

REPORT TO: Health and Social Care Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 10th February 2026

REPORTING OFFICER: Interim Director – Commissioning and Provision

PORTFOLIO: Adult Social Care

SUBJECT: Care Quality Commission (CQC) Assurance : Update on Progress

WARD(S): All wards

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report aims to update Members of the progress which the Adults Directorate have made against CQC Local Authority Assurance Framework, following their assessment and rating as 'Good' in July 2025.
- 2.0 **RECOMMENDATION:** That the Board note the report and associated appendices.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Background

3.1.1 The Care Quality Commission (CQC) implemented its local authority assurance process on 1st April 2023. The process was introduced in the Health and Social Care Act 2022 and establishes a statutory duty for the CQC to assess local authorities' performance in delivering adult social care duties under the Care Act 2014. The assessment framework for local authority adult social care assurance cover four main themes, to assure that local authorities are meeting their responsibilities:

- Working with People
- Providing Support
- How the local authority ensures safety within the system
- Leadership

3.1.2 Within these four areas there are further Quality Statements which need to be met. These are demonstrated through submission of a library of evidence, and further validated during a planned site visit over a number of days (usually around 3-4 dependant on the size of the authority). During the site visit the regulatory body meets with a range of stakeholders to determine how well the authority achieves its stated outcomes in action.

3.1.3 Halton Borough Council's Adults Directorate submitted evidence towards its assessment earlier into 2025 and had its site visit during March. Following on from

this, the Directorate received a rating of 'Good' in early July, with a total score of 64.



3.1.4 Out of 153 local authorities in England, 83 have now completed their assurance assessments and received their reports. Appendix One gives some analysis of outcomes in other areas.

3.1.5 The CQC have a number of Local Authorities still to assess, but the assessment will take place on a rolling basis. It is therefore speculated that the CQC will be requesting additional performance evidence from Halton over the next 12 to 18 and then we won't expect a reassessment of our rating for another couple of years, based on indicative intelligence. It is projected that those Local Authorities with an 'Inadequate' rating will receive greater focus in the first instance.

3.2 CQC Improvement

3.2.1 Halton, understandably, wishes to work towards developing on its CQC rating and improvement goals are part of the Adult Directorate's core function on an ongoing basis. From the CQC report, the Directorate has further scrutinised the analysis of Halton's services and performance to consider areas where its continuous improvement needs to be focussed. While it was felt that little in the report was direct criticism or condemnation of the borough's approach, there were subtle pointers to pick up on.

3.2.2 An Improvement Action Plan has been drawn up as a result, and this maps to the Quality Statement areas within the framework. A working group of managers currently meets monthly to look at progress against these actions, and developments are moving at pace.

3.2.3 Progress to date against the Improvement Plan is set out in detail in the attached table at Appendix Two. Some highlight achievements from this work are given below:

3.2.4

- Waiting lists targets have been set and are consistently being met
- A carer's contingency process has been devised and is being implemented
- A 'named social worker' approach is being embedded, where possible, to ensure that 'people only have to tell their story once'
- The Adult Social Care webpages on the Halton public website have been

restructured to ensure service access points are clearer. Further work is planned on web content.

- Pilots are being rolled out to utilise Artificial Intelligence to reduce administrative burden to record assessments
- Quality assurance processes for in-house care homes have been aligned to those used for commissioned provider care homes
- Annual fee setting process with commissioned providers has been brought forward to help sustain market stability
- The Adult Social Care Transition Protocols have been reviewed to ensure Mental Health client needs are incorporated into pathways
- Safeguarding processes altered to ensure an effective feedback loop to providers
- Coproduction Advisory Group formed and working to further develop the Directorate's approach to coproduction

3.3

3.3.1 Conclusion

The CQC Improvement Group has already achieved some 'quick wins' in terms of a response to comments made in the CQC report. Further work is planned to alleviate pressures and pinch-points, including some activity that relates to Corporate developments.

