

OPEN

Children and Families Committee

09 June 2025

Improvement Plan Progress Update

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

Report Reference No: CF/08/25-26

Ward(s) Affected: All

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.
- 2 The improvement plan addresses the findings from the Ofsted inspection in February and March 2024. The plan 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
 - the findings from a review by our sector led improvement partner (SLIP), North Tyneside, of improvements to services supporting care leavers, carried out during May 2025 and a summary of the LADO findings and actions being taken.
 - the findings from the DfE progress review in April 2025.

Executive Summary

- 4 We are continuing to make progress in delivering our improvement plan. 27% actions in the plan are now signed off as complete, which means we have been able to demonstrate impact or that measures have been achieved to the required level.

- 5 The SLIP has confirmed that the quality of practice has improved in relation to care leavers since the full inspection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children and Families Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the progress against the improvement plan.
2. Note the findings from the sector led improvement partner review of improvements to services for care leavers and the summary of the LADO and associated action plans.
3. Note the findings from the DfE progress review.

Background

- 6 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 by these arrangements are included in Appendix 3 for transparency.
- 7 We are expecting our second Ofsted monitoring visit on children in need and child protection in June 2025.

Progress against the improvement plan

- 8 The improvement plan at Appendix 2 includes updated RAG ratings and progress updates for each area as of 8 May 2025. Appendix 1 shows an overview of the RAG ratings for each action.
- 9 27% actions in the plan are now signed off as complete, which means we have been able to demonstrate impact or that measures have been achieved to the required level.
- 10 One action is delayed (S7b) as due to Ofsted availability, a registration visit has not yet taken place for Cherry Tree House. This was raised as an issue at the Improvement and Impact Board and the DfE advisor was also going to raise with Ofsted.
- 11 Key improvement activity which has taken place since the [last update to committee on 7 April 2025](#) includes:
- The family feedback strategy was received and agreed by the policies, procedure and practice group (PPP) in April 2025. This will ensure families have a variety of ways to provide feedback on our services, and that there is a feedback loop, so we learn and develop in response.
 - New corporate parenting workstreams 'Good Homes for All,' 'Good Health and Wellbeing' and 'Education and Skills' have taken place during

March and April and are ensuring there are action plans in place to develop our support in these areas. Care leaver ambassadors are part of the workstreams.

- Care leaver champions have now been launched. These champions will be members of staff across the council who will be supported to have expertise on the needs of care experienced young people so they can champion meeting our corporate parenting responsibilities within their areas. Communications have been cascaded to wider staff to recruit champions throughout April, including through management share and support sessions and team voice.
 - A mid-way Local Offer review will take place on 4 June where we will feedback what changes / support has been implemented in response to young people's feedback following the review in November 2024. Recommendations and feedback with financial implications have been shared and discussed at the Corporate Parenting Executive Board. £25 per month for leisure activities has been agreed for all care leavers who do not wish to have an everybody leisure pass and would prefer something different.
 - The neglect strategy was agreed at the Safeguarding Children Partnership Board in April 2025.
 - Work is underway to strengthen our audit process. The audit form has been updated, and a process for the responsibilities within the audit cycle has been completed. We have expanded our pool of auditors and moderators; from March 2025 we are undertaking between 15-20 audits each month. This will ensure going forward that there is broader oversight of current practice.
- 12 The lead practitioner training plan was launched in April 2025 to address our key areas for improvement from the monitoring visit and the inspection. The programme includes a mixture of lunch time sessions and master classes over a range of topics on:
- writing to the child
 - assessment skills
 - understanding a child's history and family (chronologies and genograms)
 - writing SMART and child focused plans.
 - strategy discussions
 - undertaking a s47 enquiry
 - contingency planning and safety planning
 - reflective supervision
 - collaborative audits

