Cheshire West &
Chester Council



Short breaks strategy 2026-30

Cheshire West and Chester

Contents

Foreword 3
1. Background to Short Breaks 4
2. The Purpose of This Commissioning Strategy 4
3. The Benefits of Short Breaks 5
4. The Current Offer 6
5. Using Data to Make Decisions 8
6. What Families Have Told Us 9
7. What does a good short break look like? 11
8. Our Commissioning Principles 11
9. Outcomes 12
10. Delivering the Strategy 13
11. Important Partners on this strategy 16
12. Measuring Impact 16
13. Roadmap of Intended Changes 17

Foreword

As an elected member of Cheshire West and Chester Council, I am pleased to introduce our Short Breaks Commissioning Strategy for 2026–2030.

Short breaks play a vital role in supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), while giving families the opportunity to rest, recharge, and maintain resilience. They are an essential part of helping children thrive, build independence, and enjoy meaningful experiences.

This strategy sets out our commitment to ensuring that all families can access high-quality, flexible, and inclusive short breaks. We recognise that demand is increasing and that services must evolve to be more consistent, accessible, and responsive to individual needs. Our ambition is to create a fairer, more joined-up offer that works for every family.

Importantly, this strategy has been shaped by the voices of children, young people, parents, and carers. Their insights have guided our priorities, including improving communication, increasing choice, and making it easier to access support.

We will work closely with partners across education, health, social care, and the voluntary sector to deliver these improvements. Together, we will build a more inclusive system where children and young people with SEND are supported to reach their full potential and families feel confident and supported.

This strategy reflects both our responsibility and our determination to make a positive difference. I look forward to seeing its impact over the coming years.

Councillor Adam Langan
Cabinet Member for Children and Families
Cheshire West and Chester Council

1. Background to Short Breaks

1.1 Section 25 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 requires local authorities to provide short breaks for families with disabled children.

1.2 Every local authority must publish a Short Breaks Duty Statement to inform families about the available services, the eligibility criteria, and how these services are tailored to meet the needs of families with disabled children in the area. What are Short Breaks? | Live Well Cheshire West

1.3 The Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations 2011 set out how local authorities must provide short breaks and what they should provide, this includes:

- daytime care in the homes of disabled children or elsewhere;
- overnight care in the homes of disabled children or elsewhere;
- educational or leisure activities for disabled children outside their homes; and
- services available to assist carers in the evenings, at weekends and during the school holidays.

1.4 Short Breaks should be accessible to any child or young person aged 0–18 (or up to 25 in certain cases) who has identified special educational needs and/or a disability, and who resides within the Cheshire West and Chester Council area.

1.5 Local authorities have a legal duty to provide a range of short break services, but they have flexibility in how they choose to deliver these services. In summary we must:

- Consider all relevant legislative requirements when we make decisions about how we provide and fund short breaks
- Assess the needs of any disabled child or young person whose family may want or need services above the level available locally without an assessment; and
- Provide short breaks to children or young people where an assessment shows that they are necessary to meet their needs, taking account of the family context

2. The Purpose of This Commissioning Strategy

2.1 The Short Breaks offer in Cheshire West and Chester has developed over time, providing a wide range of activities and support to meet the diverse needs of children and young people with SEND.

2.2 While the offer is broad, varied, and generally strong, access is not always consistent or equitable, and some needs remain unmet. Although elements of the Short Breaks provision have been reviewed periodically, the evolving needs and interests of children, young people, and their families highlight the need for a more comprehensive and up-to-date review.

2.3 Through in-depth conversations with families, it's clear that we need to take a whole-system approach to Short Breaks - ensuring the right opportunities are available at the right time, in the right place, and for the right children, young people, and families.

2.4 A range of strategies and plans are in place to support children and young people with SEND, including the Council's

- Children and Young People's Plan Children and Young People's Plan 2025-2026 – West Cheshire Children's Trust
- Enabling Great Lives Enabling Great Lives - Our approach to commissioning | Cheshire West and Chester Council
- SEND Strategy CWAC SEND Strategy 2025-26
- All-Age Autism Strategy (currently under development)
- All-Age Carers Strategy 2021- 2026 All age Carer's strategy 2021-2026 | Cheshire West and Chester Council
- Preparation for Adulthood strategy Preparation for Adulthood Strategy 2020-2024 – West Cheshire Children's Trust

3. The Benefits of Short Breaks

3.1 Short Breaks provide a diverse range of services that offer children and young people with SEND meaningful and enjoyable experiences that support their personal growth and development, while also giving their primary carers valuable time to rest and recharge.

