

OPEN

Children and Families Committee

Monday, 11 November 2024

Improvement Plan Progress Update

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

Report Reference No: CF/31/24-25

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 Our Improvement Plan was submitted to Ofsted within the required timescales and we received feedback from them on our improvement plan in September. Ofsted said “Your action plan is detailed and addresses the areas for improvement identified in the inspection. It also demonstrates engagement with partners and the wider council.” To strengthen our plan, Ofsted suggested that we include specific actions in each area on how we will coproduce improvements with children and young people. We have included additional actions on coproduction in the plan in line with their feedback (appendix 2) and have sent an updated version back to Ofsted.
- 5 We are now aware that our monitoring visit from Ofsted will take place in December, and we will keep committee informed on these arrangements once dates are confirmed and their findings through these reports.

Strengthened Improvement Arrangements

- 6 The Director for Improvement joined Cheshire East on the 30 September and will be overseeing progress and updates against the improvement plan going forward. As part of this work, the process of scrutiny and challenge to the plan has been reviewed and strengthened. New governance arrangements are now in place to support this going forward. As a result, it will be necessary for us to review some of the actions previously graded completed (Green) to enable a more robust sign off. We have introduced a new rating of Amber E for actions that require us to embed and evidence impact (appendix 1). All actions previously marked as completed have now been moved to Amber E to show that they are being tested to ensure they have had the intended impact and are embedded changes before we move them to completed. All the impact sections have now moved to Grey to show that it is too early to evidence impact. Impact of improvement work requires time, so impact ratings will only move to Red if impact is not achieved within six months of the actions turning Amber E.

Colour	Action Definition	Impact Definition
Grey	Not started yet	Too early to measure impact
Red	Not on track	No impact or very limited impact / improving outcomes for a few children and young people
Amber	On track to be completed within timescales	Some positive impact but this is variable and does not consistently improve outcomes for children and young people
Amber E	Completed but we need to embed and evidence impact	
Green	Completed and embedded with evidence of impact	Positive and consistent impact which delivers improved outcomes for children and young people

- 7 As part of the new governance arrangements, all new policies, procedures, and strategies developed as part of the plan will be quality assured and signed off by the Quality Assurance Service acting as independent scrutiny and challenge. This will give additional assurance to committee that work evidenced as completed has had the right level of scrutiny prior to implementation and provides confidence to the service that they are delivering quality work. Some work approved prior to this change is having some further review to ensure it is delivering the requirements needed.
- 8 Finally, to ensure we utilise our resources, time and efforts efficiently work is being undertaken to review interdependencies within the improvement plan and this will include those where we require corporate and partnership support. As a result, it is likely some of the timelines for the actions will need to be amended. Some actions on the current plan are marked as delayed and these will also be considered as part of this review. Some of these have been deliberately paused in light of the new arrangements to ensure we concentrate our efforts in the right areas, supported by evidence of impact. Actions identified from internal assessment activities will also be added to the plan within chapter 3.

9 **Ongoing Improvements to Children’s Services**

It is important to note that while Ofsted have identified areas for improvement, inspections aren’t able to cover the full breadth and depth in the time they have. As such it is important that we continue to assure all areas of our services and where further improvements are required these will be added as further actions to our plan, with clear identification of where those actions have arisen from. This will further enable us to be both be prepared for monitoring visits and capture any additional learning obtained. As part of our preparations for monitoring visits we will deliver dedicated focus on key areas of concern to ensure we know and understand our services well and take any actions required.

While we undertake further work to assess our services, we have been reviewing our external support to ensure this is meeting our priority areas for improvement and is well co-ordinated. As such this enables us to align the right expertise to the improvements required. One area requiring attention from an initial diagnostic is our Front Door and EDT. This has highlighted some strengths and areas for improvement, including how we share and access multi agency information to make informed decisions to help and protect children, both as part of our daytime services, early help responses and out of hours. Therefore, I have planned for Dorset council to provide a two-day review by two senior managers on the 6th and 7th November with a full report by the 18th November. Early learning will be shared each day to enable any immediate actions to be taken and plan for any system and process changes required. This will be key to our monitoring preparations and a full update will be provided to the December Board.

Progress against the plan

- 10 The improvement plan at appendix 2 includes updated RAG ratings and progress updates for each area as of 9 October 2024. Appendix 1 shows an overview of the ratings for each action and the impact for each plan area.
- 11 Key improvement activity which has taken place since the [last update to committee on 16 September](#) includes:
- Achieving all the milestones in our plan timeline (appendix 2 page 9) except the one regarding recruitment (an update on recruitment is included below).
- 12 Increased capacity to drive improvements through the appointment of a Director for Improvement, who has specialist expertise and a proven track record of delivering improved children's services.
- Strengthened the quality assurance process, including introducing internal moderation of audits, and moved line of sight for the improvement plan to the Improvement Director along with the QA service to ensure independence of the operational teams.
 - Established weekly leadership meetings for all senior leaders in children's services, including enabling services such as legal, finance and HR, to increase joint working and understanding of all children's outcomes. These include a monthly Improvement and Performance meeting where leaders will be held to account for the impact of services.
 - A communications strategy on 'being brilliant at the basics' has been developed and communications have been shared with practitioners and managers in September, which was positively received by the workforce. These messages will be reinforced through the in person celebrating practice workshops for managers and practitioners in October and November.
 - The supervision policy, form and practice guidance has been revised and was launched in August.
- 13 Three care leaver ambassadors have been appointed to support corporate parenting work and ensure that the views of care experienced children and young people shape service development.
- The first partnership Corporate Parenting Board took place on 2 October, chaired by the council's chief executive. This was attended by two of the care leaver ambassadors who presented the results of the care leavers survey, and recommendations on actions to be taken from focus groups of care leavers. The board also included a workshop on what arrangements are needed to develop and drive corporate parenting in Cheshire East. New governance arrangements will be established based on the

workshop. These will support the refresh of the cared for and care leavers strategy, and the Corporate Parenting Board will oversee its delivery.