3.3.2

The improvement working group are looking to sign off the current action plan as quickly as possible, and no later than March 2026, and are starting to extend their scope to look at 'stretch' criteria, which would move us closer to achieving 'Outstanding' next time around.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The CQC Improvement Plan is focussed on areas highlighted in the Adults Directorate's CQC report as potential development needs. It will be implemented alongside other continuous improvement activity and the policy and service development work programme will be planned alongside this to meet the objectives set with the plan and those emerging from 'stretch' goals.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Any financial implications related to individual actions within the plan will be brought to the relevant Boards and meetings as part of strategic planning.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence

The CQC Improvement Plan aligns to the overall objectives of the Adults Directorate in achieving this priority.

6.2 Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy

The Improvement Plan puts focus on prevention, workforce, maintaining an effective

social care market and building community asset; all of which support building a strong and sustainability local economy.

6.3 Supporting Children, Young People and Families

In meeting its Care Act 2014 objectives the Adults Directorate is supporting families across the borough to live healthier, happier lives.

6.4 Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need

The CQC Assurance Framework ensures that Equality, Diversity and Inclusion requirements are being met.

6.5 Working Towards a Greener Future

None identified

6.6 Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community

Community partners play a key role in enabling the Adult Directorate to achieve its duties against the Care Act 2014. Strengths-based working and effective use of community assets are features with the CQC Assurance Framework.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 A continued focus on improvement is needed to raise standards and assure a higher rating when the Directorate is reinspected. The Improvement Plan needs to be prioritise alongside day-to-day delivery of services and provision and this requires commitment and resource from across the Directorate to deliver on the programme of work

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 The objectives of the Adults Directorate include reaching those who are seldom seen and seldom heard. .

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None identified

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

10.1 None under the meaning of the Act.

Appendix One

ASSESSMENT RATING FOR THOSE WITH A PUBLISHED REPORT

Region	Number of councils	Completed - and published	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate
East (ADASS Region)	12	5	0	5	0	0
East Midlands (ADASS Region)	10	4	0	1	3	0
Greater London (ADASS Region)	33	19	3	11	5	0
North East (ADASS Region)	13	10	0	8	2	0
North West (ADASS Region)	23	12	0	8	3	1
South East (ADASS Region)	18	13	0	9	4	0
South West (ADASS Region)	15	8	0	3	5	0
West Midlands (ADASS Region)	14	4	0	4	0	0
Yorkshire/Humberside (ADASS Region)	15	8	0	5	2	1
England	153	83	3	54	24	2

Details of progress towards objectives of the Improvement Plan

Theme 1: Working with People

Improvement requirement	Progress
people feelings they have to 'tell their story' a number of times	<p>Starting to roll out a 'named social worker' approach into Complex Care teams, Mental Health team and Transition. This would mean that people have a consistent contact for their package of care.</p> <p>Where services users are located in the same setting e.g. supported living homes and care homes, the teams will also aim to allocated a named worker to the setting.</p> <p>This approach is more difficult to consider with Prevention and Wellbeing Service (PWS), as the social care 'front door' as picked up and allocated as part of initial contact/referral. Also, with Review team, who are picking up different cases to achieve specific outcomes.</p>
Waiting lists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care plan reviews • Occupational Therapy assessments • Financial assessments • Carers assessments 	<p>While the waiting lists aren't substantial, in consideration of others authorities' reports, the Improvement Group have established baseline figures and set targets to review in March 2026.</p> <p>The use of Artificial Intelligence is being trialled to transcribe and summarise assessment conversations. This will be under stringent oversight from case workers but has the potential of cutting administrative time so that caseloads can be completed more quickly.</p>
Carers waits on phone to Contact Centre	A new Customer Relationship Management System that is being implemented through the Contact Centre will help alleviate call wait times. This will have a 'digital agent' that will support high volume, low complexity needs (e.g. people asking which bins need to go out, reporting fly tipping, etc.). This will free up greater capacity for calls that need direct human interaction. From here, improvements on call wait times are being monitored.

