

Executive Director's Assurance Report: Children, Education and Families (CEF)

To: Audit and Accounts Committee

Meeting Date: 4 June 2025

From: Executive Director for Children, Education and Families (CEF)

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: Not applicable

Executive Summary: The purpose of this report is for the Executive Director for Children, Education & Families (CEF) to provide assurance to the Audit and Accounts Committee that a sound system of internal control is in place and operating effectively for their areas of responsibility. This will support the delivery of the key functions of the Audit and Accounts Committee, in line with the Committee's Terms of Reference.

Recommendation: This is an information-only report. The Committee should consider the assurance provided over the adequacy of the Council's control environment and compliance with corporate governance controls.

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1. Creating a greener, fairer and more caring Cambridgeshire

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is for the Executive Director for Children, Education & Families (CEF) to provide assurance to the Audit & Accounts Committee that a sound system of internal control is in place and operating effectively for their areas of responsibility. The report will also update the Committee on the implementation of planned actions to further strengthen arrangements for governance, risk and control, and the outcomes of whistleblowing referrals in the Directorate.
- 1.2 This will support the Audit & Accounts Committee to deliver the following key functions within the Committee's Terms of Reference:
- Monitor the effectiveness of the system of internal control, including arrangements for internal audit, external audit, financial management, ensuring value for money, risk management, governance, assurance statements, supporting standards and ethics, and managing the authority's exposure to the risks of fraud and corruption.
 - Provide independent assurance of the adequacy of the risk management framework and the associated control environment.
 - Review compliance with the relevant standards, codes of practice and corporate governance policies.
- 1.1 As such, this will support the delivery of all seven of the Council's ambitions as set out within its Strategic Framework.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Council is required to include an Annual Governance Statement (AGS) as part of the Annual Statement of Accounts. The AGS is an important statutory requirement which enhances public reporting of governance matters. It should therefore be honest and open, favoring disclosure.
- 2.2 A key element of developing the AGS is the preparation of self-assurance statements by all directors, as a formal assurance from those managers who have responsibility for the development, implementation and maintenance of the governance environment.
- 2.3 These assurance statements require Executive Directors to:
- confirm that they have obtained assurance from their service directors on the key elements of risk and control systems for which they are responsible.
 - confirm that all significant internal control matters brought to their attention have been or are being properly dealt with.
 - confirm that the risks and internal controls for which they are responsible have been sufficiently addressed in order to provide reasonable assurance of effective financial and operational control, compliance with the Code of Corporate Governance and with other laws and regulations; and

confirm that to the best of their knowledge, these arrangements have been complied with in all material respects throughout the period.

- identify any exceptions to the above and/or any significant governance issues¹ the Executive Director is aware of, and how these are being addressed.

3. Highlights from the Annual Governance Statement

- 3.1 The Children, Education and Families Directorate support the delivery of the actions identified in the AGS Action Plan and outlined below is the action specific to the Directorate which has been progressed.

Develop and implement an Action Plan to address the key recommendations from the March 2024 Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services.

The Ofsted Action Plan has been developed and submitted to Ofsted on 19th August and presented to the Children and Young People (CYP) Committee in October 2024 which can be found [here](#). The action plan is monitored through various groups and is underpinned by an internal activity tracker which monitors all our improvement work, including the actions from the Ofsted action plan. In February 2025, the action plan was updated to outline the progress and showed key areas of improvement, which included:

- Reduction in agency usage down from 38% - 22% in frontline teams.
- Progress has been made in the recruitment of a permanent workforce.
- Improvements have been made in support for Care Leavers.
- Additional foster carers have been recruited with a net gain in fostering households over the year.
- An approach that provides additional support to foster carers called Mockingbird has been implemented.
- Pathway planning for Care Leavers has improved by 20%.

