

OPEN

Children and Families Committee

7 April 2025

Improvement Plan Progress Update

Report of: Theresa Leavy, Executive Director of Children's Services

Report Reference No: CF/38/24-25

Ward(s) Affected: All wards

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report is part of our regular updates to committee on the progress of the children's services improvement plan.
- 2 The improvement plan addresses the findings from the inspection which 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.
- 3 This report also includes an update on the findings from the first Ofsted monitoring visit on the front door.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children and Families Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the progress against the improvement plan.
2. Note the findings from the Ofsted monitoring visit on the front door.

Background

Strengthened Improvement Arrangements

- 4 The first partnership oversight group took place in December and provided scrutiny and challenge around the progress of the improvement plan. As discussed at the last committee we identified the need to review

interdependencies and timescales for actions including any revised timescales which has now taken place and changes to the plan are included in appendix 3 for transparency. Committee particularly noted those actions that were delayed prior to these changes and the need to identify new dates which has now taken place as set out above.

- 5 Improvement governance arrangements are continuing to monitor progress against the plan monthly and agree the quality assurance activity required to demonstrate impact before actions are signed off as completed (green). Now these arrangements are established this has resulted in some actions being signed off as complete (20%). Each workstream contains a practitioner representative to ensure practitioners' views inform our developments and evaluation of improvements.
- 6 We have contacted authorities to explore suitable Sector Led Improvement Partner (SLIP) support and we are currently in discussions with the DfE to approve this with a plan to commence in April. The ask of the SLIP will be dependent on the nature of our existing improvement activity and will be a mixture of diagnostic, improvement and quality assurance to ensure the SLIP can contribute to the improvements already being progressed or provide independent QA to those completed providing a real strong evidence base that we can evidence impact. The key priority areas will include the following to take us to the end of 2025:
 - Care leavers – assurance activity around improvement work completed
 - The Designated Officer role (often referred to as LADO) - diagnostic and any required improvement activity and plans
 - Care planning and permanence - improvement capacity
 - Quality assurance (including family led decision making) – strengthen/improvement capacity around some key changes to practice
- 7 We are planning to start with assurance of the care leavers improvement work to test the impact of this in May 2025. This will provide us with independent assurance that the failings identified in the Ofsted inspection have been addressed through the actions taken and identify where impact is being achieved, or if further work and strengthening is still required. The additional areas for consideration will then support around what are the challenge areas, what is working well and has improved, areas where we can continue to improve, and will provide us with an independent evaluation which will support our understanding of the impact for children and their families. Furthermore, this activity will contribute to future monitoring visits. These areas of focus will also complement the wider improvements that are being undertaken to deliver a base build of the new locality model and the preparation for the delivery plans for the Children's wellbeing and schools bill implementation.

Ofsted Monitoring Visit

- 8 Our first Ofsted monitoring visit took place from 13-28 February 2025 on the front door. Two inspectors were onsite for two days. In advance of the visit, inspectors reviewed performance data, quality assurance reports, policies and procedures, and our self-evaluation to develop key lines of enquiry to test while onsite. While onsite, inspectors spent time in frontline teams with social workers and managers reviewing casework and reviewed over 50 cases during the visit.
- 9 The letter of findings from the first monitoring visit is not published, however all subsequent letters will be. The letter of findings will be available from 24 March and will be shared with members on this date.
- 10 The findings from the monitoring visit were:
- 11 **Leadership:**
- 12 Following the inspection in 2024, the pace of change had been slow and this had led to a further decline in performance
- Pace has accelerated with the introduction of the new leadership team, who have appropriately prioritised stabilising the workforce and getting the right support and systems in place
 - There is robust senior leader oversight of practice
- 13 Ofsted reflected we know ourselves and they hadn't identified anything we hadn't already told them
- Political alignment is strong
- 14 Staff are positive about change and say they have seen improvements since the inspection – Ofsted particularly commented the notable change in staff from the last inspection and they are with us on the improvement journey.
- 15 **Strengths within the Front Door:**
- Most contacts are timely, social workers understand risk and consider families' history in making decisions
 - Decisions are appropriate for most children
 - Risks are understood for children who go missing, are at risk of exploitation, or experience domestic abuse
 - Safety plans are put in place early to safeguard children

- Strategy meetings are well attended by partners and the outcomes of most are appropriate
- Most S47s are thorough and include the views of the child and family.
- The out of hours service (EDT) is appropriate and has been strengthened since the inspection.