- family network toolkit.
- 13 The Family Group Conferencing (FGC) Service has been moved to sit under the Manager for the Child Protection (CP) Chairs Team. The remit of the team is to ensure FGC is provided to all those subject to CP and pre-proceedings in line with the Children's Wellbeing Bill. Further work is then being considered to look at what support we can offer prior to cases coming to conference under a family network approach.
 - 14 The first integrated front door governance Board took place in March and a project plan is in place to deliver service improvements and move to a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) model. This will improve partnership information sharing and decision-making.
 - 15 Apartments in a second accommodation block on the Apollo site are being readied and decorated with the involvement of the young people placed in the first cohort. This will increase our sufficiency for migrant young people.
 - 16 We are celebrating foster care fortnight over 12-25 May – shining a spotlight (with the help of a promotional video) on some of the great work of our foster carers, gaining insight into the importance of building relationships in the profession.

Sector Led Improvement Partner (SLIP) work on Care Leavers

- 17 Approval for Cheshire East Council to receive sector led improvement partner (SLIP) support from North Tyneside was granted by the DfE on 11 April 2025. North Tyneside were recently [rated as outstanding across the board by Ofsted in their last inspection in November 2024](#). This work will support our improvement journey through learning what works well in another area and will provide external evaluation of the improvements achieved to date.
- 18 North Tyneside completed a review in May of the improvements we had made to date to support care leavers . This included:
 - a review of documentation in advance such as strategies and offers we had implemented, including our improvement plan reporting on the actions, performance information and audit reports
 - meetings over teams with key leaders
 - two days onsite on 1 and 2 May with our care leaver service and Crewe care leaver hub
 - focus groups with partners, team managers, social workers and PAs
 - meetings with our care leaver ambassadors and participation lead
 - meetings with young people

- meetings with voluntary sector providers
 - review of 10 case files.
- 19 Some meetings with key leaders to understand how we fulfil our corporate parenting responsibilities had not yet taken place at the time of writing so additional findings on corporate parenting are expected by the end of May.
- 20 The findings of this review were very positive and provided good assurance to the progress and impact of the improvement work in this area of the service. These are detailed below.

Strengths

- Everyone was passionate about doing their best for young people – there was clear commitment and desire to improve young people’s life chances
- We know ourselves and the findings reflect what we said they would see
- Young people said the support they got from their PAs was good and they were very positive about the support provided through Pure Insights– one person said it was like “being in a second family.”
- The quality of practice and case recording has improved since the inspection:
 - There are some examples of excellent practice which can be used as guide for improving consistency of practice across the service
 - All cases had case notes in April, most were within the last week.
 - All young people had been visited in March or April 2025. 7 of the 10 were seen in April. There were excellent examples of statutory visits. There was variability in recording, but all visits contained the young person’s voice.
 - 9 of the 10 cases had an up-to-date pathway plan.
 - The voice of the child was clearly seen throughout all recording.
 - There was evidence of transition planning on case files.
 - Contextual safeguarding risks were identified and responded to appropriately.

- The reviewer was particularly impressed with the support given to young people to make or keep in contact with their families or connected people. This included separated young people for whom contact was supported through the Red Cross, and young people with long histories of abuse who were being supported with family contact as they reached adulthood.
- 9 of 10 cases had clear information about EET activity. For those who were not in EET, the involvement of the EET team and the support offered was clear.
- Management oversight was evident on case files. Almost all the cases had up to date supervision.
- Opportunity for IRO support for young people up to 21 years.
- The Care Leaver Ambassadors were clear about the opportunities they get to influence practice.
- The resources available for separated migrant children and young people were excellent.

Areas for development

- There is still variability in the quality of practice.
- Case summaries were not always up to date. Sometimes case summaries had a recent date of update, but the information was still old.
- When pathway plans are updated, they pull through information from the previous plan. Quality assurance activity is needed to ensure that plans are updated each time with new information.
- Supervision varies in quality and is an area for improvement.
- There was almost no evidence of quality assurance activity on the 10 cases selected. All quality assurance activity, including dip samples from the service manager, needs to be recorded on files.
- Practitioners were not clear about our practice model in Cheshire East – restorative practice.
- Pathway planning focused on the next six months rather than preparing young people for longer term adulthood

- Some people (practitioners, young people, and partners) did not know about the local offer for care leavers or the local offer app (Junction 16 Plus).
 - Other than Pure Insights and the YMCA, it was difficult to see the footprint of partner involvement on young people's records.
- 21 There are a number of recommendations from the review, and an action plan is being developed in response to ensure we continue to improve our services.

