

Children and Families Committee

Date of Meeting: 5 June 2023

Report Title: Councillor Frontline Visits Annual Report

Report of: Deborah Woodcock, Executive Director of Children's Services

Report Reference No: CF/44/22-23

Ward(s) Affected: All

Corporate Plan Priorities	Open	An open and enabling organisation	
	Fair	A council which empowers and cares about people	X
	Green	A thriving and sustainable place	

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1.** This report provides an update to committee on the themes, strengths 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 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

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 have continued to take place on a virtual basis since the COVID-19 pandemic and have done so monthly since September 2020. Following the elections in May, training for councillors will be provided and it is planned for visits to return to being carried out face-to-face within teams.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. Children and Families Committee is asked to note the contents of the report and approve the continuation of councillor frontline visits and the process associated with them.
- 3.2. As we develop the integrated children's strategy, we ask that consideration be given by committee to extend these frontline visits across the breadth of services within children's services. This proposal will come to committee in November 2023 in the Integrated Children's Strategy paper.

4. Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1. It is important for the committee to have an overview of the issues affecting frontline social work teams. COVID-19 continued to have an impact on our children and young people, practitioners, and demand to frontline services during this time. The cost-of-living crisis is now putting further pressure on families in Cheshire East and the services that teams are working hard to provide.
- 4.2. It is important for committee members in discharging their duties to the residents of Cheshire East to hear, first-hand, the successes, challenges and opportunities that our front line practitioners experience and the wisdom they bring. This assists us in delivering on the priorities as laid out in the corporate plan.

5. Other Options Considered

- 5.1. There is the option for members not to visit the frontline, and instead to receive reports from officers and independent reports, e.g., peer reviews. However, this would not provide members with direct contact with frontline practitioners and managers to allow them to have an overview of the effectiveness of these services.

6. Background

- 6.1. 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).
- 6.2. 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.

- 6.3.** The Children's Development and Partnerships team set up a rota for frontline visits liaising with councillors and services. Visits are undertaken to each team every five months. A summary of the procedure is set out in the guidance in the appendix. During their virtual visits, councillors have met 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.
- 6.4.** 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 currently carried out through a Microsoft Teams meeting. As previously, councillors meet with the service manager initially, then with three or four practitioners.
- 6.5.** Our frontline visits promote transparency between officers and councillors and allow rich debate within the Children and Families Committee. The Ofsted focused visit in November 2021 referenced the effective connection between frontline staff, leaders, and councillors.

7. Themes from Visits and Head of Service Response

- 7.1.** A summary of the themes from frontline visits during the 12 months from April 2022 to the end of March 2023 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: two visits have taken place; one in August 2022 and another in January 2023.

What's working well?	What are we worried about?	What needs to happen / next steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork – the team work well together as a unit and across agencies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - wide range of experience - good working relationships - team feels supported - share learning and best practice at fortnightly meetings • Changes to processes have been positive and support from the DfE is welcomed and seen as supportive. • Team morale has improved since the summer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team capacity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - workloads are high - limited ability to access training - reliance on partners who are not always able to meet timescales for information • Cost-of-living crisis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - impact on families, as well as increased pressure across already stretched services. - impact for workers – concerns about fuel/energy costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment and retention: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - further support/capacity to develop follow up work with children and families - additional capacity would help to improve outcomes, increase resilience in team and allow time to access training/development • Plans to manage the increasing pressure of the cost-of-living crisis and mitigate its impact. • Further develop partnership working:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased staffing in the early help team - streamlining of processes with partners - job satisfaction is evident, and workers want to succeed in their roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in in mental health issues for families since COVID-19. • Working arrangements/processes - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - changes across partners following the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) are not always fully understood. - Liquid Logic and connectivity issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more input from health, especially regarding mental health support/decisions - more detailed referrals to inform decision making - briefings on partner changes and discussions on support opportunities • Further investigation into Liquid Logic issues and alternative options for during planned maintenance and/or phoneline/internet issues.
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Comments from the Head of Service

