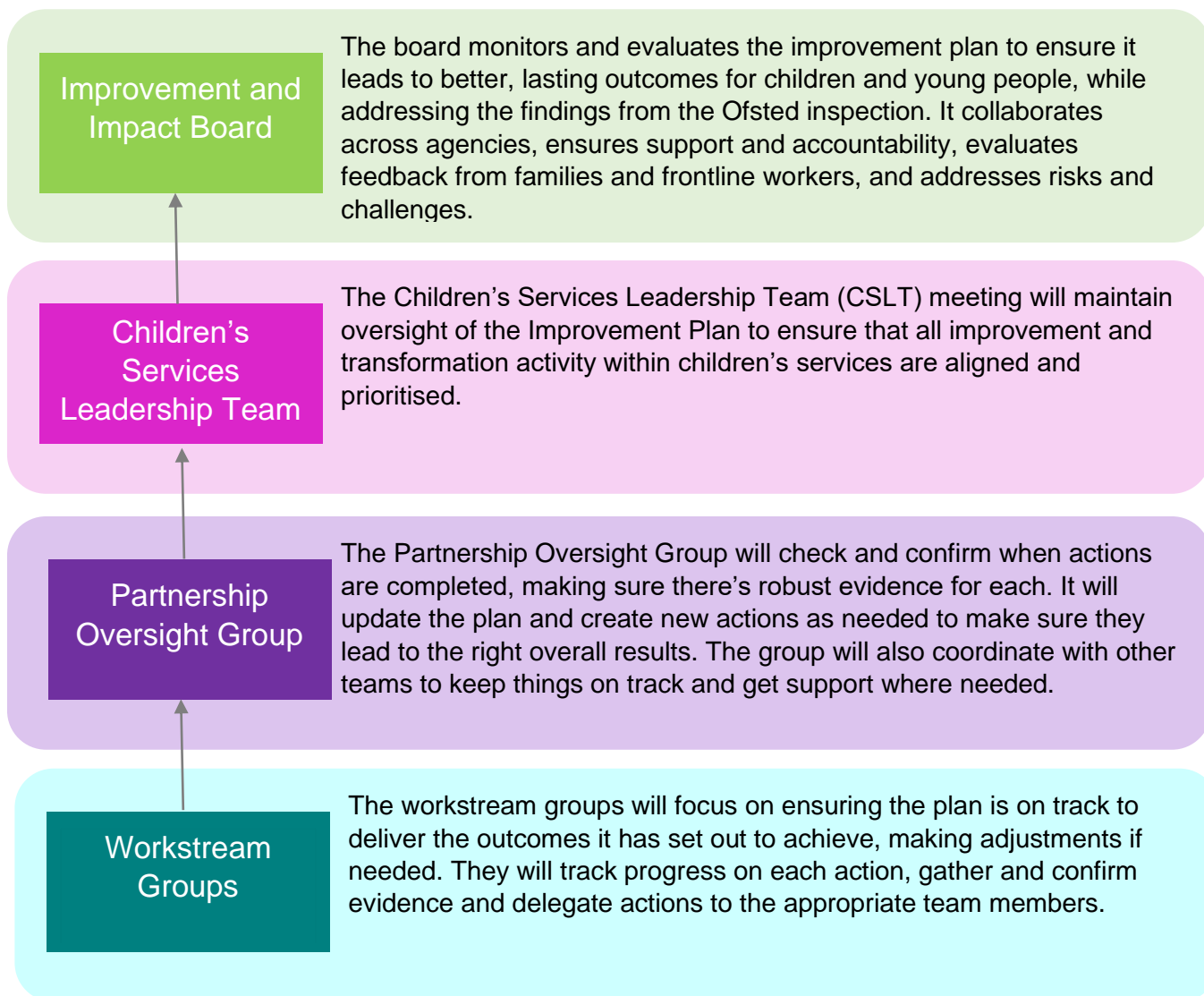
1. Note the progress against the improvement plan.

Background

- 3 Our first monitoring visit from Ofsted was due to take place in December. This will now take place in February 2025. We will keep committee informed on these arrangements and the findings through these reports.

Strengthened Improvement Arrangements

- 4 As highlighted in the previous committee we were in the process of implementing new governance arrangements which have now been implemented to support robust oversight of progress against the improvement plan. These have been communicated to managers in sessions in November.



