

OPEN

Children and Families Committee

09 June 2025

Councillor Frontline Visits

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

Report Reference No: CF/13/25-26

Ward(s) Affected: All

Decision

Purpose of Report

- 1 This report proposes new arrangements for councillor visits to frontline children's social care services to strengthen councillor oversight of the impact of services on children's outcomes.
- 2 This report also provides the themes raised through the previous councillor frontline visits undertaken between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

Executive Summary

- 3 Councillors asked that the arrangements for councillor frontline visits were reviewed, strengthened, and reinstated to support effective oversight of practice and its impact on children's outcomes. It was noted that staff are expected to facilitate the regular Ofsted inspections, DfE progress reviews, SLIP involvement, practice Observations etc, and so consideration has been given how to ensure a balanced approach, preventing staff from being overwhelmed. This report therefore details new arrangements for these visits.
- 4 This report also provides the themes raised through the previous councillor frontline visits undertaken between 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 in response to a request at the last committee.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children and Families Committee is recommended to:

1. Approve the arrangements for councillor frontline visits as outlined in this report.

Background

Proposed new arrangements for councillor frontline visits

- 5 The following is proposed as the new arrangements for councillor frontline visits:
- 6 Frontline visits will be conducted to the following children's social care teams. This is a significant expansion of the previous arrangements and will ensure there is oversight of all key areas of practice over the year.

Area	Visit to	Visit in	Report to Committee
Cared for Children and Care Leavers	Court Team	July 2025	15 September 2025
	Cared for Teams		
	Care Leavers Teams		
Quality Assurance	Child Protection IROs	September 2025	10 November 2025
	Cared for IROs		
	SCIES		
	LADO & FGC		
Placements	Fostering Team &	November 2025	19 January 2026
	Residential Teams		
Family Help	North Family Help Teams	December 2025	16 February 2026
	South Family Help Teams		

Front Door	Front Door/Domestic Abuse Team	February 2026	13 April 2026
	Emergency Duty Team		
Children in Need and Child Protection (CINCP)	Macclesfield CINCP	April 2026	June 2026
	Crewe CINCP (including the Court team)		
	Children with Disabilities Team		

7 Visits will focus on:

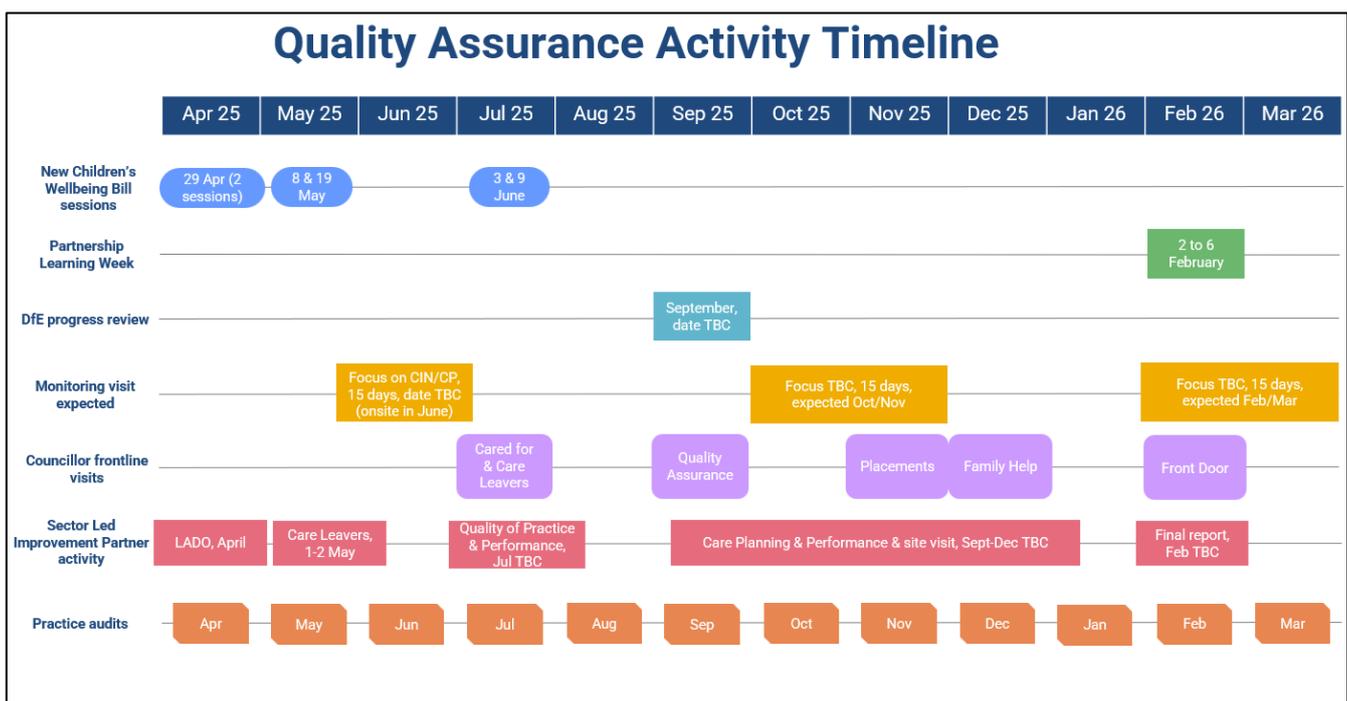
- The quality of frontline practice – what’s working well and current challenges.
- The support for our workforce to deliver good quality practice.

