

## **Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Date of Meeting:** 27 January 2020

**Report Title:** Outcome of Cheshire East Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS)

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr Kathryn Flavell, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families

**Senior Officer:** Mark Palethorpe, Acting Executive Director of People

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### **1. Report Summary**

- 1.1 This report updates the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the outcome of the Ofsted Standard Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS), undertaken between the 11th to the 29<sup>th</sup> November 2019, with the report being published by Ofsted on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2020. It also sets out the proposed actions to address the areas for development identified in the report.

### **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:
- a) note the contents of the Ofsted report at Appendix 1, including areas of strength and areas for development;
  - b) endorse the action plan at Appendix 2 to improve areas of practice identified by Ofsted as requiring improvement; and
  - c) include in the work plan an opportunity to scrutinise the impact of the proposed action plan and to achieve the ambition to develop a consistently good service for children and families in all areas of practice.

### **3. Reasons for Recommendations**

- 3.1 The Council, working with partner organisations and agencies, have specific duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in Cheshire East. It is important that Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee is appraised of the strengths and areas for improvement within Children's Services and is assured that arrangements are in place to both develop, implement and scrutinise plans that deliver improvements in meet the areas for improvement.

### **4. Other Options Considered**

- 4.1 Not applicable.

### **5. Background**

- 5.1 All Children's Services are subject to regular inspection by Ofsted. Cheshire East Council's last major inspection was under the single inspection framework (SIF) in July 2015, which found us to be 'requires improvement' following an inadequate judgement in 2013.

- 5.2 Ofsted published the 'new' ILACS framework in November 2017 and implemented it from January 2018. It replaced the single inspection framework (SIF) for all inspections of Local Authorities providing services for children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers. This again 'raised the bar' of what Ofsted expects to see as consistently good practice across all services.

- 5.3 Inspections under the ILACS framework evaluate the effectiveness of Local Authority services and arrangements, including:

- the help and protection of children.
- the experiences and progress of children in care wherever they live, including those children who return home.
- the arrangements for permanence for children who are looked after, including adoption.
- the experiences and progress of care leavers.

- 5.4. ILACS inspections also evaluate:

- the effectiveness of leaders and managers.
- the impact they have on the lives of children and young people.
- the quality of professional practice.

- 5.5 Under the SIF, Ofsted delivered a standard four-week inspection to all Local Authority services. The current ILACS framework is a more complex system of inspection. The aim is to create a proportionate inspection

process based on intelligence gathered throughout the year. There are three different types of inspections under the framework:

- **Standard inspection** – this covers all the services above across the levels of need and takes place over three weeks, with one week's notice and inspectors onsite for two weeks. At end of the inspection: a report is completed which gives a judgement on the quality of our services, either outstanding, good, requires improvement to be good, or inadequate.
- **Focussed Visit** - these inspections focus on one area in particular. We had a focussed visit on cared for children and care leavers in October 2018. These inspections take place over two weeks and inspectors are onsite for two days. At end of the inspection: a letter is written which outlines strengths and areas for improvement; no overall judgement is given.
- **Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAI)** - these inspections are multi-agency inspections that are carried out by inspectors from multi-agency inspectorates (including Ofsted, CQC, HMICFRS and HMI Probation). These inspections look at a particular topic, which changes on a regular basis. These inspections take place over three weeks and inspectors are onsite for one week. At end of the inspection: a letter is written which outlines strengths and areas for improvement, no overall judgement is given.

5.6 Cheshire East received a **Standard inspection** in November 2019. The Inspectors involved were:

- Shabana Abasi – Lead Inspector
- Alison Smale – Inspector
- John Roughton - Inspector
- Matt Reed - Inspector
- Stephen Bentham – Inspector for Education
- Mandy Williams – Social Care Regulatory Inspector
- Nick McMullen – Senior Inspector (Quality Assurance)
- Kathryn Grindrod- Inspector (designate) shadowing this inspection

5.7 The methodology adopted by the inspection team was detailed, thorough, and probing. It focussed on practice within the last 6 months and included:

- Sampling a large number of children's case records.
- Discussing individual cases in detail with practitioners.
- Meeting or phone calls with children, young people, care leavers, parents and carers, foster carers and adopters, schools and the Head of the Virtual School.
- Analysis of key documents and data (Annex A); over 600 documents were uploaded to Ofsted's SharePoint site.