- 5 In particular you will see above that an oversight group has been introduced to provide the scrutiny and challenge around the progress of the improvement plan. As discussed at the last board we identified the need to review interdependencies and timescales for actions including any revised timescales and therefore this group will be the forum to make those decisions. The set up for these new arrangements took place on 12 December.
- 6 The workstream groups will cover the areas of the improvement plan and progress the work, generally utilising some existing meeting spaces to avoid additional meetings. Our front-line staff have also been invited to inform our

service developments and contribute to the workstreams to ensure accountability from front line practice through to the senior leadership team.

- 7 Each workstream group's first meeting will focus on:
 - Reviewing the completed actions and establishing if there is sufficient evidence for each action to be confident the work is done.
 - Reviewing the action plan against the inspection findings and determining if we are on track to deliver the right outcomes for upcoming deadlines or amend where required.
 - Identify any gaps or blockers to the delivery of actions and or any changes required.
 - Agree new dates for completion on any that are delayed/overdue
- 8 Chairs of each workstream group will attend the Partnership Oversight Group, chaired by Improvement Director Lisa Davies, to present back findings on their workstream plan.
- 9 The Partnership Oversight Group will identify interdependencies and risks, manage resources, and pull in support where appropriate, and further develop the Improvement Plan.
- 10 We have recruited to a new QA officer position and part of this role will be to undertake quality assurance activity against areas of the improvement plan to test impact.
- 11 Having paused some of the external support to enable a fuller co-ordinated review of what work is required, discussions are taking place with the DfE to establish how we might now commission additional sector led improvement programme (SLIP) support with other local authorities to enable us to get the right support in other specific areas of practice.
- 12 In the last committee meeting, it was requested that where actions are delayed that we provide the new target dates. These will now be considered at the Oversight Group in January. As this committee will be taking place prior to that meeting it is noted in the overview plan for delayed action this will now show as under review until agreed at Overview for the new dates.
- 13 Quality assurance activity has been undertaken to ensure we are responding to the learning from audits and that we understand ourselves well. This has also helped us to prepare for the Ofsted monitoring visit. This included:
 - quality assurance of data lists

- a review of all the referred cases that were highlighted during the ILACS inspection to ensure actions have been completed and to consider the current quality of practice
 - a review of the actions set following audits in the previous 6 months to ensure these have been completed.
- 14 The quality assurance service has now moderated all 22 of the audits that have taken place since May 2024 to ensure an accurate judgement of the quality of practice. Audit training has also now taken place to ensure accurate judgements moving forward, this was supported by our external DfE advisor.
- 15 We continue to work to strengthen the closing of the learning loop and ensure all learning is progressed and shared. This includes:
- Introducing a new two-week timeframe to complete all actions following any audit.
 - For those judged to be inadequate additional measures have been put in place to immediately support the staff involved to address and improve practice.
 - Implementation of an escalation process should audit actions not be completed in the appropriate timescale.
 - Learning disseminated to all staff in a QA newsletter

Independent Review of the Front Door

- 16 We asked Dorset Council to provide an external and independent evaluation of our front door to inform our improvement activity and to support us to prepare for the Ofsted monitoring visit. This review provided assurance that the right decisions are being made for children and young people but improved partnership sharing of information would further strengthen this.
- 17 The review found the following strengths:
- No child found with unassessed risk in CHEC's
 - The needs of the whole family and other connected children were considered
 - There is positive and strong culture within the front door
 - Staff were clear about the processes they needed to follow
 - There was evidence of clear management oversight
 - Pitstop meetings which discuss vulnerable person assessments (VPAs) from the police provide a holistic view of families' needs
 - The emergency duty team are an experienced team with strong relationships to the front door team managers and a clear process on sharing information and recording referrals.

- 18 The areas for development identified were:
- Ensure all referrals are completed within the front door and in line with Statutory timescales
 - Consider holding strategy discussions within the front door and review the use of strategy discussions
 - Partnership representation within the front door and timeliness of information sharing (we don't currently have a Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub)
 - Timescales and oversight for responses to children in need
 - Consent is well understood but not always clearly recorded
 - Children with SEND are not always having their needs identified and responded to early enough.
- 19 The actions in response to the areas for development will be endorsed by the Impact and Improvement Board in January and then included in Chapter 3 of the improvement plan as additional actions.