8 Each member of the two children’s committees will undertake one frontline visit per year as part of their role. One councillor will need to undertake 2 visits in the year, and for this we request a volunteer.

9 Each visit will be scheduled in advance for 2 1/2 hours in person and will consist of:

- A meeting with the service manager – the service manager will provide context on the service and an update on recent developments/ priorities (30 minutes).
- A meeting with a frontline practitioner within the team room. The practitioner will show an example of their work and will talk about their experiences working in the team (30 minutes).
- A meeting with a team manager within the team room. The team manager will discuss their work areas and responsibilities, there will be an opportunity to shadow their work, and they will talk about their experiences working in the team (30 minutes).
- A meeting with a focus group of practitioners (1 hour) to enable a good understanding of the service area, improvements to practice, staff morale and working conditions. This will allow for more questions to understand practice. Guidance and preparation will be provided beforehand for members prior to all visits.

- 10 This will mirror the approach taken by Ofsted inspectors, so will be another opportunity for practitioners and managers to speak about their work and how this makes a difference to children’s lives to people outside of their service.
- 11 Councillors will be provided with a set of areas to ask questions about (in line with Ofsted’s approach – Appendix 1), and a form to complete with their findings (Appendix 2). Councillors will receive a briefing on Teams ahead of their visit to ensure that they have all the information they need and to raise any questions in advance about the process.
- 12 Councillors will be asked to return their findings within one week of the visit. Councillors’ findings will be shared with the service manager and the head of service once received. A point of contact will be set up so should any issues arise during these visits from anyone involved in the process things can be addressed immediately. This will all be discussed in the pre-briefing sessions
- 13 Councillors’ findings will be reported to each committee as part of the improvement plan progress report. Councillors who conducted the visits for that period will have the opportunity to provide further context or information on their visit within committee if appropriate. If there are any findings that require a response from the head of service, this will be included as part of the report to committee.
- 14 This proposal provides oversight of all key service areas in a proportionate way, with regular updates on findings, and will allow us to schedule activity around other quality assurance activity where practice is reviewed to ensure services have appropriate capacity, for example



audits, DfE practice reviews, Ofsted monitoring visits, and sector led improvement partner work. Please see the above schedule.

- 15 Councillors will continue to be offered additional informal opportunities to meet with and speak to frontline children's services staff such as at open days and events, for example the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill sessions, practice weeks and STAR awards. Councillor frontline visits will complement this and provide a formal reporting structure demonstrating councillor oversight of practice.

Findings from Visits for 2023-24

- 16 A summary of the themes from frontline visits during the 12 months from April 2023 to the end of March 2024 is set out below for transparency following the request from councillors at the last committee. It is recognised that due to the time passed the findings may not reflect current practice.

- 17 Visits under the arrangements at this time only took place to the following service areas:

- Cheshire East Consultation Service (ChECS)
- Children in Need and Child Protection in Crewe
- Children in Need and Child Protection in Macclesfield
- Children with Disabilities Social Work Team
- Children with Disabilities Short Breaks Team.

- 18 Visits were paused over May and June 2023 due to the elections and subsequent changes to committee members.

- 19 Since July 2021 visits to the Children with Disabilities (CWD) service were split between the social work and short breaks teams. Following service structure changes, it was agreed in October 2023 that visits would include only the statutory CWD social work team.

- 20 Across all the visits, councillors noted the passionate commitment practitioners had for supporting our children and young people.

21 Cheshire East Consultation Service (ChECS):

- 22 One visit to ChECS took place in October 2023. Another was planned for February 2024 but was rearranged due to a clash with an additional committee meeting.

- 23 Areas of strength:

- Appropriate decision making for children.
- Effective multi-agency working.

- Timely decisions.
- Good management support and support from the team.
- Good team morale.

24 Areas for improvement:

- Communication with families could be improved.
- Staffing across the service is a challenge in delivering consistency of practice.
- Workloads can be high, sick leave and annual leave has an impact.
- Workloads can make it challenging to find time for training and development.
- The police moving out of Delamere House has had an impact on ease of information sharing.

