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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 14 and 15 October 2025. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Teresa Godfrey and Nabeel Hussain.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- The experience of children in care, with a particular focus on decision-making, planning and achieving early permanence.
- The effectiveness of independent reviewing officers (IROs) to escalate, challenge and scrutinise plans for children.
- Senior leaders' quality assurance arrangements and oversight of performance in relation to permanence planning and children in care.
- 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 improvement has been hindered by instability in the senior leadership team and workforce challenges.

At the time of the second monitoring visit in June 2025, the permanent executive director for children's services and director of family help and social care had very recently started in their posts. Since then, they have been joined by a permanent director of quality, partnerships and commissioning. This monitoring visit has found

that the now-permanent senior leadership team is sharply focused on improving the quality of social work practice.

The executive director has established clear priorities and is working to stabilise the workforce and improve services for children. There has been significant investment in children's services and a strengthened commitment to children's services across the council.

The quality of practice for children in care, including disabled children, remains inconsistent. Nevertheless, improvements are being made in specific areas of practice, such as the quality of children's care plans, the focus and oversight of early permanence and the impact of the IRO service. Leaders have appropriate plans in place to further develop and embed improvements in this area of practice.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Decisions for children to enter care are appropriate, although not all children come into care in a planned way despite these children being open to services for some time. The quality of social work assessments is variable and a level of over-optimism and lack of decisive protective action results in some children entering care in an unplanned way. This also contributes to placement moves and unstable living arrangements for some children.

Children remain in the care of their wider family members through kinship arrangements when it is safe for them to do so. Assessments of family members are appropriately focused on their ability to provide care and any areas of support that they may need. For some children, a lack of effective planning results in assessments of family members being completed once children have already moved in. A small number of children have to move on from family members when assessments, completed retrospectively, are negative.

Most children in care live with carers who understand and meet their needs well. Challenges to sufficiency impact on the availability and choice of homes, the number of times children must move and children's experiences. A small number of children with plans of long-term fostering are placed with carers who are unable to meet their needs in the longer term, which creates further instability for the children.

A small number of children are placed in unregistered children's homes as a last resort. New protocols and procedures have recently been introduced by senior managers to improve oversight of these children. Leaders understand the inherent risks associated with children living in unregistered settings and the additional measures needed to ensure that they are safeguarded. The local authority continues to search for registered homes to ensure that children move to registered homes as quickly as possible.

Leaders are responding appropriately to a lack of sufficiency of homes by investing in more of their own children's homes and by working collaboratively with other authorities and partners. It is too soon to see the impact of this for children in care.

Most social workers know their children well and understand children's experiences and journey into care. The frequency of visits to children in care has improved; most are now visited in line with statutory visiting schedules, but not all visits are in line with children's needs. Too many children have experienced changes in social worker, which means that they must retell their story, and this impacts the quality of their relationships. The quality of social workers' recording of their visits to children is not consistent. This means that leaders cannot be assured that important issues for children are being appropriately addressed.

Risks to children in care are usually recognised and responded to appropriately. This includes risks posed by family members or extra-familial risks. For some children, when risks are linked to going missing from care or exploitation, specialist workers provide direct support and intervention which are effective in responding to and reducing risks. The quality and timeliness of return home interviews when children in care go missing are variable. This means that for a small number of children there are delays in actions being taken to reduce the frequency of episodes of going missing.

Most assessments of children in care are comprehensive, regularly updated and inform planning for children. There has been some improvement in the quality of care plans for children. Most are detailed, consider children's views, and their diverse needs and are outcome focused. The health and education needs of children in care are routinely identified and considered as part of planning.

Children's care plans are regularly monitored at review meetings. Senior leaders acknowledge that the review process, management oversight and other mechanisms used to monitor children's progress and track permanence have not been effective. As a result, some children have experienced delays in achieving permanence.

Delays in the discharge of care orders when children return home to their parents have resulted in some children being subject to statutory intervention for longer than they need to be. Senior leaders are well sighted on this issue and have taken appropriate steps, including the securing of additional legal resource, to strengthen the quality of practice and oversight in this area.

Work has been completed with the IRO service to strengthen practice. During this visit inspectors found that for some children, when their plans are not progressing, IROs are challenging practice effectively. There has been some improvement in this area since the inspection which is starting to have an impact and is reducing drift and delay for some children.

Oversight of all children in care has been improved. This has included the introduction of a weekly permanence panel and tracker. Staff are now required to speak to the director of children's social care prior to any placement being agreed. Leaders are appropriately focused on achieving better outcomes for children, nevertheless it is too early to assess the impact of this strengthened approach.

Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking children live in homes that meet their needs. They are encouraged to attend education and have their physical health needs met.

Children in care are supported to be healthy by their carers. Most children have up-to-date dental checks and health assessments. Although there are emotional support services available for children in care, some children, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, experience delays in accessing these services due to waiting lists.

Cared-for children have a variety of hobbies and activities that they enjoy and benefit from. Carers pro-actively encourage and support participation in these activities. Social workers show interest in children's activities and achievements and are proud of the progress that children are making.

During this monitoring visit, inspectors met with a group of children in care. They told inspectors that they felt safe where they lived but wanted senior leaders to focus on workforce stability so they could build stable, trusting relationships with workers who they know will 'stick with them'.

The executive director and her team recognise that stabilising the workforce continues to be a priority. They have established regular staff events, such as all-staff meetings and coffee mornings, to create clear lines of communication and open forums for views and opinions to be shared. The workforce development and recruitment strategy has been refreshed and additional resources have been secured to support its implementation. Members of the workforce who met with inspectors said that they felt listened to and engaged in Cheshire East's improvement journey.

Social workers told inspectors that they had manageable workloads and described accessible, supportive managers. Most social workers are now receiving regular supervision, although the quality of supervision remains inconsistent. It does not routinely consider the quality and impact of social work practice on children and families, and actions set are not always timebound. The recording of management oversight on children's records has increased but it 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. Senior leaders are working to strengthen management oversight and supervision and have commissioned a management development programme to support them with this area of development.

Senior leaders are well sighted on the significant practice issues in children's services and have a clear focus on improving the quality of practice. External scrutiny has been welcomed and quality assurance arrangements have been strengthened. There has been investment in a programme of work to support practice improvement and to embed a strong performance culture. Senior leaders are fully aware that there remains more to do to improve the quality of social work practice and outcomes for children.

The chief executive and lead member continue to be well sighted on the progress of improvement plans and the areas for further development in children's social care. Since the previous visit in June 2025, the executive director has successfully strengthened relationships between children's services and the broader council and this has resulted in wider corporate support for the improvement agenda. This has included additional resources for children's services and financial investment.

The pace of change and improvement in Cheshire East has been impacted by significant changes in the workforce and leadership team. There is now a level of optimism and confidence across the workforce that things are getting better. Leaders know what needs to be done to improve further services for children in care in Cheshire East and are making progress towards making their vision a reality.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Teresa Godfrey
His Majesty's Inspector