In addition, since 2023, Cambridgeshire County Council have worked with our Sector Led Improvement Partner, Essex (Outstanding Ofsted rating), to conduct a number of diagnostic visits to each of our Children Social Care teams to identify the key areas for improvement. Subsequently, this led to Cambridgeshire in November 2023 launching an improvement approach for our key areas of practice namely 'Big 6 Spotlight' as common areas of improvement were being identified, before the diagnostics were completed. This can also be found in the October 2024 [report](#) to CYP Committee. Work with Essex continued into 2024/25 including further diagnostic visits, systemic training and sharing good practice and resources.

¹ N.B. Significant governance issues are defined as those which:

- Seriously prejudice or prevent achievement of a principal objective of the authority
- Have resulted in the need to seek additional funding to allow it to be resolved, or has resulted in significant diversion of resources from another aspect of the business
- Have led to a material impact on the accounts
- The Audit Committee advises should be considered significant for this purpose
- The Head of Internal Audit reports on as significant in the annual opinion on the internal control environment
- Have attracted significant public interest or have seriously damaged the reputation of the organisation
- Have resulted in formal action being undertaken by the Chief Financial Officer and / or the Monitoring Officer

Further work is ongoing to ensure the actions are progressed and the success criteria can be fully realised in all of these areas.

In January 2025 Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) undertook an inspection of the Local Area's response to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. This report was published on 13th May 2025 and a copy of that report can be found here - [50276860](#)

The Council will be required to submit an action plan in relation to this inspection as well as the plan and its progress will be reported to the Children and Young People's Committee.

- 3.2 Children, Education and Families have supported the other actions outlined in the AGS action plan which has included contributing to the induction programme for Members and training for political awareness within our leadership team.

4. Overall Control Environment

- 4.1 A number of additional controls have been introduced within Children, Education and Families in the last 12 months, this would include:

4.1.1 Governance arrangements:

The Childrens Safeguarding Board has ceased to operate as a shared board between Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The revised governance arrangements mean that there is now a multi-agency safeguarding partnership for Cambridgeshire specifically. The partnership also has an Independent Scrutineer in line with the Working Together 2023 guidance who will provide scrutiny and challenge to the work of the partnership as it works to support children in need of help and protection and those in care and care leavers.

The revised approach to the Children's Rapid Improvement Board has seen partners from Police, Health and Education join the strategic group which has an independent chair to help drive the improvements and consider collaborative approaches to problem solving and practice development.

The revised approach for the Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) Executive Board to refocus on the 'Inclusion for All' framework agreed in 2024.

The Children's Change Board has been established to place assurances within key work areas across CEF, including Ofsted Action Plan action, service redesigns, business planning actions and project developments. Key areas feed into the overarching Change Board.

Strengthened Governance of financial controls. Financial transparency reports are now a standing item on the weekly Children, Education and Families. This tracks contract management, contractual spend and procurement practice.

In education, Schools Forum now has a High Needs Block Sub-group that will monitor the progress of rolling out additional Enhanced Resource Bases and any future projects put in place to improve outcomes for children with SEND as well as having a mitigating factor on the High Needs Block budget.

4.1.2 Work areas for assurances:

A number of work areas are developing to provide the assurances in a number of areas which include:

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) – an 'Inclusion for All' framework has been agreed by partners to ensure support and opportunities is available for all children, young people and their families from a variety of areas. These will focus on ensuring there is inclusive places, inclusive people, inclusive practice, inclusive partnerships, Inclusive voices and Inclusive services.

The Corporate Parenting Strategy, developed in January 2025, ensures the inclusion of children's and young people's voices in all aspects of our work, providing a platform for Cambridgeshire to consider their views in making improvements, in particular the views of Care Leavers.

Workforce Development Strategic Plan – this outlines 9 key drivers for change to ensure a focus on workforce to build stability and capacity where it is needed within Children, Education and Families.

The Residential Strategy developed in 2023 is focused on placement sufficiency for children and young people with high complex needs to ensure the right care is provided in the most cost-effective way.