3.2 These breaks can take place in a child's home, the home of an approved carer, or in community settings such as local sports clubs. Depending on a child or young person's eligibility, needs, and interests, a Short Break might range from a few hours, like attending a trampolining session, to several days for those requiring more intensive care and support.

3.3 In Cheshire West and Chester, every Short Break opportunity should enable children and young people to enjoy themselves, build friendships, and develop confidence, independence, and the social and emotional skills needed for a successful transition to adulthood. For families, Short Breaks also offer vital time for parents, carers, and siblings to work, study, or enjoy time for themselves.

4. The Current Offer

4.1 Not all children, young people and their families will need the same level of support; some will need more than others because of the nature of their child's disability and their individual circumstances.

Universal services – my child/young person needs little or no level of care and support in day to day activities
Services include: Before and After School Clubs, Community groups, Early Years services, Holiday activities, Play groups, Sports, Youth Services. This offer is open to all children/young people; there is no eligibility applied and can be accessed through a self-referral route. Providers are encouraged to make reasonable adjustments to reduce barriers for children or young people with SEND to be able to access universal services. Examples of this in practice could be offering sensory support or creating quiet zones; visual timetables or picture cards; or modifying the building such as installing ramps.

Targeted services – my child/young person needs a higher level of care and support in day to day activities such as support with personal care; my child/young person needs space and time to manage their behaviours; my child/young person needs more sensory activities; my child/young person needs support to eat and drink **Note: There may be a charge for some of these activities**
Services include: commissioned targeted community-based activity groups through Energise by Endorphins Group Limited which provide a mixture of free Saturday, After School and Holiday sessions. These activity groups are open to children and young people in two age groups aged 4-11 and 12-18 years of age. Children and young people must live in the Cheshire West and Chester area, but do not need to have a formal diagnosis to access sessions. There are other services available to families through non-commissioned services such as After School Clubs for children and young people with Autism, targeted Youth Clubs (Choices), Activity groups, Youth and play groups, Summer holiday activity groups. There is also a Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF - Edsential) available for families to access who are eligible for benefits-related Free School Meals. There is no assessment required for groups, clubs or Holiday Activities and Food Programme. Further information about activities available can be found on the Live Well website: Home | Live Well Cheshire West
Short Breaks Individual Payments: commissioned through Disability Positive and known as Community Connections. This service provides support to families to pay for targeted activities that their child or young person would like to attend. **Direct Payments**: are a way for families to have more choice, flexibility and control over their child or young person's care and support. Instead of the council arranging services for families, direct payments allow families to use the money in their child or young person's personal budget themselves. This means they can choose and arrange support to help their child access the community or take part in activities that match their interests and meet their assessed needs or desired outcomes. To access direct payments, an assessment will be required to be carried out by a Social Worker or Family Case Worker, this can be done

through calling the Integrated Access and Referral (iART) Team on 0300 123 7047. Direct payments are designed to be used in a flexible way by families, examples of this in practice could be paying for a Personal Assistant to take the child or young person out into the community to enjoy activities of their choice such as walks in the park; cinema trips; eating out; or swimming. Direct Payments can be used in many ways and it is best to explore the options with your social care professional.

Complex/specialist services – my child/young person needs a high level of support and care during the day and possibly overnight; there could be a risk of family breakdown due to the impact of our caring responsibilities on the family; or our family is under stress due to not getting enough sleep
Services include: Daytime nursing care, Direct Payments, Overnight nursing care, Specialist out of school provision, Sponsored day care, Outreach in the community and community groups. Residential short break care for overnight care for children and young people can be provided at Pinewood Short breaks | Cheshire West and Chester Council which is one of our specialist provisions. An assessment is required to be undertaken by a Social Worker which can be done through calling the Integrated Access and Referral (iART) Team on 0300 123 7047. Referral for this can be made by a Social Worker of Family Case Worker depending on the outcome of the assessment.

