

OPEN

**Children and Families Committee**

**Monday, 16 September 2024**

**Improvement Plan Progress Update**

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**Report of: Andrea Stone, Director of Family Help and Children's Social Care**

**Report Reference No: CF/25/24-25**

**Ward(s) Affected: All wards**

**Purpose of Report**

- 1 This report updates committee on progress against the children's services improvement plan to address the findings from the Ofsted inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) conducted in February and March 2024.

**Executive Summary**

- 2 Cheshire East Council received an Ofsted inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) between 19 February – 8 March 2024. The inspection found our support to care leavers was inadequate, and all other areas required improvement.
- 3 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. As agreed at the Children and Families Committee on 3 June, committee will receive updates on progress against this plan at each meeting so it can scrutinise the impact on outcomes for children.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Children and Families Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the progress against the improvement plan.

## Background

- 4 The [improvement notice](#) (appendix 3) issued to Cheshire East Council was published on 12 August 2024. This outlines the actions required from the council. A refreshed multi-agency Improvement and Impact Board, which is independently chaired by our DfE Improvement Advisor, was stepped up in July 2024. The improvement plan is being monitored and scrutinised monthly by the board in line with the requirements of the improvement notice. The notice also outlines the monitoring activity that will be undertaken by the DfE.
- 5 The improvement plan was submitted to Ofsted and the DfE on 14 August 2024. Ahead of submission, small changes were made to some of the timescales within the plan, to the wording to 4 of the actions, and to the RAG rating system to make it easier to understand, to ensure that Ofsted and the DfE received the most accurate version of the plan. These have not changed the substance of the plan from the version received at Full Council. These changes are included within the plan at appendix 2. Any further required revisions or anticipated delays to the plan will be escalated to the Improvement Board and to Committee through their regular updates.
- 6 Two new documents have been developed to communicate the improvement plan to a wider audience; a plan on a page and a timeline of activity that will be delivered over each quarter. These are included within the improvement plan in appendix 2 at pages 8 and 9.
- 7 We are awaiting confirmation on when monitoring from Ofsted and the DfE will take place, and we will keep committee informed on these arrangements and their findings through these reports.

## Progress against the plan

- 8 The [report to committee on 3 June 2024](#) outlined the key improvements that had been put in place following the inspection. The improvement plan at appendix 2 includes updated RAG ratings and progress updates for each area as at 18 July 2024. Appendix 1 shows an overview of the ratings for each action and plan area.
- 9 Key improvement activity which has taken place since the last update on 3 June includes:
  - Establishing a monthly Director's Performance and Quality Clinic, with the first meeting held in July 2024, to ensure there is effective line of sight to frontline practice, and that senior managers within children's social care are held to account for performance and quality to drive improvements to services.
  - Establishing a Children's Services Strategic Quartet, which includes the council's Chief Executive, Executive Director of Children's Services, Leader and Deputy Leader, and Chair and Vice Chair of the Children and

Families Committee. This will ensure there is oversight of and accountability for children's outcomes from the senior members of the council.

- LGA corporate parenting training has been commissioned for members of the new multi-agency Corporate Parenting Strategic Board, and elected members on the Children and Families Committee and Cared for Children and Care Leavers Committee. This training will support senior leaders in their role as corporate parents and will provide a strong foundation for the new Corporate Parent Working Group in October 2024. This will be taking place over two sessions on 30 September, and 10 October, and members are asked to prioritise attendance at both these sessions.
- A multi-agency Corporate Parenting Strategic Board has been established and will meet for the first time on 2 October. Work is underway to develop workstreams to support this board and contribute to the delivery of our cared for and care leavers strategy.
- The programme for councillor visits to frontline services has been reviewed to strengthen oversight of the quality of services. This will be published on the members hub.
- The mandatory training plan for care leavers launched on 4 June and is being delivered via a series of away days to support the development of the team and shared understanding.
- The pathway plan was revised with young people and launched in May 2024. This has an improved focus on preparing for independence. Audits of cases in July showed that the changes to the pathway plan have strengthened the identification of risk and need.
- Care leaver hubs have opened in Crewe and Macclesfield. The hubs are a safe space for our young people to get help and support. A variety of support and activities are being provided through the hubs, including a monthly social event to bring care leavers together for a meal which they will cook and eat together, with an opportunity for them to share their views and shape services. Some of our most vulnerable young people are attending the hubs.
- The care leaver app, Junction 16+, is available to download on the Google Play Store.
- A care leaver health group has been established and commenced a piece of engagement work with care experienced young people around the care leaver health summary.