- LGA corporate parenting training took place on 30 September for all members of the Corporate Parenting Board and elected members on the children's committees.
- Free bus passes for care leavers will go live on 14 October.
- The service is trialling a new child protection plan that aims to be more child focussed, impact focussed and easier for families to read and engage with. Consultation is currently underway with a small number of families on the new plan.

14 We have recruited our third Mockingbird Home Hub Carers and they have completed their training. We have identified 6 satellite families and are in the process of identifying another 1 to meet fidelity.

- Young people have developed recruitment questions to ask foster carers, and delivered training to the fostering panel, to ensure children and young people's voices and experiences are included in the recruitment and selection of foster carers.

15 During our personal education plan (PEP) training sessions with our schools and settings, two of our children and young people attended to present and share information on their current education, their journey and experiences. This also included information on their PEP and the importance of being involved in this plan, and the impact this had on them.

Impact for children and young people

16 Internal moderation was introduced in September to strengthen our assurance on progress. This found that there was over-optimism within audit judgements, and 8 of 12 audits were downgraded. Moderators identified that auditors were able to accurately identify the appropriate findings and themes but were not then grading appropriately to represent this. A workshop for auditors to improve auditing will take place in November.

17 Audits undertaken in August and September show that practice is not at the quality we want it to be; following moderation 1 case was judged good, 5 requires improvement and 6 inadequate. No child was found to be unsafe. There were elements of good practice identified, including one outstanding assessment and one good assessment which will be shared as good practice examples across teams.

Child and Family Feedback

- 18 Further work is required to ensure family feedback is gathered throughout our involvement and therefore a Family Feedback Strategy is being developed. We are also looking to strengthen the questions in our feedback so we can obtain some clear themes such as whether families feel listened to and involved in decision making.
- 19 Currently from the audits undertaken we have some feedback from children, young people and families, below is an extract:
- “They have taken the time to help me.”
“The social worker writes a lot; I would want it to be made shorter.”
“The support from services has been a whirlwind. It has felt stressful.”
“My social worker is understanding, helpful and easy to talk to.”
“I’ve had 5 social workers - some I’ve only met once. Not all have been good.”
“The social worker is approachable and explains things to me.”
- 20 Satellite carers have voiced their positivity about being part of Mockingbird and the support and companionship it has provided. Carers and young people have spoken about it feeling like a ‘real extended family’.
- 21 In August, the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service were involved in a focus group with 9 of our cared for children to seek feedback on the Cared for IRO service. The young people provided feedback that they liked that IROs tailored reviews to their requirements and they enjoyed that on some occasions these are themed to their interests. The young people fed back they felt that their IRO advocated for them and held other people to account for things they said they would do.

Risks/ key areas requiring improvement

- 22 As highlighted above, the quality of practice is not where we need it to be, with cases judged inadequate following moderations. However, this isn’t unusual on an improvement journey as progress requires time and significant development which is being addressed in our improvement plan. What is reassuring is, that despite overall poor audit gradings, some areas of the practice was identified to be good and we are supporting staff to build on this so it can be reflected in all areas of the work undertaken with children.
- 23 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.
- 24 Vacancies are causing pressure within services, and for many practitioners’ caseloads remain too high, and work will commence at pace to facilitate a workforce development, recruitment and retention strategy to address this.

Work is also being undertaken to support those workers with high case loads by ensuring robust oversight.

Update on Recruitment

25 In our plan timeline (page 9) we said we would have additional capacity in place to deliver the improvement plan by the end of September. We have not achieved this for all the posts within this timescale. Eight of the 13 posts have been filled (4 social workers, 3 PAs, and a project manager for 18-25 accommodation work). Recruitment is underway for the 5 other posts, 2 of which had the recruitment extended due to a lack of suitable candidates. A breakdown of these is provided below.

26 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	Advert extended due to a lack of suitable candidates - new closing date of 31 October 2024. However, these posts are covered by agency in the interim
Connected carer assessors x 2	Advert to close on 29 November 2024.
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. A workforce strategy will be a priority action to support recruitment including a proposal for international recruitment.
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.
Quality Assurance Officer	Advert at shortlisting stage.
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.

27 The spend to the end of September for the 5 posts is £20,381.

28 A new recruitment pack and videos have been developed support us to attract experienced social workers. A benchmarking review with other local authorities has been completed to inform the development of our offer to ensure this is competitive and attractive.

Consultation and Engagement

- 29 We are continuing to work together with children, young people, young adults, parents/carers, staff, and partners to develop, deliver and evaluate improvements, as outlined above. Children, families and practitioners' views are actively sought through our audit process.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 30 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

- 31 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.
- 32 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

- 33 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 the cost to date in our accounts is £20,381 at the end of September 2024.
- 34 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.

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

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

Human Resources

- 36 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 recruitment and retention strategy is being developed.

Risk Management

- 37 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

38 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)

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

Public Health

40 Same as the implication above.

Climate Change

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

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>
Background Papers:	<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>