- The cost-of-living crisis is a worry for us all and a challenge for our children and families who may already be experiencing adversity. We continue to work closely with our colleagues in early help and across the partnership to ensure families are supported at the earliest opportunity.
- We have been successful as a council in our bid to develop the Family Hub Model in Cheshire East which will really allow us to develop local and accessible support within communities.
- Safeguarding children is everybody's business and we continue to challenge our partner agencies to stand alongside us in achieving this, inclusive of health, and we have health representation within our Integrated Front Door which is invaluable.
- Our ambition is to recruit to a mental health post however recruitment to this role has not been successful on recent attempts. We continue to strive for this as we continue to see an increase in the complications that children and families experience due to poor mental health.
- ChECS have been working especially hard since the JTAI inspection to really sharpen the edges of practice and this is evidenced in audits and data that is now consistently good. The JTAI outcome has been used as a positive to gather momentum across all teams and partners.
- Through close multi-agency working, we have streamlined a number of processes with partners to simplify access to the right support at the right time, allowing us to focus even more on those children that require immediate safeguarding. Progress through the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) improvement plan is evident and scrutinised by our DFE Advisor.

Children with Disabilities Social Work Team

Number of visits in last 12 months: two visits have taken place, one at the end of March 2022 and another in February 2023. A number of meetings were planned but were required to be moved due to sickness in the service and councillor availability.

What's working well?	What are we worried about?	What needs to happen / next steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork – staff work well as a team and morale is good <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - supportive management - positive team changes and well managed inductions - positive work with partners - especially good relationships with schools - team are becoming better at looking at cases and stepping down to a short break where appropriate • Social workers build excellent relationships with families, as work with them over time. • Early Help Individual Payments (EHIPs) process - team are proud of this work. The system is flexible and having EHIPs means a family is more independent. • Recent training and master classes were received positively, workers were able to join sessions most suitable for their role. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team capacity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - team is small, covers a large area and caseloads have reduced but still remain higher than desirable. - difficulties to recruit new social workers - national shortage of PAs after COVID-19 who have left roles for more job security • Practice concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - unexpected issues can arise from assessment and cause resentment from families if unclear of processes. - it can be difficult to get the correct care package and to find suitable respite care. - some children are travelling long distances to school - impact of stopping short breaks could lead to more costly long-term care. • Working arrangements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - closure of Cledford: concerns about team being isolated or not having a base. - laptops are small, the screen is not ergonomically suitable, especially on home visits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment and retention: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased staffing would support the service - training offer more tailored to specific roles of the team to recognise specialist skills - review of pay for PAs • Improving practice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more clarity needed around processes for new families - care packages need reassessing where families are struggling to cope - assessments must look at how needs of the child could be met by other agencies - more early intervention so problems do not escalate - new school plans will help to ease issues around finding a suitable school/transport - provision for respite care - improved technology, such as access to iPads would better support home visits. • Improved ways for recording non-verbal communication so voice of the child is directly captured.

Comments from the Head of Service

- As a directorate we are working on our recruitment strategy which we believe will improve recruitment and retention across all of our social work teams.
- Consideration is being given to locality-based working, linking workers within the social work team to our special schools in Crewe and Macclesfield. We have also started a piece of work with our colleagues within early help to integrate closer with the development of Family Hubs.
- We continue to develop our training offer with regards to non-verbal communication methods, for example one of our special schools has delivered Picture Exchange Communication (PECs) based training to the team. We have already developed sensory bags for social workers and family support workers to use and authorisation has been given to secure tablets to improve direct communication.
- Senior managers worked closely with the team to identify cases to close or step to other teams, for example short breaks, which is freeing additional capacity within the team. Policy work around visiting and reviews requirements will also help with additional capacity.
- The shortage of PAs is having an impact on our ability to deliver sufficient support to our children and families, whilst this is a national issue, we are working with the commissioning team to look at ways to make PA work more attractive to potential workers.
- Following the consultation on the closure of Cledford House, staff have now been informed of their new working bases, which has addressed some of the insecurity being experienced by some staff at the time of the visit. We are also currently looking at the IT needs of the team.

Children with Disabilities Short Breaks Team

Number of visits in last 12 months: three visits have taken place; May 2022 and November 2022 and at the end of March 2023 (feedback awaited).