25 Current service position in response to these findings:

- The areas of strength remain consistent as demonstrated through the Ofsted monitoring visit of the front door in February 2025 and Dorset's peer review in October 2024.
- Practice has improved; however, we are always looking to continue to improve communication with families and further work is required with partners. A project plan is in place to develop services in line with the findings from Dorset's review and actions are reported generally in the improvement plan updates.
- Staffing and stability within the service has improved; the team now has 10 social workers, 5 of which are agency. An advert for 5 permanent social workers is about to go live. Workloads are continually monitored.
- Staff have undertaken more training recently as a result of the improved staffing.
- Police presence in the office has increased to one day per week. We are planning to move to a MASH model and police presence will be considered as part of this development. This will improve partnership information sharing and joint working.

26 **Child in Need and Child Protection (CINCP):**

27 Three visits took place: two to Crewe CINCP in April and November 2023, and one to Macclesfield CINCP in November 2023. Another visit was planned for March 2024, but this needed to be rearranged due to councillor availability.

28 Areas of strength:

- Family support workers' direct work with families to gain their views.
- Practitioners are increasingly exploring the family network and using family arrangements rather than foster placements, so children can be placed with people who already know and care about them.
- Good management support and support from the team.
- More permanent staff has meant caseloads have reduced. The Step up to Social Work and apprenticeship schemes are working well. The retention of social workers is good.
- The training offer is good, especially practice weeks.

29 Areas for improvement:

- Chronologies are needed to support effective understanding of a child's experience and the risks to them, and timely decisions.
- The 'grow your own' initiative appears to be working but there does not seem to be any barrier to recruits leaving as soon as they are trained. Pay is less than neighbouring councils.
- Sometimes staff have to return home because there is no space to work.
- Staff would like to see the car salary sacrifice scheme reinstated for the whole team.

30 Current service position in response to these findings:

- The strengths observed have continued.
- Chronologies are an area we still need to improve on. Training on chronologies and genograms is part of our new lead practitioner training offer which launched in April 2025 to support improvement in this area.

31 Recruitment and retention continues to be a key focus, as we know this is vital in achieving consistently good practice. Work has been carried out to review our offer in line with neighbouring areas to ensure we are competitive, and further work is required to improve some of the HR process and systems. A business case has been requested to enable dedicated capacity to facilitate recruitment away from front line SW managers. We know the DfE progress review highlighted the need for corporate support to come alongside the pace of change required. We have also explored other avenues, such as international recruitment. Nationally, social work is an area where there is high attrition from the profession. We are targeting this through our workforce strategy, and with recruitment and retention initiatives. We are not currently seeing an issue with newly qualified apprentices leaving.

32 Office space is more of an issue in Crewe than Macclesfield, but workers are not currently having to return home due to a lack of available desks in either location.

33 There is a new car salary sacrifice scheme which is in place for all Cheshire East staff. The initiative offers employees the opportunity to drive an electric or hybrid vehicle through a salary sacrifice arrangement, providing a cost-effective and environmentally friendly alternative to traditional vehicles.

34 **Children with Disabilities Social Work Team (CWD)**

35 One visit to the children with disabilities team took place in July 2023. Another was planned for January 2024 but was cancelled.

36 Areas of strength:

- There is clear 'assess and release' criteria, so the team knows what it is achieving.
- Flexible working.

37 Areas for improvement:

- More technology/tools are needed to support communication with non-verbal children.
- Cases referred to the team which aren't within the team's remit.
- Staff retention, caseloads are too high.

38 Current service position in response to these findings:

- We are planning to move into a Children with Disabilities Hub model in line with the Children and Families Bill. This integrated, multi-agency hub will improve outcomes for children and young people by enhancing aspirations, promoting independence, and ensuring their safety.
- Cases have been reviewed and appropriately transferred to services such as CINCP and cared for teams. Caseloads are regularly reviewed, and Family Support Workers are now handling early help cases as part of the transition to the CWD Hub model.
- The team is fully staffed.

39 **Children with Disabilities Short Breaks Team**

40 One visit to the short breaks team took place in September 2023.

41 Areas of strength:

- The open phone line gives families a first port of call.
- Feedback from families is good.
- Early Help Individual Payments (EHIPs) save the council money and allow parents to take a short break from their caring responsibilities, supporting family resilience.
- Good team management, practitioners were happy with the supervision they receive.

42 Areas for improvement:

- Reduction in funding for short breaks providers has resulted in greater demand for early help individual payments (EHIPs) and consequently that funding has run out.
- The team is understaffed, and caseloads are high.
- Staff regularly choose not to attend training due to prioritising workload.
- There is no clear route for advancement to become, for example, a social worker.

43 The CWD short breaks team has now been integrated within our family help offer, so there is no longer a specific team as there was at the time of the visits. The merge of the service has eliminated the previously mentioned issues. EHIPs are also no longer in operation. A social worker apprenticeship programme is now available.