- We have increased management grip and senior leadership line of sight of young adults in unsuitable accommodation. All young people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, or in emergency accommodation are reviewed in weekly performance clinics and by the monthly risk management forum. Expectations on practice and frequency of visits has been reinforced with teams.
- We have established a director level project group for accommodation for cared for young people and care leavers, 16-25 years, to drive increased sufficiency.
- We have formalised our 21+ offer, which is now opt out rather than opt in, and a tracker is in place to ensure there is oversight of engagement with this cohort. Young adults will be contacted every 12 weeks to ensure they know support is available and to check that their needs have not changed.
- We are continuing to embed restorative practice – approximately 180 practitioners have been trained, and 15 in house trainers are being trained to deliver the model to ensure it is sustainable. From September the training will be delivered by our in-house trainers.
- We are continuing to provide masterclasses, short in-house training sessions for practitioners and managers on specific topics, e.g. frequency of visits, to support improved practice.
- Practice guidance has been updated to include the proforma for practitioners to use when recording visits, this has been briefed out to all staff. Dip samples have shown that the proforma is supporting better recording of visits.
- A bespoke leadership programme for all leaders in children's services has been commissioned to embed high support and high challenge across the whole directorate. The training will run in 3 cohorts for all children's managers. Cohort one received training in June and cohorts two and three will receive their training in September and January.
- Our in-house leadership and management programme for children's social care has been tailored around the inspection findings. Sessions have been provided on supervision, planning and cross-service working.
- Practice standards for IROs have been refreshed and IRO service development days are being held every 3 months to embed these.
- A Workforce Strategy Group has been stood up and will take place 6 weekly from September, focusing on workforce development, recruitment and retention, and staff wellbeing.

## **Impact for children and young people**

- 10 The vast majority of impact against the inspection findings is rated as red at this stage (for 13 of 17 sections – please see the RAG summary at appendix 1). This is where we would expect to be at this stage of our improvement journey.
- 11 Overall, audits show that the majority of practice requires improvement (70%), 10% were inadequate and 20% were good quality.
- 12 Six audits of work to support care leavers found that there has been improvement in relation to the inspection findings:
- In 5 of 6 of the audits, auditors felt the personal advisor (PA) knew young people well.
  - In 4 of 6 cases there was good evidence of visiting by PAs tailored to need and risk of the young person. There was evidence that where young people were in emergency accommodation visiting rates increased.
  - Recording was generally up to date, with the only exception being the audit graded inadequate.
  - There was extensive evidence for 5 young people of the work of the EET team.
- 13 We now have reassurance through the updated 21+ offer and tracker that the right young people are open to this service.
- 14 We are starting to see an impact on young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) as a result of the work of the EET team. NEET figures have consistently come down from 40.48% in January to 30.81% in June. There was a slight rise to 32.57% in July. Within this figure there are 20 young people who are NEET and able to work which equates to a figure of 10%. If we look at the same period last year, the figure for June 2023 was 39.61%.
- 15 There has been a significant improvement in the waiting times for therapeutic services delivered by Freedom from Torture who support the emotional health of some of our unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people (UASC). At the time of inspection waiting lists for counselling was 9-12 months and is currently now 3-6 months, with a response to referral in 1-2 weeks.

## **Risks/ key areas requiring improvement**

- 16 Accommodation for care leavers remains our most significant challenge and we have moved from having three young people in hotel accommodation at the time of the inspection to an average of 8 at the time of writing. For these young adults, we are also exceeding the statutory limit of 48 hours in hotel

accommodation. There is senior manager oversight for all these young people and safety plans and risk management plans are in place to support and protect them. Risks to young adults are now understood at all levels and action is being taken to mitigate these risks. The weekly meetings that we are having with Housing team managers are proving invaluable in making progress in these cases.