Progress against the plan

- 20 The improvement plan at appendix 2 includes updated RAG ratings and progress updates for each area as of 13 November 2024. Appendix 1 shows an overview of the ratings for each action and the impact for each plan area.
- 21 Key improvement activity which has taken place since the [last update to committee on 11 November](#) includes:
- Dorset Council's independent review of the front door provided assurance that the right decisions are being made for children and young people. This has strengthened our preparation for the Ofsted monitoring visit and identified areas where we can improve our practice.
 - A new need to know process has been put in place to ensure senior leaders are sighted on our most vulnerable young people/ key risks, with a formal review process and shared thematic learning to further improve services and practice where applicable
 - The first monthly Improvement and Performance meeting for leaders across all children's services took place in October, chaired by the Executive Director of Children's Services. This included analysis of the CHAT data and the vital signs scorecard. The measures in the vital signs report are being developed to ensure they drive meaningful conversations around outcomes and impact for children and families. This will be further strengthened with the new Performance framework which has now also been completed. An enhanced focus on all children's services measures is now in place with exception reporting taking place on the 22nd January 2025. This will facilitate reporting for the corporate council measures once agreed.

- The care leaver ambassadors gathered feedback during Care Leaver Week to contribute further ideas and recommendations for developing support to care leavers which were shared at the Care Leaver Local Offer Event on 13 November.
- The cared for IRO service is now holding fortnightly thematic performance meetings aligned to the improvement plan.
- We have begun to collate the feedback on the new child protection plan. Professional feedback has been received from our key safeguarding partners who have been wholly positive about the changes being more child focussed, impact focussed and easier for families to read and engage with. We are now obtaining feedback from families on the current format to enable a base line as well as engagement on the changes they would like to see. This will inform our next steps.
- We have launched a promotional video – [fostering is everything](#) – which shows the long-term impact fostering can have to show people how rewarding and life-changing fostering is. As well as achieving a fostering friendly status from the Fostering Network
- The pilot for our new personal education plan (PEP) has gone well with recommendations on some very tangible ways in which we can develop the form before a complete roll out to all schools in the spring term.
- Practitioners have been invited to be part of a practice reference group to shape services in Cheshire East and we have had good take up of this offer.

Impact for children and young people

- 22 Audits from October show that the majority of practice requires improvement, with 5 of 6 cases judged requires improvement and 1 case judged inadequate. Moderation findings agreed with the judgement of the auditor in 5 of 6 cases which gives us assurance about the impact of the recent audit training. However, to ensure this is embedded, the quality assurance service will continue to jointly moderate.
- 23 Strengths are clearly seen in case recording where we are writing to the child. Where this is happening, recording is more purposeful, more impactful and more sensitive.
- 24 Prior to the inspection there were no commissioned emergency beds, we now have two post 18 emergency beds, with an additional bed due to go live once vacant. This increased emergency bed capacity has meant that when young people are in crisis they have been able to access an emergency bed that meets their needs, and has avoided the use of unsuitable accommodation such as hotels.

Child and Family Feedback

- 25 Further work is required to ensure family feedback is gathered throughout our involvement and therefore a Family Feedback Strategy has been developed, pending formal sign off as part of our new governance arrangements (Practice, Policy and Procedure group). This includes strengthening the questions in our feedback so we can obtain some clear themes such as whether families feel listened to and involved in decision making.
- 26 Currently from the audits undertaken we have some feedback from children, young people and families, below is an extract:
- “We were treated with kindness and respect”
“The social worker was brilliant, proactive and got everyone working together”
“I feel safe in their [the social worker’s] hands”
“I know the help we have had has changed our lives”
- 27 The participation team have been working with young people through October to develop the activities to celebrate November’s Children’s Rights month. This has included:
- 42 young people attending a Youth Work week event to take part in outcome-based activities and celebrate National Youth Work Week. The theme was ‘a right to youth work’ and senior managers were invited to have conversations and gather feedback and recommendations connected to the outcomes of the Children and Young People’s Plan. The recommendations from this work was presented at Children’s Trust Board on 14 November 2024. Further work is also being developed to ensure children and young people can work with the leads for each of the priorities within the CYP’s Plan so these are achieved collaboratively.
 - Young people from Cheshire East Youth Council took part in a Children and Families Committee ‘takeover’ to advocate on behalf of young people across Cheshire East by sharing the recommendations and priorities of young people. The young people launched their hate crime and discrimination campaign ‘Hate Stops Here’.
 - Preparing a young person who will participate in Takeover day to present their ideas and thoughts about issues that are important to them. These ideas include access to education resources for home educated children and young people and free access to GCSE exams.
- 28 The Care Leaver Ambassadors have delivered workshops at the Celebrating Practice staff events about the importance of positive relationships to improving outcomes. They have also captured the views of Care Leavers in preparation for the Local Offer Review Event and presented these ideas,

feedback and recommendations at the event which took place on 13 November 2024.