National Social Care Reforms – the Family First Programme of reforms are a significant national reform ensuring children, young people and families receive the help they need at the earliest opportunity. For Cambridgeshire, a programme is currently in development to ensure this can be delivered in line with statutory changes.

4.2 The Children, Education and Families risk register has recently been reviewed and outlines the key strategic areas of risk. One of those risks in relation to 'Safeguarding vulnerable children and young people across Cambridgeshire' is also within the corporate risk register. There are a number of mitigations in place and additional actions which support the mitigation of this risk. These include:

The Corporate response to the Ofsted Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection in 2024 has seen the development and delivery of the Ofsted Action Plan for Cambridgeshire these have included the progression of all seven recommendations, key elements already described in 4.1.2 and as outlined.

Recruitment of permanent staff – has seen an increase of 'growing our own' workforce including the recruitment of international social workers, apprentices and newly qualified social workers in most teams. This has led to the reduction in agency use.

Children's Placement Sufficiency has been a priority and includes greater market engagement with an increasing number of children being placed in Cambridgeshire. Social Care and Commissioning working more closely together as a strong focus on recruiting in-house foster, showing early signs of success, however, there are still a number of children in unregistered placements. A Sufficiency Statement will be presented to Children and Young People Committee in September 2025.

An overarching review of key areas of Children's, Education and Families services to currently review the out-of-hours service and decision-making at the integrated front door. More work is required as the National Reforms programme is developed.

5. Outstanding Audit Actions

5.1 Within CEF, there are a total of 4 key themes with 18 recommendations outstanding:

- Case 128 Transport backlog x 1
- Dedicated School Grant (DSG) x 10
- Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) x 5
- Schools Deficit x 2

5.2 **Safety Valve** - The service has one outstanding Essential internal audit action related to the Safety Valve, High Needs Block and the Designated Schools Grant. The delays in completion relate to two primary areas. Firstly, the County Council was asked to re-submit a Safety Valve plan to the Department of Education which has been completed. We are awaiting feedback from the Department as to whether the re-submitted plan will be approved by the Minister in order for the Council to be re-entered into the Safety Valve Programme. The second aspect is the implementation of the new education database. This is scheduled to go live in August 2025 and actions related to this cannot be concluded until evidence is provided that this system is having the desired impact.

The number of overdue actions has reduced significantly in 2025 in part down to the strengthened governance arrangements in the CEF. These actions are now a standing item on the CEF Leadership Team meeting agenda and this takes place on a weekly basis. Progress on actions is reported directly to the Executive Director for Children, Education and Families.

5.3 **Transport** – Following the independent review of our transport arrangements by People Too, a comprehensive Transport Strategy and aligned action plan will be presented to Children and Young Peoples Committee in October 2025. Activity that does not require a Key Decision will begin in June.

5.4 **Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)** - The recommendations for the MASH have been reviewed. Practice in the MASH has improved significantly with a noted reduction in referrals to children's social care and an increase in the number of children accessing help and support earlier through the Early Help Hub. We have provided evidence to meet all of the recommendations aside from two which will be concluded in the next iteration of the report.

5.5 **Schools Deficit** – All schools in deficit have been written to and where appropriate a Financial Improvement Group is set up to support the school and to monitor action plans. Increasing number of schools across the Country are facing deficit budgets due to the impact of funding stay pay agreements and the increasing pressures of delivering education services to children with Special Education Needs and disabilities (SEND).

- 5.6 CEF also has its own Quality Assurance team which conduct several 'in-service' audits which are monthly case audits with frontline teams, and they also conduct thematic audits on key themes:

The following scheduled internal thematic audits were completed during 2024/25:

- Youth Justice re-offending in 2yrs
- Permanency
- Care Leavers Service
- Supervision
- Children and Families assessments

Completed audit reports are shared with the service, who are supported to develop action plans to address any identified development needs. These plans are monitored through Practice Quality Governance Board and the actions are tracked at the CEF Leadership Meeting as a standing agenda item.

