

BRIEFING REPORT

Children and Families Committee

Date of Meeting:	24 March 2022
Report Title:	Councillor Frontline Visits Annual Report
Report of:	Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children's Services

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. This report provides an update to committee on the themes and issues raised through councillor frontline visits to the Cheshire East Consultation Service (ChECS), Child in Need and Child Protection (CIN/CP) Teams, and the Children with Disabilities Social Work Team and Short Breaks Team over the last 12 months 2021-22.
- 1.2. It is important for the committee to have an overview of the issues affecting frontline social work teams. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on our children and young people, practitioners, and demand to frontline services, so it is particularly important that councillors continue to be sighted on this.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. Councillors continue to be committed to frontline visits, and their direct contact and discussions with social workers and managers within Children's Social Care is highly appreciated. The findings from frontline visits continue to inform planning and quality assurance within the service.
- 2.2. Frontline visits continue to take place on a virtual basis due to the COVID-19 pandemic and have done so monthly since September 2020.

3. Background

- 3.1. Lord Laming's Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié resulted in a range of recommendations. One of these (Social Care Recommendation 41) states that:

"Arrangements must be made for senior managers and councillors to regularly visit intake teams in the Children's services department and to report their findings to the Chief Executive and Social Services Committee" (para 5. 193).

- 3.2.** This recommendation remains best practice and is still considered as part of any Ofsted inspection. In Cheshire East, our 'intake teams' (the teams that deal with new referrals) are the:
- Cheshire East Consultation Service (ChECS)
 - Child in Need and Child Protection Service in Crewe
 - Child in Need and Child Protection Service in Macclesfield
 - Children with Disabilities Social Work Team
 - Children with Disabilities Short Breaks Team.
- 3.3.** The Children's Development and Partnerships Team set up a rota for visits liaising with councillors and services. A summary of the procedure is set out in the guidance in the appendix. During their virtual visits, councillors meet with managers and team members to discuss the following:
- outcomes for children
 - support for teams
 - how COVID-19 has impacted on their work (e.g. needs of families/ impact on relationships/ working as a virtual team)
 - any other areas.
- 3.4.** Councillors are sent the form (Appendix 1) to record the key headlines from the discussion, and the guidance (Appendix 2) before the meeting. As outlined in the procedure, councillors complete and return the form following their visit, and subsequently receive a response from the head of service. Visits are carried out through a Microsoft Teams meeting. As previously, councillors meet with the service manager initially, then with three or four practitioners.
- 3.5.** In July 2021 it was agreed that visits to the Children with Disabilities Service would be split between the social work and short breaks teams. It was therefore agreed that the frequency of visits would change slightly so all teams would be visited every five months (previously four) so both of the teams for children with disabilities could be included in the rota.
- 3.6.** Our frontline visits promote transparency between officers and councillors and allow richer debate within the Children and Families Committee. The most recent Ofsted focused visit in November 2021 referenced the effective connection between frontline staff, leaders and councillors.

4. Briefing Information – Themes from Visits

- 4.1.** A summary of the themes from frontline visits over the last 12 months is set out below. Across all the visits, councillors noted the passionate commitment practitioners had for supporting our children and young people.

Cheshire East Consultation Service (ChECS)

Number of visits in last 12 months: one has taken place (March 2021), one is planned for February 2022. A number of meetings were planned but were required to be moved due to councillor availability.

What's working well?	What are we worried about?	What needs to happen / next steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calls/contacts from partners and members of the public are well managed and appropriate support is identified for children and young people. The service is focused on ensuring contacts are progressed in a timely way. • New rota system has improved information sharing practices • Conversations with callers and families supports good understanding of the situation, keeping the child at the centre of decision making, and building and developing relationships with families. • Staff felt supported in their roles and reported that IT support has been excellent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in referral rates – initially low during first stage of pandemic then an increase in referrals from family members. • Time to complete contacts and necessary administrative tasks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional administrative support was being sought to ease pressures on social workers' time. Solutions to increase time efficiency when taking contacts were being piloted. • Further specialist help within the team would be very useful in the future e.g., a housing specialist on the team rather than external to the Front Door. • Increase use of screening tools by partners
Comments from the Head of Service		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes have been revised and streamlined to increase timeliness – this has been a real positive, particularly in developing the way in which Police Vulnerable Person Assessments (VPAs) are jointly screened. • We are progressing plans to bring a Mental Health Practitioner into the Front Door to strengthen support to partners as well as support strong decision making, ensuring children and young people receive the right support to meet their needs. 		

Children with Disabilities Social Work Team

Number of visits in last 12 months: two visits have taken place during April and October 2021.