Consultation and Engagement

44 Councillors will have the opportunity to discuss this paper through the all committee briefing and during the committee meeting. Services have been consulted about the arrangements for the visits.

Reasons for Recommendations

45 Committee is asked to agree to these arrangements for frontline visits to ensure each member of the children's committees has oversight of the quality of frontline practice, and the support in place for our workforce. This will support councillors in their key role to drive improved outcomes for children and young people in Cheshire East.

46 This proposal provides oversight of all key service areas in a proportionate way, with regular updates on findings, and will allow us to schedule activity around other quality assurance activity where practice is reviewed to ensure services have appropriate capacity.

Other Options Considered

Option	Impact	Risk
Do nothing	Councillors will not have direct oversight of frontline practice	Councillors do not accurately understand which services are improving, and any barriers to improvement, making it difficult to support practice to improve as required

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal

- 47 There are no specific legal implications but the proposals for Councillor Frontline Visits demonstrates the Council's adherence to good practice and aligns to ongoing improvement.
- 48 It is important that confidentiality is maintained before, during and after such visits and all councillors who are undertaking the frontline visits must ensure they have completed the councillor relevant Data Protection and UKGDPR training.
- 49 In addition, whilst at this point in time councillors are not required to undertake DBS checks to participate in these activities, as they will be accompanied by a member of staff, they are encouraged to undertake DBS checks to enable them to effectively discharge other corporate parenting roles and comply with the recent government request for all elected members to have up to date DBS checks.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 50 There are no financial implications that require an amendment to the Medium-Term Financial Strategy as a result of the recommendations in this report.

Policy

- 51 If approved by committee the new arrangements for councillor frontline visits will be put into place from July 2025.

Commitment 1: Unlocking prosperity for all	Commitment 2: Improving health and wellbeing	Commitment 3: An effective and enabling council
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Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

52 There are no equality implications.

Human Resources

53 Previous feedback from staff is that frontline visits make them feel valued. However, we need to ensure that frontline visits are planned along with the other quality assurance activity that is taking place so that we are not creating additional burdens for frontline teams.

Risk Management

54 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.

Rural Communities

55 There are no direct implications for rural communities.

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

56 Frontline visits will support us to ensure that services are equipped to meet the needs of children and young people and achieve strong outcomes.

Public Health

57 The aim of frontline visits is to support improvements to services so that we can deliver strong outcomes for our most vulnerable children, young people, and young adults.

Climate Change

58 There are no direct implications for climate change.

Consultation

Name of Consultee	Post held	Date sent	Date returned
<i>Statutory Officer (or deputy):</i>			
Sal Khan	Interim Director of Finance, Deputy Section 151 Officer	21/05/25	23/05/25
Janet Witkowski	Acting Governance, Compliance and Monitoring Officer	21/05/25	25/05/25
<i>Legal and Finance</i>			
Diane Green	Children's Services Finance Manager	08/05/25	08/05/25
Janet Witowski	Acting Governance, Compliance and Monitoring Officer	08/05/25	15/05/25
<i>Other Consultees:</i>			
<i>Executive Directors/Directors</i>			
Claire Williamson	Acting Director of Children's Services	21/05/25	27/05/25

Access to Information

Contact Officer:	Lisa Davies Interim Improvement Director
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Appendices:	Appendix 1: Example questions for frontline visits Appendix 2: Form for frontline visits
Background Papers:	None.

Appendix 1

Example questions for frontline visits

For one-to-one meetings with frontline practitioners

1. Can you tell me about some work you are proud of?
2. What was the impact of your work on that child/ young person?
3. How do you assess or measure that your work has had an impact?
4. Tell me about how you involved and worked together with the child/ young person, and their parents/ carers
5. How did you try to understand the child/ young person's lived experience?
6. How did you manage the risk involved?
7. How were decisions made in the child/ young person's best interests?
8. How do you work collaboratively with other agencies?
9. What do you think the child/ young person, or the family would say about the work you're doing?

For one-to-one meetings with team managers

1. What improvements have you seen since the inspection?
2. How do you support good quality practice in your team?
3. How do you assess what impact your team is having on children and young people?
4. Tell me about how you understand children/ young people's lived experiences?
5. How do you make sure decisions are made in children/ young people's best interests?

For the focus group

On working in Cheshire East

1. What improvements have you seen since the inspection?
2. Thinking about how you work with children and young people, and improving their outcomes - what are your team's strengths?
3. What are the things that are getting in the way of achieving better outcomes? The things we need to change as an organisation.
4. What's your experience of working in Cheshire East – starting with what's good about working here?
5. What could be better about working in Cheshire East?
6. How are you supported to keep improving and developing your work?