	<p>In order to enable carers to get to appropriate information more swiftly the Adults Directorate has published a 'Living Well Guide' on its webpages, so that people can access information without the need for immediate contact. The website also hosts information specific to carers.</p>
Carers Contingency Plans	<p>This relates to situations where carers may not be able to fulfil their caring duties.</p> <p>Adult Social Care has built a new form on the records management system (Eclipse) to capture these and has set targets for getting these completed.</p>
Embedding strengths-based working prevention and	<p>Strengths-based practice is now embedded and as part of our operational processes we routinely monitor this via case file audits, supervision, team meetings etc. A 'Train the Trainer' model has been developed for staff and people with lived experience to provide on-going training to new staff and refresher training for existing staff.</p> <p>We continue to engage across the Cheshire & Merseyside region Training Partnership, Research in Practice and Skills for Care to access strengths-based practice training opportunities, which are cascaded through the teams via learning sets.</p> <p>Our focus on prevention is demonstrated from a strategic perspective in Halton's Health & Wellbeing Strategy, our Adult Social Care Commissioning and Prevention strategies. A new commissioning strategy/plan is due for completion by end of March 2026, whilst the Prevention strategy runs until March 2027.</p>
Carers access to prevention services	<p>This has been investigated and it is felt that the One Halton Carers Strategy 2004-2027 addresses this, with a range of activities having been undertaken to support carers, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carers Centre receiving and distributing Carers Break Funding on behalf of the Council. • A number of small local community & voluntary organisations receiving grant funding to facilitate activity to support carers. • One off carer's breaks funding via a Direct Payment. • Home-Based Respite Care Service, which allows carers to have time away from their caring role, whilst maintaining a safe and consistent level of support to the person being cared for. • Accelerated Reform Funding received by Halton was passported over to Halton Carers Centre to develop a series of projects/interventions to explore ways to better support unpaid carers.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Halton Borough Council's Prevention and Wellbeing Service hold fortnightly drop-in sessions at the Halton Carers Centre, at both their Runcorn and Widnes sites.
Website improvements	<p>A review has since taken place of the current structure of these pages.</p> <p>The 'front page' now focuses more closely on signposting people to prevention services and self-help, prior to routing them towards services. (This has been achieved within the constraints of the current content management system available to the Council).</p> <p>The content of the individual pages have been allocated across Head of Service and Directors to ensure their teams update, amend, further develop or delete information. Some additional gaps have been identified, where information is not available on the website, and pages will further be developed.</p>
Direct Payments – Local Authority rates being lower than services accessed	<p>On examination this relates to a small number of service users (12 people) who have chosen their own providers through a Direct Payment, and the provider charges more than the Direct Payment rate. The service user therefore picks up the extra costs. The main requirement for this was in relation to choice around Domiciliary Care provision.</p> <p>The Directorate, at the time, had one main commissioned provider, which not all people wanted to use. Since then the Directorate has now re-commissioned Domiciliary Care, with a framework of providers available to meet user choice requirements.</p> <p>Public facing information about Direct Payments has been checked, and were this situation to be faced in the future, it has been clear in relevant leaflets that the Direct Payments rates are set and that any costs outside of this are being on 'user choice'.</p>
Greater representation from Adults Directorate staff on Corporate Staff Network Groups	<p>The Staff Network Groups are part of the Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) programme and have been set up to provide a safe place for colleagues to engage in a confidential and welcoming environment with others who share their Protected Characteristics.</p> <p>As the Adults Directorate has signed up to the Social Care Workforce Race Equality Standards, CQC saw these groups as central to taking forward related agendas.</p>

	The Staff Network Groups have been further promoted to staff across Adult Social Care and ongoing newsletter items related to EDI activity will be shared.
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Theme 2: Providing Support

Improvement requirement	Progress
Limited choice of home care provision	This was reflective of the commissioning position at the time, as one main provider was contracted by the Directorate. This has since changed as procurement exercise has now been completed to develop a framework of providers for domiciliary care.
Out of borough specialist provision	For dementia patients, an Enhanced Dementia Working Group has now been established and proposal is being developed to look at an enhanced dementia care model within provision in-borough. This proposal is being costed and will be brought to relevant Boards for sign-off. Alongside this the Directorate is also looking at specialist provision for learning disability with the Transformation Delivery Unit, to consider future commissioning options that would create efficiencies.
Investment in the voluntary and community sector	Stakeholder feedback had alluded to reductions in funding on a Corporate level. The Adults Directorate have a number of community and voluntary service contracts which support asset-based and preventative working. Representatives from the CQC Improvement Group are to attend the Halton and St Helens VCA Steering Group in mid-December to look to understand the sector's needs. This meeting follows on from the Halton VCFSE Sector and Halton Borough Council Partnership Event held in the summer by the Environment and Regeneration Directorate.
Capacity within home care and care homes – limited planning	Work has commenced on the new Market Position Statement for Adult Social Care. This will be published in the Spring and will reflect the local market.
Carers – Access to breaks/respite	The Adults Directorate currently has a Respite Policy which sets out the offer across the borough. This includes designated Learning Disability and Autism provision in a 4-bed unit at the Bredon site in Runcorn,