What's working well?	What are we worried about?	What needs to happen / next steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork – passionate and efficient workers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - relationships are strong - good communication - team are well supported - homeworking/use of virtual technology works well • Support provided: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A graduated response to children aged 4+ is offered and open phonenumber to support parents/social workers takes pressure off other services e.g., ChECS. - Bespoke packages of support are offered • Feedback from parents and children is very positive as are relationships with families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team capacity/resource: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - providing sufficient overnight and residential provision, to support short breaks and respite care. - shortage of PAs – impact on packages of support - team feel work not always sufficiently recognised or rewarded - caseloads are high and team consistently busy, especially as children can remain with service for a long time - demand for support is rising - transition to adults' services can be a slow process - concern regarding pay rates for car users, many workers are using their cars daily. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment and retention: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - staffing structure to be reviewed to increase capacity and support wellbeing of existing staff - focused recruitment drive for foster carers to improve overnight/respite provision - improved residential provision to support short breaks - PAs to support capacity issues in the team • More streamlined transition to adults' services. • Review impact of car user mileage rates.
Comments from the Head of Service		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A focused recruitment of new short break foster carers has been taking place with the fostering team, we have been working with colleagues within our commissioning service to enhance our local short breaks residential support options and we are currently engaged in recruitment to expand the capacity within the short breaks service. We are also working with colleagues in early help to look at opportunities to reduce the number of cases allocated within the short breaks team. • A new full-time member of staff joined the team in November with significant personal and professional experience of disability, she was also former joint chair of our local Parent Carer Forum. • The recruitment, retention and recognition of PAs remains an issue for Cheshire East, as it does nationally. We are working with colleagues within adults' services to develop an all-age direct payments policy which may result in some of the recruitment and retention issues being addressed through an increase in our standard direct payment rate. And, in addition, we are working with colleagues across children's and adults' commissioning to look at ways of making recruitment of PAs more successful. It is worth noting that PAs are directly recruited by families and not the council. • The corporate car mileage policy is applied within this team, as it is in all children's social care teams. If staff are not eligible for regular car user allowance and receive occasional car user allowance, it would be because they have not met the threshold. Staff make fresh applications every year and the determination is made independently by HR. 		

Child in Need / Child Protection (CIN/CP)

Number of visits in last 12 months: five visits have taken place: three to Macclesfield – April and November 2022, and March 2023 (feedback awaited), and two to Crewe – June 2022 and January 2023, a further visit is planned to Crewe CiN/CP in April 2023.

What's working well?	What are we worried about?	What needs to happen / next steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork – committed workers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - continuity of social worker builds relationships with families - staff now more settled following team changes - team works well together - good range of experience - supportive managers - masterclasses and practice week positive in developing team working, improving performance, sharing ideas, boosting morale - split of work with the cared for team works well - team supportive of changes following COVID-19; being able to work from home allows flexibility and more productivity. • Retention of staff is good: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - agency staff choose to stay - students join following placements - supporting apprenticeships - 'Grow your own' initiative has resulted in six staff joining - progression routes for social workers are good • Multi-agency working <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - referral process working well, and multi-agency working is effective e.g., very positive relationship with SEND team - good partnership relationships/practices with police colleagues following their restructure after the JTAI - early help initiatives are well resourced and working well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team capacity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - staffing has been an issue, partly due to COVID-19 and self-isolation, recruitment remains a challenge, pay also has an impact - caseloads remain high and staff shortages do impact - there are still slight delays with court work - handing over tasks to other agencies can be difficult • Supporting families: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - COVID-19 did impact ways of working (although staff feel is no longer doing so) - still a need to look at impacts of COVID-19 for families, e.g., impact of alcohol use • cost-of-living crisis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increase in demand for mental health support for young people, and difficulty in accessing resources • Working arrangements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - time to complete admin tasks/issue of duplication - issues with the Unit 4 system - mileage rate not in keeping with increased petrol prices - concerns about the working environment during visit to Crewe in June - car allowance decision has been divisive and reduced team morale, particularly in Crewe - staff laptops are large and heavy, problematic now used more outside the office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment and retention: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - teams are small and ways of working to be innovative - sustaining good support for new social workers and agency staff - additional admin and family support workers would help in reducing workload - expertise of family support workers could have more impact if there was capacity - more protected time/days off - pay disparity with other LAs - consideration/revision of car allowance scheme and mileage costs to reflect increase in energy prices • Further develop partnership working: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - integrated front door service is valued and links are being developed further - early intervention is key and other agencies sometimes slow to make referrals - streamlining forms/ reviewing Liquid Logic functions to support partner and avoid repetition/data entry issues - regular case reviews are important for communicating progress – legal advice to be sought sooner if needed • Supporting assessments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increase partner understanding / use of screening tools - more educational psychologists would help
Comments from the Head of Service		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our workforce is our greatest resource, and it is important they know how valued they are by the whole council. The cost-of-living crisis is felt by our workforce as it is for our children and families. This makes it's so important that we are the employer of choice locally, providing a competitive salary as well as benefits aligned to other LAs (such as the car user allowance referenced by the team).. • Family support workers were brought into the team at Crewe to support practitioners until social work vacancies were filled. We have been creative with our offer and advertising as well as joining regional 		