What's working well?	What are we worried about?	What needs to happen / next steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social workers provide a consistent point of support for children with disabilities and their families. Low staff turnover ensures consistency for children. Relationships are built and developed with families. • The team works closely with the SEND team, especially regarding transition. • A blended approach – using both face to face meetings and Teams meetings - was working well. Lateral flow tests were used for supporting safe visits. Families liked the use of Teams as it provides more flexibility, and particularly where families were shielding. • Management support for the team and to managers is effective and supports staff in their roles. • Staff reported training opportunities were easier to access on Teams and social workers can choose the training they think will assist in their work. • Effective ICT in place to support roles. Teams has improved communication with partners and led to quicker solutions for families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The year has provided many challenges for children, young people and their families due to the pandemic, such as reduced access to support networks, changes to services and groups not running face to face, and in some cases, children not being able to attend school. • Team capacity - the pandemic and its challenges for families has resulted in more complex issues being referred to the team – staffing, caseloads and pressures on workloads were raised by staff. • Sometimes there are issues with saving work to Liquid Logic (the child's record) which results in work needing to be re-entered again, and with the ICT connection to remote working at home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interim social workers will be used when required to give additional capacity to the team. • Further work with Adult Social Care to support transition for young people.

Comments from the Head of Service

- Each and every member of the service has gone over and above in trying to maintain service delivery and to continue their direct support to families through this unprecedented time.
- We have recruited a new team manager to our Children with Disabilities Service following the previous post holder's retirement in December 2021. Some social workers are due to move on to pastures new and we have been able to recruit experienced social workers into those vacancies. We have also brought a family support worker into the team which will assist our frontline practitioners in supporting children and families providing additional capacity.
- We are continuing to develop the relationships we have with our colleagues in Early Help and Adults Services to support the smooth transition of children out of the Disability Team when they no longer

require social care intervention. This will also support the improvement in capacity that our frontline social workers need.

Children with Disabilities Short Breaks Team

Number of visits in last 12 months: two visits have taken place in August 2021 and January 2022 (awaiting feedback from the visit completed in January).

What's working well?	What are we worried about?	What needs to happen / next steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are providing a person-centred service and one which supports young people and their families. Feedback from families shows they feel supported by the team and that they provide a variety of activities tailored to meet the needs of the children and young people. • Transition is working well; the process is centred around the young person's needs. • Well-motivated team. • Good information sharing with other teams. • Staff reported feeling supported by managers and senior management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in referrals to the service as a result of the pandemic. • Continuity of workers for annual reviews of Education, Health and Care Plans due to a change in process. • Team capacity - the team had five support workers which had reduced to four due to a retirement, and the team manager was undertaking an additional role as dedicated social care worker for SEND. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent recruitment to the team vacancy.
Comments from the Head of Service		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dedicated social care officer post has been added to the service structure and interviews have been held we are awaiting a start date for the successful candidate. This post is an exciting addition to the service and one which will add value to the experiences of children, young people and families. It will also improve the service being delivered to colleagues across both children's and adults social care, early help, education and health. 		

Child in Need / Child Protection (CIN/CP)

Number of visits in last 12 months: five have taken place: three to Crewe – April and July 2021, and January 2022 (feedback awaited), and two to Macclesfield – May and November 2021.

What's working well?	What are we worried about?	What needs to happen / next steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships with families are positive; more engagement with families is leading to better outcomes, for example, engaging with family networks is resulting in more children placed with wider family members so more children remaining within their families. • There is consistency in staff members. Management support and supervision is positive; the team feel well supported and • able to escalate cases for advice and support as required. • The vaccination roll-out has worked well. • Cases under court proceedings have moved to the cared for team, which means the focus at CIN/CP is on early intervention. • Court hearings can now be online or hybrid, resulting in shorter allocated times and less time in court for workers. • Training and development is effective, regular masterclasses on different subjects take place, workers who join on placement often apply for permanent roles, and the advanced practitioner role is working well. • Twice weekly step up/step down meetings are working well, ensuring families get the right level of support. • Effective ICT in place and use of Teams has improved communication with families and partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting experienced workers was raised in May 2021 due to some team members about to go on secondment. • Caseloads were raised by staff during the Crewe visit in July and the Macclesfield visit in November. • Court processes could still be improved in some areas and there are still some delays due to court availability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies to sustain and develop service delivery continue to be explored. Teams have worked in partnership with an external auditor who has delivered support to managers. • Strengthening the relationship with Legal Services in working to prevent children from entering care. • Recruitment and retention of staff is key in providing consistency to families. • Teams were keen to get back into the office for face-to-face contact and support.
<p>Comments from the Head of Service</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Macclesfield, recruitment and retention of staff is a real strength. Whilst there are a small number of agency staff, this is a temporary measure to cover gaps that have arisen due to 'step-up' opportunities for other social workers or progression of the workforce. A working group is in place to support recruitment and retention and to ensure we are an employer of choice. 		