Sector Led Improvement Partner (SLIP) work on the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)

- 22 The LADO service was reviewed by the SLIP at our request as part of a service review. This included an audit of 10 exception cases during April 2025. These cases were selected due to a number of varying exceptions, including being held open for longer than expected.
- 23 The SLIP review found that whilst there was a prompt response from the LADO service, there were a number of areas that could be improved, including:
- Review and develop the contact/referral/advice and guidance pathways, so that the criteria for a LADO referral is better understood by partners.
 - Too many cases remain open with no clear rationale - review of all open cases required.
 - Develop a better system for management oversight, QA, tracking and reviewing.
 - Recording is too reliant upon email trails and requires greater analysis and clarity of outcomes.
- 24 An improvement plan has been developed that includes the following actions:
- Review the referral pathway and provide clarity for referrers and expectations of the LADO role on the LADO threshold criteria (WT 23); The review should consider an 'advice and guidance' pathway and the timeliness and content of the Allegation Management Meeting (AMM) /Risk Management Meeting (RMM) to ensure that threshold criteria and LADO outcomes are used, and meetings are timely.

- Ensure that AMM /RMM meetings and reviews are the mechanism used to agree threshold and actions; Analysis of information and LADO outcomes to be clearly recorded.
- Six weekly meetings with SCIEs, social care and fostering to ensure cases are progressing where we have other parallel processes running.
- Agree wording of advice and where this is recorded. LADO to be clear on own remit and what the role can and cannot do
- Review all open cases to ensure grounds are met to remain open and or the right action has been taken. AMM meetings to be main decision making and record of progress.
- Agree with Liquid Logic (LL) and Service areas points at which 'LADO involvement' prompt is in system and adjust forms.
- Produce clear QA framework for LADO, including management oversight, supervision, multi-agency audit, peer reviews, reporting to CЕСSР and DCS/Chief Executive.

DfE Progress Review

25 The DfE completed a progress review on 10 April 2025. This is part of the requirements of our improvement notice. The review evaluates Cheshire East's progress and challenges in relation to the inspection findings. The findings are summarised below:

Strengths

- Overall, the pace of improvement in the past 6 months has accelerated, acknowledging the limited progress made in the first few months after the inspection report was published.
- The council, across all layers, knows itself better than it did previously. There is now a much more consistent understanding of the strengths and challenges in relation to children's services.
- There is significant political and corporate commitment to children, young people and families, for example through "right-sizing" the budget for children's services despite financial pressures across the council, and through dedicated task and finish groups of officers and councillors.
- The interim leadership team has brought a robust approach to service improvement and there is some evidence of the positive impact this is having on the quality of practice.

- Most frontline practitioners and managers were positive about the training they were receiving, for example the recent reflective supervision training and the impact this was starting to have on the quality of supervision.
- Morale was mostly positive and staff were receptive to, and engaged with, the improvement journey.
- There has been a strong focus on putting in place the supporting infrastructure for the Safeguarding Children Partnership, including basic structures, governance, systems and plans and this has progressed at considerable pace.

