



CABINET

Subject Heading:

Starting Well Improvement Plan Year Two
May 2025 - May 2026

Cabinet Member:

Councillor Oscar Ford, Cabinet Member
for Children

ELT Lead:

Tara Geere, Director of Starting Well

Report Author and contact details:

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Well

Policy context:

Havering Children's Social Care is subject to a Department for Education ((DfE) statutory improvement notice served in March 2024. This report summarises the updated year two Starting Well Improvement Plan, and delivery timescales.

Financial summary:

The additional costs of the year two improvement plan is £0.395m. A funding request was submitted to the DfE who have agreed £0.2m leaving a cost of £0.1935m to the Council's general fund.

Is this a Key Decision?

Yes

Significant effect on two or more Wards

When should this matter be reviewed?

Within six months

Reviewing OSC:

Children and Learning

The subject matter of this report deals with the following Council Objectives

X People - Supporting our residents to stay safe and well

Place - A great place to live, work and enjoy

Resources - Enabling a resident-focused and resilient Council

SUMMARY

Following Ofsted's inspection in December 2023 and the Statutory Improvement Notice in March 2024, the Starting Well directorate developed and implemented an improvement plan, which was submitted to Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE) in May 2024.

One year on, the plan has been updated to reflect progress and sharpen priorities, informed by internal quality assurance activity and feedback from Ofsted and the DfE. Two Ofsted monitoring visits (October 2024 and March 2025) and two DfE reviews (November 2024 and June 2025) have acknowledged progress, while highlighting the need for accelerated pace of improvement. The revised plan focuses on strengthening management oversight, supervision, and quality assurance. The DfE welcomed the plan's clearer focus on outcomes.

Key developments include collaboration with the DfE Improvement Advisor, Sector-Led Improvement Partners (LB Islington and Centre for Systemic Social Work) to improve our case management system (LiquidLogic) and relaunch our systemic practice model with staff, as well as with partners. This work began in late 2024/25, with impact expected this financial year.

Workforce development remains central to the plan. The second phase of the Starting Well reorganisation concludes this autumn, with continued focus on recruitment, retention, training, and accredited systemic development. We are also advancing the use of Artificial Intelligence and technology to reduce administrative tasks and increase time spent undertaking direct work with families.

Progress continues to be overseen by the independently chaired Practice Improvement Board (meeting every eight weeks) and the quarterly Practice Improvement Oversight Board, chaired by the Chief Executive and attended by senior leaders, elected members, partners and DfE representatives.

The next Ofsted monitoring visit is expected in autumn 2025, followed by a third DfE review in late 2025.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet note, endorse and adopt the content of the Starting Well Improvement Plan 2025/26.

REPORT DETAIL

1. Following Ofsted's full inspection in December 2023 and the Statutory Improvement Notice issued in March 2024, the Starting Well directorate has been actively delivering the actions outlined in our inaugural improvement plan, submitted to Ofsted and the DfE in May 2024.
 - 1.1 One year on, we've refreshed the plan to reflect progress and sharpen our focus, informed by internal quality assurance processes and feedback from Ofsted and the DfE.
 - 1.2 Since the inspection, Ofsted has conducted two monitoring visits (October 2024 and March 2025), and the DfE has undertaken two bi-annual reviews (November 2024 and June 2025). While progress has been acknowledged, we recognise the need to accelerate the pace of improvement.
 - 1.3 Our revised plan prioritises areas where we can make the most impact, particularly in strengthening management oversight, supervision, and quality assurance. The DfE has reviewed the updated plan and welcomed its improved focus on outcomes and impact.
 - 1.4 To reflect the significance of our improvement work in relation to supervision and management oversight, the impact of managers and leaders has moved to theme one within the new iteration of the improvement plan.
 - 1.5 Over the past year, we've worked closely with our DfE Improvement Advisor (appointed September 2024) to progress our improvement plan and monitor and scrutinise the impact of activity on outcomes for children and families.
 - 1.6 We have worked collaboratively with our sector-led improvement partners (LB Islington and the Centre for Systemic Social Work), to enhance our case management system and relaunch our systemic practice model. Much of this work began in late 2024/25, with impact expected this financial year.
 - 1.7 We continue to invest in our workforce, with the second phase of the Starting Well reorganisation set to conclude this autumn, which is closely linked to the transformative Families First Partnership Programme set out by DfE in March 2025.
 - 1.8 Within the revised plan we have retained our focus on delivering a 'stable and able workforce' as well 'removing barriers' to ensure that good social work practice can thrive. This includes improving how we recruit and retain staff, offering improved support and career development, and renewing our commitment to accredited systemic training for permanent staff and managers.

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1.9 Alongside this we remain committed to developing our use of artificial intelligence (AI) and technology to reduce time spent undertaking administrative tasks, so our teams can spend more time with children and families.