5.8 The standard inspection made judgements as set out below:

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 and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

5.9 Areas of strength

- 5.9.1 Inspectors found that Cheshire East had made significant progress in a number of areas since the last inspection in 2015 and since the focussed visit in 2018. This included a strengthened front door and improvements in the scale and effectiveness of the early help offer. Our 'edge of care' team, @ct, works intensively and effectively with families to ensure children only come into care when they need to and children at risk of exploitation receive a robust service. Permanency planning is identified at an early stage and children are supported to live safely within their birth family. The voice of the child is a strength and evident across all services.
- 5.9.2 Areas of good practice included the wealth of support offered to children and families at risk from domestic abuse. Support for children with disabilities or a plan of adoption were also identified as strengths. We have also improved our response to children who go missing or are at risk of exploitation.
- 5.9.3 There are well embedded systems for assessing, tracking and safeguarding children missing from education and electively home educated. The Virtual School provides strong leadership, which is leading to improving outcomes for most cared for children.
- 5.9.4 Most cared for children live in homes that meet their needs and help them to make progress. Social workers and carers are attuned to their physical and emotional health.
- 5.9.5 Care Leavers know their Personal Advisors well, they are supported to learn and practice their independence skills. Their mental health and emotional wellbeing needs are effectively supported.
- 5.9.5 Social Workers know their children well and engage in creative direct work that informs their assessments and plans.

- 5.9.6 There is a strong training and development package and specific funding for additional staff. This has reduced reliance on temporary staff. Children are benefitting from consistent and committed social workers, who know them well.
- 5.9.7 Strategic partnerships are mature and responsive to changing needs in operational conditions demonstrated through areas of strong and collaborative partnership working in the front door, early help and contextual safeguarding.
- 5.9.8 There is a whole council commitment to driving improvement for children and families. The Corporate Parenting Committee, Safeguarding Children Partnership and scrutiny function provide appropriate challenge to operational services where deficiencies are highlighted. This means senior leaders are accountable for the performance of services and experiences of children.

#### **Areas for improvement**

- 5.10 The areas for improvement noted by the inspectors are highlighted below alongside planned actions to ensure timely improvements are made.

#### **The quality, consistency and analysis of assessments and the child focus of plans**

- 5.10.1 Over the last 18 months Cheshire East has been introducing a new evidence based social work model, "Signs of safety". In the short term this has led to some inconsistency in the quality of assessments and plans as early help workers, social workers and managers begin to use the new approach. Significant progress has been made in embedding the model, particularly in building trusting relationships and the quality of direct work with children and families. Implementing Signs of Safety is a journey of 4-5 years to fully implement, however this will provide the foundations of a good social work service for vulnerable children.
- 5.10.2 Further work is required to improve the consistency and quality of social work assessments and plans. This will be led by the Signs of Safety Board. Further work to improve quality will take place across Children's Social Care and Early Help Services. The purpose of further work is to improve consistency across the whole service. Over the last six months there has been a focus on improving practice. We have invested in training additional practice leads to support individual teams. We have also delivered additional training and support to front line practitioners.
- 5.10.3 In 2019 we launched our quality assurance framework but this is not yet fully embedded. We are aware that our audits can be overly

optimistic. We have refreshed our audit process, redesigning the audit tool and strengthening moderation. We plan to increase the frequency of reporting to the Senior Leadership team to ensure that audits are completed and the moderation process leading to increasing accuracy in audit judgements. To support this process, we have provided additional training to our front line team managers around completing audits. We will also be providing individual coaching sessions with each team manager on ensuring consistent and high quality practice in their teams during February and March 2020.

- 5.10.4 Over the next 6 months we expect to see improvements in the consistency and quality of our assessments and plans for children, driven by a strengthened quality assurance process.

**Management oversight of cases in pre-proceedings, to avoid drift and delay for children**

- 5.10.5 A small number of children suffering chronic neglect experienced delay in ensuring they were protected from the cumulative impact of neglect. They are time limited with a clear plan of assessment, support and actions required by parents/ cares to reduce risk for children. During the inspection a review of each child took place and senior managers have agreed actions to ensure timely progress is achieved. Tracking for the individual children identified as being at risk of not achieving a timely permanency plan that ensures they are safeguarded from neglect will be led by Head of Service for Child in Need and Child Protection. A joint evaluation with legal services will take place by February 2020 to determine what further work is required. This evaluation will include understanding good practice in other Local Authority areas and seeking feedback from the Courts, Family Justice Board and Cafcass to inform our plans.

**The response to children in private fostering arrangements, children who are homeless aged 16 and 17 years old and care leavers who need emergency accommodation**

- 5.10.6 All children and young people within this small but significant cohort have been reviewed by senior managers and we are confident that appropriate plans are in place. The quality assurance process for 16/17 year olds presenting as homeless will be strengthened through revision of the audit tool by February 2020. The accommodation offer for care leavers will be recommissioned, with the new services in place from July 2020. The specification has been amended to reflect the findings from the recent inspection.