Areas for development

- Corporately, there have been improvements in the support delivered to children's services but there is more to do to reflect the urgent nature of improvements required. At times, the pace of change in children's services can be negatively impacted by the pace of change across the council and cumbersome systems and processes. An example includes the limited progress made in relation to recruitment and onboarding of key posts across children's services.
- Practice remains variable across the service, and this continues to be a focus for leaders.
- More work needs to be done to embed restorative practice consistently, including updating forms within the child's record to reflect this approach.
- High workloads and recruitment challenges were raised by staff as a barrier to improvement.
- Leaders should reflect on communication and engagement with staff to ensure clear and consistent messaging and to allay worries whilst keeping them updated with important information. There were some positive examples where this has worked well, such as the recent events on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. It is crucial that the Council sensitively manages the transition from the current interim Executive DCS to the newly appointed, permanent Executive DCS.
- The Safeguarding Children Partnership might benefit from further reviewing its scrutiny arrangements, in particular how the Independent Scrutineer can be best utilised.

Impact for children and young people

- 26 The SLIP and DfE reviews found that improvements have been made since the inspection, and that staff at all levels are committed to making improvements.
- 27 Our care leaver ambassadors continue to be involved in shaping services and have recently delivered training to frontline practitioners about the importance of relationships, presented at committee, supported the recruitment of PAs and senior managers across the council including the new DCS, Director of Children's Social Care and Director of QA and Commissioning, fed back ideas about sufficiency, independence packs, and writing to the child. They are also planning for the local offer review event in June 2025.

Child and Family Feedback

- 28 Young people participated in the SLIP review and provided feedback on their experiences. The feedback from all the young people the SLIP team spoke to was that the support they got from PAs was good. Young people did not like changes in their PAs, and some relationships were better than others. Feedback on the commissioned volunteer resources was very positive, particularly for Pure Insights. One young person said their support was like “being in a second family”. Volunteer mentors were also appreciated – young people like that people are supporting them because they want to and not for pay.
- 29 Care Leaver Ambassadors have joined the corporate parenting workstreams and attended to represent the voices and experiences of children and young people who are care experienced. So far young people have attended “Good Homes for All” and “Good Health and Wellbeing”. Through the relationships built in Good Homes for All, other professionals from Housing have agreed to support the delivery of the new coproduced pilot project to embed the improvements to Independence Packs.

Update on Recruitment

- 30 Additional posts were agreed by committee and full Council as additional capacity to support service improvements for 18 months, starting from September 2025. It is recognised that after the 18-month funding period has expired we will need to remain within the original establishment. An updated position on those posts which were not filled is provided below.

<u>Roles</u>	<u>Update</u>
Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) x 2	Both roles are currently covered by agency. The roles are about to be advertised for permanent recruitment.

Connected carer assessors x 2	One post holder commenced in February 2025. The other post was re advertised, and we appointed, with a start date of 12 May 2025.
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. We are currently about to go live with adverts for 2 permanent PAs. One agency PA is converting to permanent which is very positive.
Quality Assurance Officer	This post started on 3 December 2024, but the postholder since resigned. This post will have been recruited to on an interim basis while permanent recruitment is undertaken. The interim postholder will start at the end of May 2025.

Consultation and Engagement

- 31 Staff, stakeholders and young people are consulted on the impact of improvements through the DfE and SLIP reviews. There are opportunities for staff and young people to be involved in shaping services through the practitioner forum and participation team.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 32 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/Governance

- 33 This is a further update report for the committee on the Childrens Improvement Plan. It is within the committee remit to monitor improvement within the service and ensure compliance with the improvement notice served by the DfE.
- 34 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.
- 35 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

- 36 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.
- 37 The overall funding was approved totalling £1.987m across the 2 financial years 2024/25 and 2025/26.
- 38 In summary of the outturn spend 2024/25, the planned expenditure for 2025/26, and the forecast costs for 2025/26 is shown in the below table.
- 39 The outturn for 2024/25 is an underspend of £0.1m. As at 1st April 2025 the forecast for 2025/26 is an overspend of £0.9m. The combined two-year forecast is £2.8m an overspend of £0.8m by March 2026. This overspend will need to be addressed either through reduced expenditure, or identification of additional funding in year.

