

24 March 2025

Theresa Leavy
Interim Executive Director of Children's Services
Middlewich Road
Sandbach
CW11 1HZ

Dear Theresa

Monitoring visit to Cheshire East children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Cheshire East children's services on 27 and 28 February 2025. This was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Teresa Godfrey and Rachel Griffiths.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The receipt and response to contacts and referrals, including the process by which children and families are 'stepped up' from early help to statutory social work.
- The involvement of multi-agency partners in decision-making.
- Child protection enquiries, including the quality of strategy discussions and section 47 enquiries.
- Child and family assessments.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Following the last inspection, there were significant changes in the senior leadership team. The departure of the director of family help and children's social care and the executive director of children's services, alongside changes in political leadership around this time, resulted in a period of instability. This was compounded by insufficient financial support for children's services and resulted in insufficient focus on improvement activity for services to children. Since the new interim leaders

started in post in autumn 2024, the pace of change has accelerated and appropriate steps have been taken to improve the quality of social work practice.

There are now robust governance arrangements in place to support oversight of progress in accordance with the revised improvement plan. Political support for the new senior leadership team is strong, and the children's services budget has been aligned to the new strategic priorities across the service. This investment has resulted in strengthened capacity across the service at a senior and frontline level.

Nevertheless, the quality of practice for children at the front door is inconsistent and some issues identified at the last inspection have not sufficiently improved. These include step up processes to children's social work teams, the role of partners in decision-making for children, and the recording of strategy meetings.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Most contacts to Cheshire East Consultation Service (ChECS) are made in a timely way and are promptly triaged by managers. Contacts vary in quality. Most do not clearly indicate what is being requested for children and their families. This creates additional work for staff at the front door as they seek further clarity and information to inform next steps.

For most children receiving early help support whose circumstances do not improve, prompt contacts are made to ChECS. This is an improvement since the last inspection. Nevertheless, the quality of these contacts is poor and the step-up process is not as streamlined as it should be.

For some children, contacts are inappropriate and do not meet thresholds for statutory intervention. This includes a significant number of contacts from the police. This indicates a lack of partner understanding of thresholds and the role and remit of children's social care. As a result, some children experience short delays in having their needs assessed and addressed.

Screening activity in ChECS is completed promptly and appropriately by experienced social workers and practice support officers. For contacts relating to children who go missing from care, or who are at risk of exploitation, social workers demonstrate an understanding of these risks and make appropriate recommendations to support children who may be at risk of harm.

The response to contacts relating to domestic abuse is mostly effective. Victims of domestic abuse receive sensitive and helpful independent support, and social workers understand the impact of domestic abuse on adults and children.

Family history and previous involvement with services are routinely collated by staff in ChECS. Issues relating to parental consent are understood and managed appropriately but are not consistently recorded. Partner agency information is sought

to inform recommendations. However, the process whereby social workers request partner information is time-consuming, burdensome and leads to short delays for some children. Leaders are aware of this and are in the process of simplifying the process.

The multi-agency partnership is not routinely included in social care decisions about next steps, and they are not consistently made aware of the outcome of referrals. This was also the case at the last inspection. Senior leaders are well sighted on this issue and this is part of their improvement planning towards the development of an integrated front door.

There is robust management oversight in ChECS and, for most children, outcomes are appropriate and in line with levels of need or risk. When it is established that the threshold for social work intervention has been met, children's cases are progressed to the operational teams for a strategy meeting or social work assessment without delay. Leaders have taken action to improve practice in this area.

For most children, when there are significant and immediate concerns about risks, these are recognised promptly, and strategy meetings usually happen quickly. Strategy meetings are well attended by key partners, who share information and contribute appropriately to decision-making. In most circumstances, the outcome of strategy meetings is appropriate and results in appropriate action being taken to safeguard children. However, the minutes of these meetings do not consistently capture the discussion about risk, which means that the rationale for decisions made to safeguard children is not always clear.