## **The quality and consistency of support and engagement with foster carers**

5.10.7 An independent review regarding the recruitment, retention, development and support of foster carers will be completed by the end of January 2020. The recommendations from this review will then be overseen and progressed by the recently established Fostering Review Board. The review and development work will be co-produced with foster carers and progress reported to the Corporate Parenting Committee. Work has already commenced to improve our engagement and communications with our current foster carers. This includes the first newsletter being sent in December 2019 and a foster carers forum, attended by senior managers on the 13<sup>th</sup> January 2020, where views were sought from carers to inform the review.

## **Consistent management oversight and supervision in the organisation to ensure that consistent, good quality social work practice is in place**

5.10.8 A review of how performance management information is scrutinised and understood has taken place. An evaluation of supervision arrangements, following the introduction of Signs of Safety has also been completed and recommendations will be progressed through the Signs of Safety Board. There is a plan in place to fully embed our revised quality assurance framework. This includes additional training and support for managers at all levels. The review of pre-proceedings will also include a specific focus on the role of team managers and service managers in timely progress for children, whilst ensuring all help and support has been offered to families to care safely for their children.

5.11 A detailed action plan to address the areas set out above is attached at Appendix 2.

## **6. Implications of the Recommendations**

### **6.1 Legal Implications**

6.1.1 The Local Authority has a statutory duty to keep children within its area safe. Equally, there is a duty to promote a child being raised within the family where it is safe and appropriate to do so. Legal Services will work in collaboration with Children's Social Care to identify any areas for reconfiguration of and costing of current legal resources. In the event additional resources are required, in particular in relation to meet the future needs of children's social care to ensure timely planning for children who

are subject to the Public Law process, or the discharge of Care Orders, it is envisaged appropriate additional resources will be made available to factor into the general review of legal services across the Council.

## **6.2 Finance Implications**

- 6.2.1 The ambition to ensure that children's services deliver services which are good and outstanding requires an ongoing financial commitment from the Council. Fostering allowance rates for Cheshire East foster carers are currently being considered as part of the wider fostering review. Nationally there are budget pressures around cared for children placements. This is due to the rising costs of children's homes and insufficient foster placements to meet the rising numbers of children in care.
- 6.2.2 In Cheshire East we are facing similar challenges, however the rising costs will be mitigated through the work planned to increase the number of Cheshire East foster carers, driving individual permanency plans for children and mobilisation of our commissioned Children's Homes.

## **6.3 Policy Implications**

- 6.3.1 Cheshire East is ambitious and committed to ensuring it is a great place to be young and every child has the best start in life. This is demonstrated through the Council's core priorities that people live well for longer and have the life skills and education they need to thrive. These priorities are supported and driven through the Children and Young People's plan and the Health and Wellbeing Strategic plan.

## **6.4 Equality Implications**

- 6.4.1 The proposals within this report are intended to improve equality for children and families.

## **6.5 Human Resources Implications**

- 6.5.1 Ensuring the ongoing recruitment and retention of high quality Social Workers and managers will continue to be a priority for the local authority and will require the support from HR colleagues to deliver the strategy in relation to this. Further work is planned to review the support package for our newly qualified



social workers to ensure we are strongly placed to attract the very best student social workers.

## **6.6 Risk Management Implications**

- 6.6.1 There are reputational and financial risks of not providing good children's services. These risks are currently also included as risks for the Safeguarding Children Partnership. The Council, as the lead agency, must continue to ensure that these risks are minimised by ensuring effective plans are in place to improve where areas for development are identified.

## **6.7 Rural Communities Implications**

- 6.7.1 There are no direct implications for rural communities.

## **6.8 Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children**

- 6.8.1 Our plans intend to improve the experiences and outcomes for children and young people across the borough, in particular, those who are the most vulnerable.

## **6.9 Public Health Implications**

- 6.9.1 Health inequalities are linked directly to the wider determinates which will have implications for public health. The work on the indices of deprivation will support the improvement of outcomes for children and young people.

## **6.10 Climate Change Implications**

- 6.10.1 There is a commitment to ensure that Cheshire East cared for children live as close to their home community as possible, wherever this is safe to do so. This will ensure that children can continue to feel connected to their families and local community. It also reduces the geographical footprint of children, families and staff as travel is reduced.

## **7. Ward Members Affected**

- 7.1 The recommendations will affect children and young people across all areas of Cheshire East, mostly our most vulnerable.

## **8. Consultation & Engagement**

- 8.1 We will continue to consult and engage with all our key stakeholders as we develop and implement our plans for improvement.

## **9. Access to Information**

9.1 The published report can be found on the following Ofsted page:

<https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/44/80447>

## **10. Access to Information**

10.1 The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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Insert Appendix 1 – Final Report

Insert Appendix 2 – Action Plan