Expenditure	2024/25 Budget (Original Planned)	2024/25 Outturn	2024/25 Variance	2025/26 Budget (Original Planned) Budget	2025/26 Forecast	2025/26 Variance	2 Year 2024/26 Forecast Spend	2 Year 2024/26 Forecast Variance
4.00 FTE Agency Social Worker (initial plan 6.00 FTE Direct Employees)	£213,637	144,426	-£69,210	£344,106	£326,465	-£17,641	470,891	86,851
Connected Care Assessor	£71,212	-	-£71,212	£114,702	£126,800	£12,098	126,800	59,114
Independent Reviewing Officer	£82,842	79,522	-£3,320	£133,434	£162,788	£29,354	242,310	26,035
Personal Advisor	£77,518	12,187	-£65,331	£124,860	£138,477	£13,617	150,664	51,714
Project Manager (grade 11) to lead 18-25 accommodation recommitment	£41,421	43,467	£2,047	£66,717	£73,665	£6,948	117,132	8,995
QA Officer	£41,421	19,766	-£21,654	£66,717	£73,665	£6,948	93,431	14,706
Specialist Expert Support	£100,000	-	-£100,000	£0	£0	£0	-	100,000
Head of Service - Integrated Front Door	£0	65,747	£65,747	£0	£169,032	£169,032	234,779	234,779
Specialist Expert Support - Dorset Council Peer Review of Front Door	£0	5,931	£5,931	£0	£0	£0	5,931	5,931
Specialist Expert Support - External Consultant to work on Health programmes	£0	27,170	£27,170	£0	£0	£0	27,170	27,170
Executive Assistant to the Improvement Programme	£0	675	£675	£0	£0	£0	675	675
Additional Pre Proceedings and Court Work Manager	£0	-	£0	£0	£0	£0	-	-
Service Manager - Children with Disabilities	£0	53,995	£53,995	£0	£150,816	£150,816	204,811	204,811
Strengths Finder - licences	£0	-	£0	£0	£0	£0	-	-
Project Lead	£0	63,598	£63,598	£0	£173,270	£173,270	236,868	236,868
Safeguarding Quality Assurance Manager	£0	8,743	£8,743	£0	£144,101	£144,101	152,843	152,843
Relationship Support Service	£0	-	£0	£0	£15,000	£15,000	15,000	15,000
Children's Home for Children with Complex Mental Health Needs and Challenging Behaviour - design costs and programme document	£0	18,700	£18,700	£0	£0	£0	18,700	18,700
Specialist Capital Consultant	£0	-	£0	£0	£9,000	£9,000	9,000	9,000
Grand Total	£628,050	543,928	-£84,122	£1,358,550	£2,218,159	£859,609	2,762,086	775,487

Original improvement plan	
Original plan item replaced	
Updated plan	

Human Resources

- 40 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

- 41 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

- 42 None.

Policy

- 43

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

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

Other Implications

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

46 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	16/05/25	23/05/25
Janet Witkowski	Acting Governance, Compliance and Monitoring Officer	16/05/25	22/05/25
<i>Legal and Finance</i>			
Diane Green	Finance Manager - Children's Services	09/05/25	15/05/25
<i>Other Consultees:</i>			
<i>Executive Directors/Directors</i>			
Lisa Davies	Improvement Director	09/05/25	19/05/25

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	<p>Lisa Davies, Interim Director for Improvement, Children's Services</p> <p>Lisa.davies@cheshireeast.gov.uk</p>
Appendices:	<p>Appendix 1: RAG rating overview</p> <p>Appendix 2: Improvement Plan</p> <p>Appendix 3: Changes to improvement plan actions</p> <p>Appendix 4: Vital Signs Scorecard</p>
Background Papers:	<p>Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 7 April 2025</p> <p>Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 13 January 2025</p> <p>Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 11 November 2024</p> <p>Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 16 September 2024</p> <p>Report on the improvement plan to the Children and Families Committee on 16 July 2024</p> <p>Report on the Ofsted inspection findings to the Children and Families Committee on 3 June 2024</p> <p>Cheshire East's Ofsted Inspection Report published 16 May</p> <p>Ofsted ILACS Framework</p>