In addition, the service has been involved in two multi-agency suits by the Local Safeguarding Partnership and the Serious Youth Violence and Domestic Abuse.

6. Whistleblowing, Complaints and Inspections

- 6.1 Children, Education and Families have seen one major inspections in the last year. In February 2025, Ofsted and Care Quality Commission undertook an Area SEND Inspection (Area Inspection of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), which included partners within this area of work in Cambridgeshire, namely Parent/Carer groups, Health and Schools. The outcome of this inspection was published in May 2025 (delayed publication due to the pre-election period). Of the three possible outcomes below, Cambridgeshire achieved the second grade in bold:

- Local area partnership's SEND arrangements typically lead to positive experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The local area partnership is taking action where improvements are needed.
- **Local area partnership's arrangements lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The local area partnership must work jointly to make improvements.**
- There are widespread and/or systemic failings leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND, which the local area partnership must address urgently.

The Inspectors identified the following priority areas for improvement: -

Areas for improvement

The local area partnership should work together to improve the timeliness and quality of the statutory EHC plan processes so that children and young people with SEND get the right support at the right time. This should include a particular focus on:

- improving the timeliness of EHC plan needs assessments and annual reviews
- improving the quality of EHC plans
- amending EHC plans appropriately after annual review.

The local area partnership should improve access to, and reduce waiting times for, specialist mental health pathways and neurodevelopmental assessments. Leaders should ensure that children and young people and their families consistently receive effective communication and support while waiting for neurodevelopmental assessments.

The local area partnership should develop better opportunities for co-production with children and young people with SEND, so their voices and views are more fully included in the design of support and services.

The local area partnership should improve the support for children and young people with SEND as they prepare for adulthood, especially in mainstream schools.

The local area partnership should improve how it communicates its offer, so schools, services and families know about and understand what the area seeks to provide. This will mean those who work most closely with children and young people with SEND will be better able to help them access the support available.

*EHC = Education, Health and Care Plan

An improvement action plan is required to be drafted and submitted to Ofsted within 35 days of publication of the report. This plan will be presented to Children and Young Peoples Committee.

6.2 Complaints

During 2024/25, CEF received the following:

- Compliments received - 153
- General enquiries - 72
- Councillor enquiries - 31
- MP enquiries - 149
- Statutory Stage 1 received – 62 (86)
- Statutory Stage 2 received – 16 (10)
- Statutory Stage 3 received – 0 (1)
- Corporate Stage 1 received – 720 (368)
- Corporate Stage 2 received – 148 (39)
- Corporate Stage 3 received – 60 (16)
- LGO enquiries received – 37 (17)

The majority of MP enquiries and complaints across all of the three stages relate to delays in the delivery of SEND assessments and services. The CEF service is developing a workforce and service plan, linked to the Inclusion for All Strategy that will ensure need is met more effectively over the course of 2025/26.

6.3 Whistleblowing

There have been three whistleblowing referrals received by the County Council. These have each been investigated and are summarised with outcomes in Appendix 4.

7. Appendices

7.1 The following appendices are attached to this report:

- Appendix 1 – *Executive Director, Children, Education and Families Annual Assurance Statement 2024-2025.*
- Appendix 2 - *Executive Director, Children, Education and Families Actions within the Annual Governance Statement Action Plan*
- Appendix 3 - *Audit Actions Overdue in the Children, Education and Families as at 30th April 2025.*
- Appendix 4 - *Summary of Whistleblowing Referrals received in Children, Education and Families and the outcomes for 2024/2025.*

8. Source Documents

8.1 Ofsted ILACS inspection report - [50247204](#)

8.2 Ofsted Action plan Committee report - [Council and committee meetings - Cambridgeshire County Council > Meetings Calendar](#)

8.3.1 Ofsted and CQC ASEND inspection report - [50276860](#)