

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



8 December 2021

Dr Lorraine O'Donnell
Chief Executive
Cheshire East Council
Municipal Buildings
Earle Street
Crewe
CW1 2BJ

Dear Lorraine

Focused visit to Cheshire East children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Cheshire East children's services on 3 to 4 November 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Kathryn Grindrod HMI and Russel Breyer HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a protection plan. Specifically, inspectors considered the application of thresholds, step-up/step-down arrangements, and children subject to edge of care or pre-proceedings support.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out fully on site.

Headline findings

An inspection of Cheshire East children's services took place in November 2019, when the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were found to require improvement to be good. Since that time, there has been improvement in the overall quality of work with children who are in need of help or protection.

Assessments and plans are mainly thorough and focused on improving outcomes for children. In most parts of the service, more effective management oversight is ensuring that children's needs are met well, including through provision of relevant services. A child-focused programme of auditing is driving practice improvement and providing senior leaders with an accurate oversight of practice.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The identification of contingency arrangements in child-in-need plans.
- The consistency and effectiveness of management oversight for disabled children.
- The completion of audit recommendations to further improve experiences for children.

Main findings

COVID-19 rates reached their highest levels to date in Cheshire East in October 2021. During the pandemic, the local authority has experienced pressures in terms of capacity while leaders have attended to competing demands on their time. Despite this, the leadership team has overseen the safe reduction in the number of children in the borough requiring help and protection through children-in-need or child-protection plans. The quality of social work with these children and their families has improved overall during this time.

Children in Cheshire East benefit from stable and meaningful relationships with their social workers. Children have frequent opportunities to express their wishes and feelings, and social workers complete purposeful and creative direct work with children to better understand their experiences. While children's wishes are considered in plans, written records are not always clear about whether children have the opportunity to be actively involved in meetings about them.

Timely assessments of children's needs include careful consideration of family history and children's experiences to appropriately identify strengths and risks for children. The views and opinions of children, parents and relevant professionals are sought effectively to inform assessment conclusions.

Children who need help or protection are identified as a result of effective assessments of risk and need. Thresholds for working with children are appropriately applied. However, some assessments do not fully consider children's identities when reaching decisions, and assessments are not always updated promptly when children's circumstances change. For a small number of children, this has resulted in a delay in identifying and responding to their changing needs.

Most children in need of help or protection have written plans that are regularly reviewed and updated. Most written plans are clear about what needs to happen and who is responsible. While social workers can verbally describe the positive impact their work is intended to have on children's daily lives, some written plans still measure success by the completion of tasks rather than impact for children.

Contingency arrangements in child-in-need plans are not always sufficiently well formed or detailed. Management oversight is also not always fully responsive to children's changing needs, and child-in-need meetings do not always lead to the

identification of drift for children. This all means that, when situations deteriorate for children in need, alternative decisive action is not always taken promptly.

Family support networks are routinely considered to offer immediate support for children and families. This helps families to build resilience and lessens the need for external professional involvement. Family support networks are not explored well enough in longer-term contingency planning.

Most child-in-need and child-protection review meetings involve relevant professionals and their views feed into planning for children. Professionals share children's wishes and feelings in formal meetings. Parents are routinely involved in review meetings and their views can be seen in plans.

Child-protection chairs review progress for children subject to child-protection plans between formal meetings. Child-protection chairs routinely challenge practice when there are unnecessary delays. This usually results in managers and social workers agreeing and implementing remedial action to address the concerns.

Children receive pre-proceedings support when it is appropriate given the nature or duration of concerns about them. Improved senior-management oversight of early pre-proceedings work is having a positive impact on the timeliness and effectiveness of this input for children. Cases are appropriately stepped down from pre-proceedings when concerns lessen as a result of effective and focused support.

Care proceedings are issued when concerns are such that legal intervention is required to keep children safe. For a small minority of children, there are unnecessary delays in progressing pre-proceedings processes or issuing care proceedings. However, the local authority ensures that support is in place to promote the immediate safety and well-being of children experiencing these delays.

The local authority's edge of care service, @ct, has a positive impact for children who are at risk of needing to come into care. This ensures that children remain with their families when possible and appropriate. One child told us that their @ct worker helped them to be more confident about their feelings 'for definite'.

Most managers have regular oversight of social work with children and their families. Supervision takes place with sufficient frequency in most teams, and children's wishes and experiences are usually considered in discussions. However, management oversight does not always challenge and prevent drift for all children effectively. This is particularly evident in the service for disabled children, where supervision and management oversight are less regular and effective. While children are not left at risk of immediate harm as a result, they experience a more reactive service because of this weaker management grip.

Elected members and senior leaders are well informed on the quality of practice with children through receipt of regular and accurate reports about strengths and progress in areas for development.

A child-focused auditing programme provides a clear overall picture of the impact of practice for children across the service. Thematic findings from this work inform areas for future service development. For example, the identification through audit of the need to strengthen support for children at risk of neglect has led to more effective responses to these children. While the impact of individual audits can be seen in subsequent practice with some children, this is not always evident for every child whose records have been audited.

Social worker caseloads are high in some teams that work with children in need of help and protection. Despite this, the quality of practice continues to be such that, for most children, there is no detrimental impact. However, the lack of additional capacity in the system means a minority of children experience drift should their social worker be unexpectedly away from work.

Social workers feel supported by managers and leaders at all levels of children's services, and they enjoy working in Cheshire East. The workforce is stable and so children benefit from enduring relationships with their social workers. A comprehensive training offer is well used and appreciated by social workers, who can describe the direct positive impact their training has for the children they work with.

Social workers are able to talk about the local authority's strategic aims and ambitions and they know how their roles fit in in the local authority's plans. Senior leaders are successfully embedding a child-centred culture across the child-in-need and child-protection teams in Cheshire East.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Grindrod
Her Majesty's Inspector