

OPEN

Children and Families Committee

19 January 2026

Improvement Plan Progress Report

Report of: Dawn Godfrey, Executive Director, Children's Services

Report Reference No: CF/24/25-26

Ward(s) Affected: All

For Scrutiny

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report is part of our regular updates to committee on the progress of the Children's Services improvement plan. The improvement plan addresses the findings from the Ofsted inspection in February and March 2024.
- 2 This report also includes the findings from the councillor visits to frontline services which took place in November 2025. Councillor frontline visits enable councillors to have oversight of quality of practice and people's experiences of working for the council
- 3 The [findings on the third Ofsted monitoring visit](#) on cared for children and permanence were published on 13 November 2025.

Executive Summary

- 4 We are continuing to make progress in delivering our improvement plan, with 57% actions now complete. The third Ofsted monitoring visit confirmed that improvements are being made and recognised the significant investment in Children's Services and a strengthened commitment to Children's Services across the council.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children and Families Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the progress against the improvement plan.
2. Note the findings from the councillor visits to the fostering service and residential service in November 2025.
3. Note the findings from the third Ofsted monitoring visit on cared for children, planning and achieving permanence.

Background

- 5 Improvement governance arrangements are continuing to monitor progress against the plan and provide scrutiny and challenge monthly. Changes to the plan since the last report which have been agreed through these arrangements are included in Appendix 3 for transparency.

Progress against the improvement plan

- 6 The improvement plan at Appendix 2 was updated on 12 November 2025. Appendix 1 shows an overview of the RAG ratings for each action.

- 7 Key improvement activity which has taken place since the last update to committee includes:

- The practice standards have been revised and will be relaunched to ensure expectations on practice are clear to everyone.
- A new quality of practice framework is being developed. This will replace our quality assurance framework and will ensure we understand ourselves and develop our practice in relation to our audits and feedback from children, young people and families.
- Successful implementation of restorative practice as our practice model is critical to our sustained improvement, so we are partnering with L30 Relational Systems who specialise in working with Children's Services directorates to build a bespoke training programme. L30 Relational Systems are well regarded in the sector and recognised as experts in this field. This is anticipated to start in Q4 this year.
- The Housing Charter for care leavers aged 16-25 has been launched. The initiative aims to provide stable accommodation and tailored guidance to help young people transition confidently into independent adulthood. 13 registered providers have now signed up to the Charter and bi-monthly meetings are planned to share good practice, discuss issues and update on support available in line with the Charter commitments.
- To continue supporting the practice of our Designated Teachers we have hosted a 'New to Role' training session and we have rewritten our Personal Education Plan Quality Assurance documentation to refine our success criteria and guidance for schools.
- The refreshed recruitment campaign for children's social care was launched on 20 November - [Cheshire East TOGETHER for social work](#).

- 8 The third monitoring visit in October 2025 found that the senior leadership team is sharply focused on improving the quality of social work practice. There has been improvement in services since the inspection, such as in the quality of care plans, challenge from IROs, and oversight of all cared for children. It also found a number of strengths in practice, such as that children remain in the care of their wider family members when it is safe for them to do so, and most

children live with carers who understand and meet their needs well. Practice in some areas remains too inconsistent, which we know, and are continuing to focus on. The review of the practice standards, new quality of practice framework, and new improvement plan, will all support our improvement work moving forwards.

- 9 At the last committee meeting in November, councillors requested an independent view of progress from the Improvement Board Chair. The Director for Children's Services has confirmed that this update will be provided to policy and opposition briefings.

Findings from Councillor visits to frontline services

- 10 This report covers the findings from the third round of visits which took place in November to the Fostering Service and Residential Service.
- 11 The visits support councillors to understand:
- The quality of frontline practice
 - How we support teams to deliver good quality practice.
- 12 The findings are summarised below.
- 13 Strengths:
- Staff are child-focused. Young people's emotional needs are well understood and supported, including support to build/ maintain connections with people that are important to them.
 - Young people's feedback on the support they receive is very positive, and young people are achieving positive outcomes.
 - Children and young people benefit from kinship foster carers which means they remain within their wider families.
 - The Mockingbird model provides support to foster carers.
 - Referral schemes for foster carers are working well.
 - Access to LiquidLogic for residential teams has improved communication with social workers.
 - There is a positive culture within the residential service, staff feel listened to, valued, and empowered to make decisions. Staff wellbeing is prioritised. There is a strong training offer.
 - Managers are approachable. Management support and team relationships are strong.

14 Areas for development:

- Challenges with Unit4, and the time to recruit to roles, are impacting on recruitment and the ability to recruit bank staff to the residential service.
- Recruitment of foster carers is a challenge. Cheshire East is competing with private fostering agencies to attract foster carers.
- Ensuring we have the right support for kinship carers.
- Foster carer forums need to take place to provide support to foster carers, hear their views, and enable foster carers to develop peer networks.
- There has been instability in the fostering service which has impacted on capacity.