(planned & unplanned): Bookable	& Pre- care provider within the service users own home, our Shared Lives service, and details of how to work with older people's care home to negotiate respite placements. The Bredon short-stay respite service is being looked at as part of the Transformation work, to see how it can be utilised more effectively. The Improvement Group intend to further consider options to look at planned older people's respite opportunities.
Quality Assurance (QA) Process for In-house care homes separate to QA Process for external care homes	This has now been aligned.
Work with care providers – cost of care being transparent & fair	This referred to consultation on cost of care rises and the fee setting process which take place annually. This was remarked to be a delayed process because of Council's budget arrangements, giving no time for providers to plan their own fiscal year. A report on reviewing the annual fee setting process came to Executive Board in October 2025 and it was agreed that fee setting will now take place in February each year.

Theme 3: How the Local Authority ensures Safety within the System

Improvement requirement	Progress
Transitioning to adult service when individuals open to mental health services – Criteria	A slight difference in processes was observed for those service users under the Mental Health Team. As a result, the Transition Protocols have been amended to ensure continuity of care for all those coming into Adults Services from Children's Social Care.
Transition – promotion of service	The Transition Service is promoted as part of the Council's SEND webpages. CQC recommended that promotion of the service is made through the Adults Directorate. Plans to achieve this are included in our

	review of the Directorate's webpages, and the Transition Team have also made in-roads to build relationships with The Cavendish High Academy, as the main special education setting in the borough.
Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards – of Backlog applications	<p>Like all local authorities across the country, the Worcestershire Ruling 2014 increasing the demand for Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards in the borough of Halton.</p> <p>A piece of work has already been in place, prior to the CQC visits, to look how this is managed. This programme of work has subsequently been added to the Improvement Plan. A baseline has been established and a target set for improvement.</p>
Safeguarding Enquiries – Outcome notification	<p>This concerns stakeholder feedback that providers don't get notification of outcomes of Safeguarding Enquiries (Section 42 – Care Act 2014).</p> <p>Processes have now been amended to include a feedback loop.</p>

Theme 4: Leadership

Improvement requirement	Progress
Transformation Programme – strategy and engagement needed to ensure impact controlled and outcomes positive	<p>The Adults Transformation programme was under review at the time of the CQC visit.</p> <p>The new Adult Social Care Transformation approach is now being finalised and its rollout will be reviewed as part of the Improvement Group activity.</p>
Scrutiny Function – Not sufficient focus on Adult Social Care	The Health Policy and Performance Board (PPB) puts a spotlight on both health and social care across the borough. The CQC report pointed out that the Board's Scrutiny Review function has been focussed on health issues for the past few years. In a wider context however this has followed on from a number of social care focused Reviews.

	<p>The Improvement Group have reflected on the health and social care split across Board meetings and have found an equal focus.</p> <p>In February 2025, the roles of the PPBs were reviewed in light of the Corporate Plan. The Health PPB title will now change to Health and Social Care. This will help further reflect the balance in reports brought.</p>
Co-production: Fully embed in service design and strategy development	<p>A Coproduction Advisory Board, made up of experts by experience, has been formed as a result and work continues to establish and deliver on coproduction objectives.</p> <p>The Coproduction Advisory Group have met three times and have devised their own Terms of Reference as well as a Recognition and Reward Policy for experts by experience involved in coproduction activity.</p>
Improve uptake of people's feedback via surveys etc	Work is underway to establish service user feedback surveys as part of care management processes.