- We are focusing strategically on reducing caseloads to allow social workers to complete even better work with our children and families.
- The service is continuing to work alongside colleagues in the court arena to ensure the right children are prioritised for hearings so plans of permanency can be progressed at the earliest opportunity.
- The service is part of a pilot scheme to use the office space differently. One of the aims of the pilot is to provide better access to peer support to less experienced staff.

5. Implications

5.1. Legal

5.1.1. We advise that all councillors who are undertaking the frontline visits also complete the councillor GDPR training.

5.2. Finance

5.2.1. There are no financial implications of this report.

5.3. Human Resources

5.3.1. Previous feedback from staff is that this process makes them feel valued.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	<p>Louise Hurst, Head of Service: Children in Need and Child Protection Louise.Hurst@cheshireeast.gov.uk</p> <p>Keith Martin, Head of Service: Children with Disabilities Keith.Martin@cheshireeast.gov.uk</p>
Appendices:	<p>Appendix 1: Councillor Frontline Safeguarding Team Visits Form</p> <p>Appendix 2: Guidance for Councillor Frontline Safeguarding Team Visits 2021</p>
Background Papers:	None

Appendix 1:



COUNCILLOR FRONTLINE SAFEGUARDING TEAM VISITS FORM

Please read Guidance for Councillor Frontline Safeguarding Team Visits before completing this form.

Names of Councillors	
Date of visit	
Service visited	
Names of staff involved in visit	

NB: only insert commentary where you have gathered information.

	What are we worried about/ barriers?	What is working well?	What needs to happen?
Outcomes for children How are you making a difference for children, and how do you know?			
Support for teams Management support, training opportunities, caseloads, equip/environment			
Any other areas			

How has COVID-19 impacted on your work (e.g. needs of families/ impact on relationships/ working as a virtual team)

Comments

Completed By:	
Date:	

Head of Service Feedback

Completed By:	
Date:	

Please forward this completed form to the Children's Development and Partnerships Team Inbox within 4 weeks of the visit:
childrensdevelopmentandpartnerships@cheshireeast.gov.uk

Any queries, please email childrensdevelopmentandpartnerships@cheshireeast.gov.uk.

Appendix 2:



Guidance for Councillor Frontline Safeguarding Team Visits 2021



Councillor Frontline Safeguarding Team Visits

Lord Laming's Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié resulted in a range of recommendations. One of these (Social Care Recommendation 41) states that:

"Arrangements must be made for senior managers and councillors to regularly visit intake teams in the children's services department and to report their findings to the Chief Executive and Social Services Committee" (para 5. 193)

Local Procedure

1. Within Cheshire East it has been agreed that the 'intake teams' for these purposes are the teams dealing with new referrals, i.e.:
 - Cheshire East Consultation Team (ChECS)
 - Child in Need/Child Protection Team in Crewe
 - Child in Need/Child Protection Team in Macclesfield
 - Children with Disabilities – Social Work Team
 - Children with Disabilities – Short Breaks Team
2. Visits will be undertaken to each team **every five months** with the service manager of the appropriate team.

3. Visits will last approximately one hour and consist of:
 - Discussion with service managers/ team manager(s)
 - Discussion with team members (as available)

4. The visits will be based on the Signs of Safety model, which poses the following three questions:

- What are we **worried about**?
- What is **working well**?
- What **needs to happen**?

5. Councillors are asked to consider these questions against the following areas (**always starting with what is working well**):

Outcomes for children

- ✓ How are you making a real difference for children?
- ✓ How do you know?
- ✓ How are you building and developing good relationships with families?
- ✓ How do you keep children at the centre of your work?
- ✓ How is multi-agency working supporting good outcomes?
- ✓ What are the barriers to achieving good outcomes for children (e.g. workloads, processes, etc.)
- ✓ What changes would help you to achieve better outcomes?

Support

- ✓ How are you supported to achieve good outcomes for children (e.g. management support, training opportunities, ICT equipment/ environment, communications).
- ✓ What are your caseloads like?
- ✓ What's good about how we support you?
- ✓ How can we support you more effectively?
- ✓ What's it like to work in your team at the moment – what is morale like?

Other areas

- ✓ Are there any other areas the team wanted to raise, or that came up during the discussion that impact on providing effective services to safeguard children and young people?
6. Councillors will record the key issues from the visit on the electronic form and send to childrensdevelopmentandpartnerships@cheshireeast.gov.uk who will arrange for the relevant head of service to provide a response to the issues raised.
 7. The themes and issues arising from visits and the service response to these will be presented to the Children and Families Committee every 12 months by the Head of Service – Children in Need and Child Protection, and will be shared with the Chief Executive.

Summary of Procedure