- 29 Young people co-produced and co-delivered the SEND annual conference where workshops were delivered and feedback gathered in respect of preparing for adulthood and transitions, health and wellbeing and inclusion. The feedback gathered at this event will be presented to the SEND partnership board on 22 November 2024.

Risks/ key areas requiring improvement

- 30 As highlighted above, the quality of practice is not where we need it to be, with the majority of cases judged requires improvement. However, this isn't unusual on an improvement journey as progress requires time and significant development which is being addressed in our improvement plan. What is reassuring is, that despite overall poor audit gradings, some areas of the practice was identified to be good and we are supporting staff to build on this so it can be reflected in all areas of the work undertaken with children.
- 31 Management oversight and supervision remains a key area for improvement to facilitate a good line of sight to the practice and will drive the quality of work, which our enhanced performance oversight will further support. Some service changes are looking to manage some of our work more effectively and this should also support managers to have improved oversight.

Update on Recruitment

- 32 The following roles were agreed by committee and full Council as additional capacity to support service improvements, starting from September onwards:

<u>Roles</u>	<u>Update</u>
Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) x 2	There has been agreement that these can be advertised as permanent positions as the 18 month contracts were not attracting enough interest/suitable candidates. These posts are covered by agency in the interim. 1 candidate has been offered a role and we are awaiting a response.
Connected carer assessors x 2	Advert closed on 29 November 2024. We have appointed to one post and the other post is being readvertised.
Social worker x 6	As outlined in the previous report to committee, 4 agency social workers have been appointed into Macclesfield and Crewe within Children in Need and Child Protection as these are experienced workers. This is the same cost as 6 non-agency social workers. A workforce strategy will be a priority action to support recruitment including a proposal for international recruitment.

PAs x 3	Recruited 3 additional staff on an agency basis, however, due to turnover within the service they are now no longer additional capacity and additional resource is being sourced.
Quality Assurance Officer	This post has been appointed to and the start date is 3 December 2024.
Project Manager to lead development of 18-25 accommodation	Internal secondment appointed on 1 July to enable work on this area to start immediately. Post funded by the service until 1 September.

- 33 The spend to the end of October for the posts is £45,681 (4 social workers and Project Manager).

Consultation and Engagement

- 34 We are continuing to work together with children, young people, young adults, parents/carers, staff, and partners to develop, deliver and evaluate improvements, as outlined above. Children, families and practitioners' views are actively sought through our audit process. Practitioners have been invited to be part of a practice reference group to shape services in Cheshire East.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 35 Cheshire East Council's children's services received an inadequate judgement from the 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
Do not scrutinise the improvement plan	Committee will not have oversight of progress against the plan so cannot be assured that outcomes will be improved for children and young people	There is a risk that improvements are not achieved at the pace needed

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 36 Members of the committee need to be assured that all requirements and recommendations within the ILACS report and the improvement notice (served upon the council by the DfE on the 24 July 2024 resulting from the Ofsted inspection findings), are complied with and that the plans in place deliver the improvements required are within the timescales set by the DfE.
- (a) Failure to comply or poor progress against the Improvement Plan can result in the imposition of directions to secure performance, which can include DfE intervention and nomination of a person to act on its behalf to secure performance.
- 37 The protection of vulnerable people is a council responsibility. Continued regular oversight by members of the Childrens and Families Committee, alongside the overall approach to improving service provision, aligns with this obligation.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 38 The additional resources linked to the plan are expected to be starting during September 2024 or in April 2025 in line with the costed plan, therefore the cost to date in our accounts is £45,681 at the end of October 2024.
- 39 The improvement plan to address the findings from the inspection was agreed at the Children and Families Committee on 16 July and Full Council on 17 July, which included the approach to the funding of the plan.

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

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

Human Resources

- 41 Additional capacity has been requested to support the delivery of the improvement plan and an update on this is included within the body of the report. HR are supporting the improvement work and a recruitment and retention strategy is being developed.

Risk Management

- 42 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 has been added to the council's corporate risk register and this risk is monitored quarterly through the Corporate Policy Committee.

Rural Communities

- 43 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)

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

Public Health

- 45 Same as the implication above.

Climate Change

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

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Lisa Davies, Interim Director for Improvement, Children's Services Lisa.davies@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix 1: RAG rating overview

	Appendix 2: Improvement Plan
Background Papers:	<u>Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 11 November 2024</u> <u>Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 16 September 2024</u> <u>Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 16 July 2024</u> <u>Report on the Ofsted inspection findings to the Children and Families Committee on 3 June 2024</u> <u>Cheshire East's Ofsted Inspection Report published 16 May</u> <u>Ofsted ILACS Framework</u>