16 **Areas for development with the Front Door:**

- Contacts vary in quality - time is spent seeking additional information which would not be needed if referrals were clearer. There were some cases where thresholds were not understood by referrers or clear about what the ask was
- The process for requesting partner information is cumbersome and can lead to delay for some children; inspectors saw plans were already in place to address this
- Decisions for children at the front door are not consistently shared with partners
- Consent is not always recorded consistently
- Minutes of strategy meetings don't consistently explain the rationale for decisions and who will do what, by when, to improve children's outcomes
- Assessments vary in quality and timeliness needs to improve. History, father and new partner's views need to be more fully considered
- Management oversight of assessments does not consistently identify areas that need to improve, e.g. including fathers' views.

17 The visit positively reflected the distance travelled since the inspection in February and March 2024. Where inspectors found issues, plans were already in place to address these. It was acknowledged that while the inspection is a very specific focus, significant other foundations have been secured to facilitate a whole system change and the level of work that has taken place to improve the conditions for success. We know we still have more to do, however this offers us reassurance that we have an accurate understanding of our services and that improvements were evidenced and are contributing to improved services for children, young people and families.

18 The next monitoring visit is expected to take place in June 2025 on child in need and child protection.

Progress against the improvement plan

19 The improvement plan at appendix 2 includes updated RAG ratings and progress updates for each area as of 13 February 2025. Appendix 1 shows an overview of the ratings for each action and the impact for each plan area.

- 20 Key improvement activity which has taken place since the [last update to committee on 13 January 2025](#) includes:
- Further enhanced line of sight is now in place through a monthly exceptions report which commenced in December and enables an update on all high-risk LADO notifications/ outcomes, Need to Knows (high-risk notifications), fostering exemptions, any unregistered placements, DOLs, SINs, Reg 40s etc. and enables the detail required and oversight by the directors with Heads of Service.
 - A new performance framework has been developed and was signed off on 18 December. The first formal Performance Board took place on 22 January under the new framework.
 - In line with our Quality Assurance Framework, Cheshire East launched practice observation week as part of a weeklong programme of partnership learning opportunities (3-7 February 2025). There are a range of practice opportunities being observed across the system by senior leaders. Councillors were also invited to participate in the week, replacing the previous programme of frontline member visits. This provides us with a rich opportunity to have a window into practice on the frontline; it enables us to learn from the good practice that exists in our system but also helps us to identify the barriers and challenges to good practice.
- 21 A family feedback strategy has been drafted and is being consulted on with families so we can do this in various ways and at various touch points of our involvement. The engagement work is also seeking to ensure strong systems to use the feedback to improve our services.
- 22 A quality assurance newsletter was introduced in January 2025 to share the learning from audit to highlight good practice and any areas we need to continue to strengthen. This also contains updates on new policies or practice guidance to ensure all our front-line staff are updated on best practice.
- 23 The care leaver ambassadors led the Care Leaver Local Offer Event, which was recognised as best practice, and we have been approached to share this approach with other local authorities. The ambassadors have gathered feedback from other care leavers about the Supported Accommodation recommission, supported work to develop the Junction 16+ app, reviewed and suggested improvements to pathway plans, and led activities at the Planning Your Future Events in Macclesfield and Crewe. One care leaver ambassador has been accepted on to the Cheshire Youth Commission and another has applied to be a national Care Leaver Voice Ambassador.
- 24 Collaborative work with Cheshire YMCA and Apollo Buckinghamshire UK has resulted in a pilot for the use of unutilised student accommodation to be used to accommodate and support a small number of asylum-seeking young people

over the age of 18 who do not yet have leave to remain. An initial group of young people moved into Apollo accommodation in December 2024 and have settled well. We are now in the process of signing contracts for an expansion of this scheme through 2025.