Consultation and Engagement

- 15 Practitioners' views on improvements are sought through the councillor frontline visits, sector led improvement programme work, Ofsted monitoring visits, and DfE progress reviews. The third Ofsted monitoring visit found that staff felt listened to and engaged in Cheshire East's improvement journey, and that there was a level of optimism and confidence across the workforce that things are getting better.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 16 Cheshire East Council's Children's Services received an inadequate judgement in the Ofsted inspection in 2024. 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 councillors 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/Governance

- 17 This is a further update report for the committee on the children's improvement plan. It is within the committee's remit to monitor improvement within the service and ensure compliance with the improvement notice served by the DfE.
- 18 Members of the committee therefore 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.
- 19 The recent Ofsted monitoring visit recognised that progress has been made in several areas identified in the improvement notice however, there are a number of areas which require further development and monitoring via the improvement plan.
- (a) The protection of vulnerable people is a council responsibility so continued regular oversight by members of the Children and Families Committee, alongside the overall approach to improving service provision, aligns with this obligation.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 20 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.
- 21 The overall funding was approved totalling £1.987m across the two financial years 2024/25 and 2025/26 with an additional £0.013m budget increasing the total budget to £2.000m.
- 22 The 2025/26 forecast at FR3 is £1.761m as detailed in the table, this reflects the current recruitment position. The combined 2 year costs of £2.305m is an overspend of £0.305m.

Expenditure Group	2025/26 Budget (Original Planned)	2025/26 Actuals End of October 25	2025/26 Forecast Total
Edge of Care Support Workers (5 FTE)	£208,100	£0	£0
Team Leader (2 FTE)	£133,434	£26,714	£70,624
QA Officer (1 FTE)	£66,717	£15,273	£59,800
Project Manager (grade 11) to lead 18-25 accommodation recommitment (1 FTE)	£66,717	£30,680	£35,591
Connected Care Assessor (2 FTE)	£114,702	£43,783	£103,944
Independent Reviewing Officer (2 FTE)	£133,434	£66,725	£151,339
Personal Advisor (3 FTE)	£124,860	£86,067	£131,806
2.00 FTE Agency Social Worker (initial plan 6.00 FTE Direct Employees)	£344,106	£81,075	£126,315
2.00 FTE Agency Team Managers	£0	£108,190	£180,333
Family Group Conference Support Worker (originally 4 FTE, increased to 6 FTE)	£166,480	£105,088	£287,491
Childrens Commissioning Event	£0	£186	£186
Children's Home for Children with Complex Mental Health Needs and Challenging Behaviour - design costs and programme document	£0	£-1,292	£-1,292
Head of Service - Integrated Front Door (1 FTE)	£0	£108,110	£172,503
Project Lead (1 FTE)	£0	£85,206	£85,206
Relationship Support Service	£0	£15,000	£15,000
Safeguarding Quality Assurance Manager (1 FTE)	£0	£69,048	£123,944
Service Manager - Children with Disabilities (1 FTE)	£0	£96,418	£134,278
Specialist Expert Support - External Consultant to work on Health programmes	£0	£54,416	£54,416
Childrens Staff Event	£0	£250	£250
Corporate Exc Workstream	£0	£0	£30,000
Grand Total	£1,358,550	£990,937	£1,761,734
Original improvement plan as agreed at full council in July 2024			
Amended item from the original improvement plan			
Additional items identified through improvement activity			

23 This position continues to be monitored through in-year forecast reporting.

24 The overspend has been offset by legitimate use of Grant Funding at FR3, in line with the grant conditions. Any budget shortfall in future years will be addressed as part of the 2026/27 Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Human Resources

25 HR are supporting improvement work and attend and report to each Improvement Board.

Risk Management

26 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.

Impact on other Committees

27 None.

Policy

	Commitment 2: Improving health and wellbeing	
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Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

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

Other Implications

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

Consultation

Name of Consultee	Post held	Date sent	Date returned
<i>Statutory Officer (or deputy):</i>			
Chris Benham	Director of Finance and Deputy S151 Officer	19/12/25	06/01/26
Kevin O'Keefe	Interim Director of Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer)	10/12/25	22/12/25
<i>Legal and Finance</i>			
Diane Green	Finance Manager	26/11/25	18/12/25
Tessa Williams	Interim Principal Child Care Lawyer (People Team)	26/11/25	03/12/25
<i>Other Consultees:</i>			
<i>Executive Directors/Directors</i>			
Dawn Godfrey	Executive Director, Children's Services	19/12/25	22/12/25

Vonni Gordon	Director of Quality, Partnerships and Commissioning	03/12/25	19/12/25
Access to Information			
Contact Officer:	Vonni Gordon, Director of Quality, Partnerships and Commissioning Vonni.Gordon@cheshireeast.gov.uk		
Appendices:	Appendix 1: RAG rating overview Appendix 2: Improvement Plan Appendix 3: Changes to improvement plan actions Appendix 4: Vital Signs Scorecard Appendix 5: Ofsted monitoring visit findings on cared for children and permanence		
Background Papers:	Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 10 November 2025 Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 15 September 2025 Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 9 June 2025 Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 7 April 2025 Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 13 January 2025 Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 11 November 2024 Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 16 September 2024 Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 16 July 2024 Report on the Ofsted inspection findings to the Children and Families Committee on 3 June 2024 Cheshire East's Ofsted Inspection Report published 16 May		

	<u>Ofsted ILACS Framework</u>
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