- 17 Due to service capacity, currently we are not able to allocate PAs at 16, and there are some 17 year olds who do not have a PA. This impacts on young people's ability to build relationships with their PAs. Three additional PAs have been recruited and are due to start within the next 4 weeks which will support with earlier allocation.
- 18 Management oversight and supervision remains a key area for improvement. We need to continue to focus on achieving compliance and improving our key performance measures.

### **Update on Recruitment**

- 19 The following roles were agreed by committee and full Council as additional capacity to support service improvements, starting from September onwards:
- Independent reviewing officers (IRO) x 2
  - Connected carer assessors x 2
  - Social worker x 6
  - Personal advisor (PA) x 3
  - Quality assurance officer x 1
  - Project manager to lead development of 18-25 accommodation x 1.
- 20 Three additional PAs have been recruited and are due to start within the next 4 weeks. We are likely to be out to advert or shortlisting by the date of committee for all the other roles with the exception of the 6 social worker roles. There is a rolling advert open for social workers, however we have previously had difficulty recruiting experienced practitioners, so we will be recruiting 4 agency social workers (which will be experienced workers) to enable us to gain experienced practitioners. Four agency workers have the same cost as 6 non-agency social workers over the same period. The workforce strategy group will be refreshing our advertising campaign and benchmarking with other local authorities to support us to attract experienced social workers moving forwards.

## Consultation and Engagement

- 21 We are continuing to work together with children, young people, young adults, parents/carers, staff, and partners to develop, deliver and evaluate improvements. Children, families and practitioners' views are actively sought through our audit process.
- 22 A #talktogether session was held in July on the improvement plan for all children's services staff. Communications have been shared with staff on the improvement plan and progress to date following the improvement plan being agreed at Full Council and submitted to the DfE and Ofsted. Regular progress updates will continue to be communicated to staff each quarter.

## Reasons for Recommendations

- 23 Cheshire East Council's children's services received an inadequate judgement from the Ofsted inspection. 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 members 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*

- 24 Members of the committee 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.

- 25 The protection of vulnerable people is a council responsibility. Continued regular oversight by members of the Childrens and Families Committee, alongside the overall approach to improving service provision, aligns with this obligation.

#### *Section 151 Officer/Finance*

- 26 The additional resources linked to the plan are expected to be starting during September 2024 or in April 2025 in line with the costed plan, therefore there are no costs incurred to date.
- 27 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.
- 28 Since the funding plan was agreed the first financial review of 2024/25 has been carried out, and as a result the Children and Families Directorate are forecasting an overspend at FR1.
- 29 This means that although the specific funding identified for the plan is available from the MTFS growth, that other costs in the directorate, and indeed the council as a whole, are forecast to exceed their budgets resulting in an overall overspend position.
- 30 In order to address the in year budget pressures services will be working to mitigate and reduce costs wherever possible, whilst prioritising essential activity such as delivery of the improvement plan.

#### *Policy*

A council which empowers and cares about people

Work together with residents and partners to support people and communities to be strong and resilient.

Protect and support our communities and safeguard children, adults at risk, and families from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Be the best Corporate Parents to our children in care.

Ensure all children have a high quality, enjoyable education that enables them to achieve their full potential



### *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion*

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

### *Human Resources*

- 32 Additional capacity has been requested to support the delivery of the improvement plan.

### *Risk Management*

- 33 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. The risk of failing to deliver the improvement plan has been added to the council's corporate risk register and this risk is monitored quarterly through the Corporate Policy Committee.

### *Rural Communities*

- 34 Vulnerable children and young people are present in all communities in Cheshire East.

### *Children and Young People including Cared for Children, care leavers and Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)*

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

### *Public Health*

- 36 Same as the implication above.

### *Climate Change*

- 37 There are no implications for climate change because of this report.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
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Appendices:	Appendix 1: RAG rating overview Appendix 2: Improvement Plan Appendix 3: Improvement Notice
Background Papers:	<a href="#">Report on the Improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 16 July 2024</a> <a href="#">Report on the Ofsted inspection findings to the Children and Families Committee on 3 June 2024</a> <a href="#">Cheshire East's Ofsted Inspection Report published 16 May</a> <a href="#">Ofsted ILACS Framework</a>