25 We have recruited to a dedicated resource to support young adults aged 21+, a 21+ coordinator, who started in December. This will support us to provide a consistent response to all our young adults.

26 We are introducing a specific team to manage court work. This will improve the quality of planning for children within the court arena and should also improve the quality of practice for cared for children in long term care by releasing capacity within the cared for teams.

27 A new early help strategy has been drafted and is open for consultation.

Impact for children and young people

28 The Ofsted monitoring visit found that improvements have been made since the inspection in February and March 2025, and that staff at all levels are committed to making improvements.

29 There continues to be a significant amount of collaboration with families, staff and partners in delivering improvements. This includes opportunities for all our staff to be connected to various working groups and be part of driving service improvement. To be able to evidence the impact of this for our children and families we have further enhanced how we seek feedback in audit to ensure this is more consistent and will feed into the workforce reference groups.

30 Within this financial year we have approved 8 mainstream households, which is a significant increase on the previous year where we approved 5 by the end of March 2025. The service is confident that by the end of the financial year we will have 11 households approved. Year to date conversion to expressions of interest (EOI) has increased to 27.61%. The EOI's that received have been thorough and with suitable candidates who are aware of the benefits of working for Cheshire East.

31 Our audits demonstrate that we need to improve the quality and timeliness of recording, and we will be providing lunchtime learning sessions on a range of best practice topics including this area. A plan of activity is commencing in April.

Child and Family Feedback

32 A participation event with care leavers was held to enable care experienced young people to provide their views on their pathway plans and their pathway plan reviews. Rich information was provided by our care leavers as to what they liked about the new pathway plan, how it could be improved further and what would support them to attend their reviews in person. The recommendations

provided by this group will shape future service delivery in this area. A selection of their feedback is shown below:

“The pathway plan is not as complex, it is easier to understand”

“It offers up opportunities for your future”

“It could still be simplified further – less headings, combining areas so it isn’t as long”

“Give young people incentives to join their reviews.”

Continued work is also taking place through our Safeguarding Partnerships engagement officer to develop a reference group of children and families to test and challenge how the commitment and priority of “feel and be safe” as part of the children and young people's plan is being delivered. This is also being driven by a young person champion who reports into the CYP’s Trust where the priorities are overseen.

Engagement work is also being finalised for a specific area of improvement relating to the developments of the Child Protection Plans. In the ILACS inspection it was noted that plans were not clear or easily digestible for families to understand. Therefore, significant work has been taking place to co-design a new template which we are now aiming to build into the children’s recording system (LL).

Risks/ key areas requiring improvement

- 33 Management oversight and supervision remains a key area for improvement to facilitate a good line of sight to the practice and will drive the quality of work, which our enhanced performance oversight will further support. Additional work has also taken place with the PSW and Improvement Director to understand some of the barriers to support improvements in this work. Some training remains outstanding for some managers and is being prioritised through April and May. Quality Assurance will then review and monitor progress

Update on Recruitment

- 34 The following roles were agreed by committee and full Council as additional capacity to support service improvements, starting from September onwards:

<u>Roles</u>	<u>Update</u>
Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) x 2	One post had been recruited to permanently, however this postholder has now resigned. This post has now gone out for agency cover while we try to secure a permanent position. The second role is covered by agency.
Connected carer assessors x 2	We have appointed to one post. The other post was re advertised and interviews were held in February 2025.
Social worker x 6	As outlined in the previous report to committee, 4 agency social workers have been appointed into Macclesfield and Crewe within