job fairs. Some student social workers started with the team towards the end of last year, which is an excellent way to develop the workforce and often our best social workers start with us as students!

- The comments made regarding morale in Crewe were noted and since the time of the visit, there have been many opportunities for the workforce to share their views and we have taken action both big and small to listen to their voices and develop what is within our gift to lift this feeling. Children's Social Care Practice Week takes place each quarter to bring teams together to learn, reflect and focus on the work we are doing, this time masterclass events were shaped by staff creating a real sense of team spirit!
- In Macclesfield, demand into the service has increased over the last 12 months, and we have realigned staffing to meet this need. Retention of staff is a real positive and we believe the right support and culture is what has directly contributed to this.
- The points raised regarding an increase in the complexity of children's mental health is an area of priority for Cheshire East Safeguarding Children's Partnership which is focusing on the emotional health and well-being of children at a strategic level.
- The JTAI in July 2022 added a pressure and focus but equally a momentum and motivation across the entire partnership to recognise the importance of a collective response to children that require help and protection. Supporting children and families at the earliest opportunity prevents escalation to crisis and the development of the Family Hub model will have a positive impact on this.
- Recruitment continues to be a focus and we have regular meetings with HR colleagues which keeps the focus on recruitment, retention and addressing of any barriers. We also continue to work closely with HR regarding issues raised with the Unit 4 system, and this is escalated at a corporate level.

8. Implications

8.1. Legal

- 8.1.1. There are no specific legal implications but the programme of Councillor Frontline Visits to Safeguarding Teams demonstrates the Council's adherence to good practice.
- 8.1.2. We do also advise that all members who are undertaking the frontline visits complete or refresh the member GDPR training.

8.2. Finance

- 8.2.1. There are no financial implications of this report.

8.3. Policy

- 8.3.1. Councillors may raise issues from frontline visits that have policy implications. These would follow due process.

8.4. Equality

- 8.4.1. There are no equality implications.

8.5. Human Resources

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

8.6. Risk Management

- 8.6.1. If frontline social work teams are not able to carry out their role effectively to assess and manage risk to children, and provide appropriate intervention, there is a risk to the outcomes for our children including a potential risk of serious harm. The ability to carry this out effectively can often be linked to capacity and quality and therefore it is essential our councillors are cited and in touch with the work of our frontline teams.

8.7. Rural Communities

8.7.1. There are no direct implications for rural communities.

8.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

8.8.1. Frontline visits are part of our quality assurance framework, ensuring that services are equipped to meet the needs of children and young people.

8.9. Public Health

8.9.1. Carrying out visits virtually helped us to manage the risk of infection from COVID-19.

8.10. Climate Change

8.10.1. Carrying out visits virtually enabled us to reduce our carbon footprint.

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Louise Hurst, Head of Service: Children in Need and Child Protection - Louise.Hurst@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix 1: Councillor Frontline Safeguarding Team Visits Form Appendix 2: Guidance for Councillor Frontline Safeguarding Team Visits 2022
Background Papers:	None

Appendix 1:

COUNCILLOR FRONTLINE SAFEGUARDING TEAM VISITS FORM

Please read the 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.

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Appendix 2:



Guidance for Councillor Frontline Safeguarding Team Visits 2022

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 service 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