1.10 Oversight of progress against our plan will continue to be undertaken by the Practice Improvement Board (PIB), which meets every eight weeks and is independently chaired. Our Practice Improvement Oversight Board (PIOB) also meets quarterly and is chaired by our Chief Executive Officer. This is attended by senior leaders in the Council, as well as elected members and representatives from the DfE.

1.11 We anticipate that the third Ofsted monitoring visit will be undertaken in autumn 2025, followed by a third DfE review in late 2025.

1.12 The below table details the additional costs of the year two improvement plan, and outlines where funding from the DfE will be used and what additional costs will be covered by the Council

Year 2	Proposal	Impact	Cost	Funding request from DfE	DFE request will support	Havinging Council contribution
Yr2a	Retain x3 Improvement leads	Added capacity and support to the practice improvement work including mentoring / coaching and training for managers to drive focused improvements	£0.18m	£0.1m	x 2 FTE Improvement Leads	£0.08m (x1 FTE)
Yr2b	Establish x1 Commissioner & Project Manager	Added capacity to take forward key streams of our sufficiency strategy, with the aim of improving outcomes for children and reducing placement spend to support financial sustainability	£0.117m	£0.057m	x 1 FTE Commissioner and Project Manager	£0.06m
Yr2c	Establish x1 System Developer (Liquid logic)	Improvements to the case recording system to better support workers in their day-to-day work, freeing up time spent on administrative processes for more direct work with children and families.	£0.0465m	£0.04m	x 1 FTE additional System Developer	£0.0065m

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Yr2d	Establish x1 additional Project Manager	Additional capacity to support development and delivery of the corporate parenting strategy and related activity across the wider Council	£0.05m	£0.003m	x 1 FTE Project Manager	£0.047m
Yr2e	Sector Led Improvement Partner work with the Centre for Systemic Practice	Following the November 2024 launch, on-going embedding of the systemic model of practice across all staff, with a particular focus on managers	Costings to come from the SLIP partners to DfE			
Total				£0.2m		£0.1935m

REASONS AND OPTIONS

Reason for the decision: To ensure that Cabinet are kept informed and appraised of the Starting Well Ofsted Improvement Plan

Other options considered: None; it is a statutory requirement for us to submit an improvement plan as per our improvement notice

IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

Financial Implications and Risks:

Over the last two years the Council has significantly increased its investment in Children's Services. There was a net £9m included in the 24/25 MTFS budget setting and a further £2.1m added in year and another net £14.8m in the 25/26 MTFS budget. This has supported an increased social care workforce through two major reorganisations which has brought about a reduction in caseloads, stronger management structures and further development of family support. The additional costs of the year two improvement plan are summarised above and are estimated to be in the region of £0.4m of which £0.2m is expected to be funded by grant from the DfE. The remaining £0.2m cost will be met from the 2025/26 Starting Well budget and has already been built into our forecast expenditure.

Legal Implications and Risks:

Should the Council fail to comply with the Improvement Notice or should ministers not be satisfied with the Council's progress at any stage, ministers may choose to invoke their statutory powers of intervention (under s497A Education Act 1996 as applied to children's social care by section 50 of the Children Act 2004) to direct the Council to enter into an appropriate arrangement to secure the improvements required in children's services.

Human Resources Implications and Risks:

We are aware that some actions within the Starting Well Improvement Plan will have a direct impact on staff. However, any such actions that require support from HR colleagues are outlined in the plan and any work undertaken (i.e. service redesigns) will be done following the necessary processes and procedures.

Equalities Implications and Risks:

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 requires the Council, when exercising its functions, to have 'due regard' to:

- (i) The need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010;
- (ii) The need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share protected characteristics and those who do not, and;
- (iii) Foster good relations between those who have protected characteristics and those who do not.

Note: 'Protected characteristics' are age, sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnerships, religion or belief, pregnancy and maternity and gender reassignment.

The Council is committed to all of the above in the provision, procurement and commissioning of its services, and the employment of its workforce. In addition, the Council is also committed to improving the quality of life and wellbeing for all Havering residents in respect of socio-economics and health determinants.

Any of the specific projects and programmes of work within the Ofsted Improvement Plan will have an Equality and Health Impact Assessment undertaken as needed, and any subsequently identified issues responded to.

Health and Wellbeing Implications and Risks

The Starting Well Improvement Plan contains specific actions related to physical and mental health and addresses wider determinants of health (such as education and employment), which are expected to impact positively on health and wellbeing. As specific projects and programmes of work progress, health and wellbeing implications and risks will be reviewed, and identified issues responded to.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

There are no Environment and Climate change implications or risks for this decision

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Appendix 1; Starting Well Improvement Plan May 2025-May 2026