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Dear Dawn

Monitoring visit to Cheshire East children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Cheshire East children's services on 10 and 11 June 2025. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2024. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Teresa Godfrey and Steve Bailey.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan, including disabled children.
- Senior leaders' oversight of performance, to ensure that there is a coherent approach to continuous improvement.
- The quality of management oversight and supervision.

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

Headline findings

Following the inspection of children's services in 2024, the pace of change was too slow, and this led to a decline in practice in some areas. The first monitoring visit, of the front door in February 2025, recognised that progress had accelerated. The experienced interim senior leadership team, who had been in post since autumn 2024, were appropriately focused on making the necessary changes to improve the quality of social work practice. Nonetheless, senior leaders recognised that there was still a lot more to do.

Since then, there have been significant changes in the senior leadership team. This includes the very recent appointment of a permanent assistant director and executive director for children's services. Appropriate transition arrangements are in

place to mitigate the potential impact this will have on the wider workforce and the pace of change.

This monitoring visit has found that improvements are being made in specific areas of practice such as the regularity of supervision and frequency of visits to children. Leaders have appropriate plans in place to further develop and embed improvements in practice. Nevertheless, the quality of practice for children in need of help and protection, including disabled children, is inconsistent.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Most children receive multi-agency support and protection in accordance with their level of need and risk, with thresholds applied appropriately. The quality of social work practice with these children is variable, and this means that children's experiences do not always improve in a timely way.

For most children in need of protection, initial child protection conferences (ICPC) are appropriately convened and are well attended by key partners and family members. The decisions made at ICPC are appropriate. The minutes of these meetings are sensitively written and evidence how decisions have been reached.

For a small number of children, when the decision is made at ICPC that risk and need can be managed through a child in need plan rather than a child protection plan, plans of support are not put in place promptly enough. This means that risks and the needs of these vulnerable children are not being consistently well met.

For most children, their child protection plans are appropriately focused on the support and actions needed to ensure that risks are reduced. Most plans consider children and families' unique identity and cultural needs. For some children, social workers engage their wider family networks in their plans at an early stage, which makes a positive difference to the support and help they receive.

Child protection plans do not consistently articulate what change will look like for children and their families, and actions are not sufficiently timebound to measure progress. This means that parents may not understand what they need to do to improve and what will happen if they do not. For some children in Cheshire East, their child protection plans have effected no significant change or improvement in their circumstances.

Child in need plans are not always detailed and specific enough to ensure that children and families are clear about what needs to happen and why. Some plans measure success by the completion of tasks rather than changes in the child's experiences. For these children, it is difficult to see how a family will know what progress looks like and when it has been achieved. As a result, some children with child in need plans experience drift and delay and their circumstances do not improve as a result of the support they have received.

Contingency plans are not always sufficiently detailed in child protection and child in need plans, so parents may struggle to understand expectations and next steps.

Most children's plans are reviewed regularly. Review meetings and core groups are mostly well attended by key partners, who share information to inform ongoing planning. Children do not routinely attend their meetings, and this means that it is not always possible to see how their voice and influence has been considered.

For some children, review meetings and core groups are used effectively to track progress, and this prevents drift and delay. Some children's experiences improve as a result of the support they receive and their plans end. However, for some children, review meetings and core groups do not consistently develop or adapt their plans in line with their changing needs or circumstances.

A small number of children in Cheshire East have been on child in need or child protection plans for too long, with little positive change being achieved. The effectiveness of conference chairs in robustly managing children's plans and providing appropriate challenge to those working with the family to reduce drift and delay is improving. However, for some children, conference chairs are not yet effectively challenging and driving forward their plans when this is needed.

Social workers understand what needs to change for children and put support in place for them during child protection and child in need planning. They demonstrate empathy and understanding for the children and families they work with and spend time trying to build positive relationships with them. Despite this, working relationships with some parents and their children have been affected by many changes in social workers. This has impacted on their ability to form trusting relationships and share their experiences. For some children, this has also resulted in the contributions of other agencies not being well coordinated or, when necessary, challenged, to ensure plans are cohesive and impact focused.

There has been an improvement in the frequency of visits to children since the last monitoring visit. Most children in need or on child protection plans are now visited regularly by social workers. Most visits to children are purposeful but the quality of visits has been impacted by the high turnover of social workers in recent months. The quality of recording of visits is inconsistent. Social work visits to disabled children evidence the effective use of tools to enable them to understand children's experiences and obtain their wishes and feelings. The voice of disabled children is well captured in records, which is a strength, as many of these children are pre-verbal.

For most children, when they are not being safeguarded effectively by a child protection plan and concerns are escalating, there is timely escalation into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Letters in pre-proceedings are written to parents in clear language, which helps them to understand why social workers are concerned about their children. There is effective oversight of children through this process and families are offered support and direction to improve the care and

protection of their children. As a result, an increasing number of children have been able to remain living with their parents. Nonetheless, a small but significant number of children in Cheshire East have remained in pre-proceedings for too long and experienced delays in the progress of their plans.

There has been an improvement in holding regular social work supervision since the last monitoring visit. The quality of supervision remains variable. Supervision is not sufficiently analytical or reflective and it is not consistently driving forward plans for children. It does not routinely consider the quality and impact of social work practice on children and families, and actions set are not always timebound. Management oversight does not always provide sufficient challenge or reflection to improve social work practice. For some children, this has led to their needs not being recognised or acted on in a timely way.

Social workers told inspectors that their caseloads are challenging, and this impacts on the quality of work they are able to undertake with children. Senior leaders and managers routinely track and monitor caseloads, although they recognise that there is more work to do to reduce workloads safely and effectively.

High turnover of social workers and a high number of vacancies, and a reliance on agency social workers and managers, have presented challenges to embedding a performance culture and improving consistency in the quality of practice and outcomes for children. Senior leaders recognise the impact of instability in the workforce and are taking steps to mitigate this. There has been an appropriate focus on the recruitment and retention of social workers and in the provision of accessible training and support to staff.

Stabilising the workforce continues to be a priority. A refreshed workforce development and recruitment strategy is now in place. This is appropriately focused and designed to address the high level of staff turnover since the inspection. This includes the development of a more accountable and child-centred approach to social work practice. Inspectors found that managers and workers are now being held accountable for their practice and performance. This is a positive shift in culture, and it is starting to have an impact on children's outcomes.

Senior leaders are well sighted on the significant practice issues in children's services. Although there continues to be a level of instability in the workforce and senior leadership team, leaders have maintained a relentless focus on improvement given this challenging context.

There is now a coherent approach to the continuous improvement of social work practice. Quality assurance arrangements and systems to support oversight of progress against the improvement plan have been strengthened and continue to develop. There are structures and frameworks in place to create the conditions to improve the quality of social work practice. These include the introduction of routine performance meetings and the regular analysis of performance data. These measures have equipped the senior leadership team and managers with improved

oversight and understanding of the quality of social work practice with children and their families in Cheshire East.

Practitioners are positive about working in Cheshire East and demonstrate their commitment to improving outcomes for children. They told inspectors that they felt listened to and were well engaged in the improvement journey. They said their working conditions have improved and described a positive and supportive culture and a growing team spirit.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Teresa Godfrey
His Majesty's Inspector