For most children, Section 47 child protection investigations are thorough. They include the views of children, other professionals and parents. Most children are seen promptly by social workers, who seek to understand their circumstances and what they have experienced. Risks and strengths are identified and interim safety plans are put in place.

The responses to children's needs out of hours is proportionate and appropriate. There are effective handover arrangements in place with daytime services. This area of practice has been strengthened since the inspection.

The quality of assessments of children's needs is inconsistent. Stronger assessments are thorough, detailed and clearly outline and analyse risk to inform plans. For too many children, assessments do not properly evaluate historical risk factors or the cumulative impact that these have on children. Partner views are included in most assessments, but the views of fathers, new partners and the wider family network are not consistently considered. This means that, for some children, recommendations for next steps are made without an analysis of key information.

Children are usually seen promptly in order that social workers can get an early understanding of the issues affecting them. Direct work is undertaken by social

workers to inform assessments and to assist them in understanding what life is like for children. For most children, their individual needs, including their cultural and language needs are considered. Nonetheless, for too many children there are lengthy gaps between visits, and this impacts the quality of relationships.

For many children, social workers complete their assessments several weeks after their last visit to the family. This leads to delays in some children receiving the appropriate support through child-in-need planning. Most social workers have an understanding of the range of services available to children and families in Cheshire East. For some, but not all children, appropriate support is put in place during the assessment process despite these delays.

There is routine management oversight of assessments of children's needs. This level of oversight provides clear direction and rationale for recommended next steps, but it does not consistently identify any deficits in the assessment process or analysis of information. This means that for some children the quality of their assessment is weak, and practice is not sufficiently challenged by managers in order for it to improve.

There have been significant changes in senior leadership since the inspection in February and March 2024, when services to children were judged to be inadequate. The interim leadership team has quickly established a detailed and realistic view of the areas that require improvement. Leaders have welcomed external scrutiny and developed internal quality assurance processes to support improvement. As a result, leaders' self-assessment accurately reflects what was seen by inspectors during this visit. The interim executive director of children's services and her senior leadership team know that there is still much to do to ensure that children in Cheshire East receive consistently effective services.

At a strategic level, leaders understand the urgent necessity for the planned improvements to practice and have committed financially and publicly to supporting the detailed and wide-ranging improvement plan. This includes ensuring that there is additional capacity in the senior leadership team to drive improvement, and to develop quality assurance activity across the service. It also includes addressing long-standing issues in other council services, such as human resources and financial services, which can hinder the provision of effective and strong social work.

Senior leaders are well sighted on the significant practice issues in children's services and are laying strong foundations to enable the necessary improvements to be delivered. They understand that there is much more to do to improve the consistency and quality of practice. They are working to address these issues with determination and pace.

New systems and processes to monitor performance have been introduced. Leaders are aware that quality assurance activity is of variable quality. A new quality assurance framework has been launched recently, which includes the introduction of

routine collaborative auditing with practitioners and managers. It is too early to see the impact of this on practice and service improvement.

Social workers in the child-in-need and child protection teams have not consistently received supervision to support consistently good practice for children. A revised supervision policy and guidance document, alongside the rollout of mandatory reflective supervision training for all managers, has recently been launched. Senior managers are focused on ensuring that front line managers have the skills they need to deliver supervision that is strong enough to recognise and challenge ineffective social work practice with children and their families. Nevertheless, it is too soon to see the impact of this in practice or for children. Practitioners are positive about working in Cheshire East, where there has been increased engagement with staff in recent months. They reported increased visibility of the new senior leadership team and told inspectors that they were being involved in changes to the service and understood the direction of travel.

Workers and managers at the front door described a supportive working environment. They described challenging workloads but told inspectors that they have the time and support that they need to make the right decisions for children.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. Because this is the first monitoring visit to your local authority, we will not publish this letter on the Ofsted website. You may share this letter with others if you wish.

Yours sincerely

Teresa Godfrey
His Majesty's Inspector