	Children in Need and Child Protection as these are experienced workers. This is the same cost as 6 non-agency social workers. However, as part of the workforce strategy, we have now also recruited 8 international social workers commencing in April and converted 3 agency staff to permanent contracts.
PAs x 3	Recruited 3 additional staff on an agency basis, however, due to turnover within the service they are now no longer additional capacity and additional resource is being sourced through recruitment agencies.
Quality Assurance Officer	This post started on 3 December 2024. The postholder has since resigned so will be going back out to advert
Project Manager to lead development of 18-25 accommodation	Internal secondment appointed on 1 July to enable work on this area to start immediately. Post funded by the service until 1 September.
Family Group Conferencing Leads x 2	Appointed starting 1 April 2025.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 35 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

- 36 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.
- 37 The protection of vulnerable people is a council responsibility. Continued regular oversight by members of the Children’s and Families Committee, alongside the overall approach to improving service provision, aligns with this obligation.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 38 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.
- 39 Below is the summary of the planned expenditure for 2024/25, the spend to date, and the forecast costs for 2024/25.
- 40 The overall funding was approved totalling £1.987m across the 2 financial years 2024/25 and 2025/26. As shown in the below table the forecast overspend for 2024/25 is £7k. If there is an overspend in 2024/25 then this will need to be addressed either through reduced expenditure in 2025/26, or identification of additional funding in 2025/26.

Expenditure	Values			
	2024/25 Budget (Original Planned)	Spend to End of Feb 25	2024/25 Forecast Total Spend	2024/25 Variance
4.00 FTE Agency Social Worker (initial plan 6.00 FTE Direct Employees)	£213,637	£117,474	£160,065	£53,571
Connected Care Assessor	£71,212	£0	£10,173	£61,039
Independent Reviewing Officer	£82,842	£66,320	£82,863	£22
Personal Advisor	£77,518	£0	£14,765	£62,753
Project Manager (grade 11) to lead 18-25 accommodation recommitment	£41,421	£37,335	£43,403	£1,982
QA Officer	£41,421	£18,080	£23,997	£17,423
Specialist Expert Support	£100,000	£0	£0	£100,000
Head of Service - Integrated Front Door	£0	£47,940	£65,062	£65,062
Specialist Expert Support - Dorset Council Peer Review of Front Door	£0	£5,931	£5,931	£5,931
Specialist Expert Support - External Consultant to work on Health programmes	£0	£14,420	£29,599	£29,599
Executive Assistant to the Improvement Programme	£0	£675	£675	£675
Additional Pre Proceedings and Court Work Manager	£0	£0	£25,000	£25,000
Service Manager - Children with Disabilities	£0	£41,774	£56,666	£56,666
Strengths Finder licences	£0	£0	£5,000	£5,000
Project Lead	£0	£45,019	£62,883	£62,883
Safeguarding Quality Assurance Manager	£0	£0	£18,733	£18,733
Relationship Support Service	£0	£0	£15,000	£15,000
Children's Home for Children with Complex Mental Health Needs and Challenging Behaviour - design costs and programme document	£0	£0	£15,720	£15,720
Grand Total	£628,050	£394,968	£635,536	£7,487

Original improvement plan
 Original plan item replaced
 Updated 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

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

Human Resources

- 42 Additional capacity has been requested to support the delivery of the improvement plan and an update on this is included within the body of the report. HR are supporting the improvement work, and a workforce strategy has been developed.

Risk Management

- 43 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

- 44 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)

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

Public Health

46 Same as the implication above.

Climate Change

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

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Lisa Davies, Interim Director for Improvement, Children's Services Lisa.davies@cheshireeast.gov.uk
Appendices:	Appendix 1: RAG rating overview Appendix 2: Improvement Plan Appendix 3: Changes to improvement plan actions
Background Papers:	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 Ofsted ILACS Framework