4.2 Eligibility criteria to access Complex / Specialist Services - Eligibility criteria will apply where disabled children / young people require additional services over and above those provided under the Universal or Targeted services and priority for these services will be as follows:

- Children and young people with Autism who have co-occurring needs such as severe learning disabilities or have behaviour which is challenging
- Children and young people with complex health needs which includes those with disability and life limiting conditions who require palliative care services and children with complex health needs and physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments
- Children and young people with moving and handling needs that will require equipment and adaptations
- Children and young people where challenging behaviour is associated with other impairments (e.g., severe learning disability or mental ill health).

4.3 Services will be allocated on the basis of need which has been identified through an assessment. It will not be the degree or level of disability alone that determines eligibility for services, but the interplay of this with parenting capacity, family and environmental factors. Assessment will be

undertaken via a Team Around the Family (TAF) Assessment), or a Single Assessment.

5. Using Data to Make Decisions

5.1 Our Short Breaks offer will be guided by a current and accurate understanding of the number of children and young people with SEND, their geographic distribution, the nature of their needs and/or disabilities, and any relevant protected characteristics.

5.2 Equally important is anticipating how these factors may change over time, enabling us to adapt our services proactively and ensure they continue to meet evolving needs effectively.

5.3 At January 2024, 5.2% of pupils in the borough had an education, health and care plan (EHCP), totalling 2,920 pupils compared with 4.8% nationally. An additional 12.9% (7,184 pupils) receive special educational needs (SEN) support without an EHCP. The proportion of pupils in with EHCPs in Cheshire West and Chester is higher than the national average, while SEN support figures are slightly below the national level but higher than statistical neighbours.

5.4 There has been a significant increase in the number of pupils with EHCPs in Cheshire West and Chester, rising by 48% between 2019 and 2023, reflecting a broader national trend. This rise indicates growing recognition of high needs and increasing pressure on local services. In contrast, the number of pupils receiving SEN support has fluctuated, showing a modest increase of 1.7% over the same period.

Pupils with SEND by Primary Need	2024	2025
Autism	766	876
Social, Emotional, Mental Health	562	633
Speech, Language and communication needs	548	598
Specific Learning Difficulty	207	227
Moderate Learning Difficulty	201	214
Severe Learning Difficulty	177	152
Physical Disability	93	99
Other Disability or Difficulty	81	100
Profound & Multiple Learning Difficulty	41	52
Visual Impairment	26	27
Hearing Impairment	19	18
Multi-Sensory Impairment	13	7
Downs Syndrome	No data	16

6. What Families Have Told Us

6.1 Extensive engagement sessions have been held to gather feedback, insights, and ideas from parents, carers, children, young people, and young carers with lived experience. This valuable input, combined with available data, enables the Council to make evidence-based decisions that lead to better outcomes for children and young people.

6.2 While many families view the current Short Breaks offer positively, it is clear that the future offer must be designed to ensure fairness and equity for all families across the borough.

6.3 This Commissioning Strategy is grounded in the voices of those with lived experience. We are deeply grateful to the parents, carers, children, young people, and young carers who generously shared their experiences and ideas for change. Their insights have highlighted the need for:

- **Activities**: Fun and engaging activities for children and young people, bring them happiness and enjoyment, and promote inclusiveness.
- **Socially enriching**: Opportunities to make new friends was highly valued so that children/young people would feel less isolated.
- **Provide opportunities for growth:** Services should help build life skills as children/young people get older, supporting personal growth and independence by trying new experiences.
- **Safe and trustworthy:** A secure environment is essential for peace of mind and for children to thrive.
- **Consistency and availability:** Regular and reliable sessions, especially during school holidays, when routine support may be lacking was important.
- **Flexibility and choice**: Opportunities, flexibility and choice for a range of different short breaks that consists of both physical and non-physical activities.
- **Peer to peer support:** Some families would welcome the opportunity to have peer to peer support available.
- **Initial visits to groups:** Families would welcome the opportunity to be able to have initial visits to buildings so they know what to expect when attending groups.
- **Centralised hub of information:** As discussed in the communication section, families would welcome a centralised hub/platform of information where they can register, access, book and pay for sessions without the need for having to carry out

extensive research on providers and the services they are offering. Schools could offer information in welcome packs.

- **Services for parents/carers:** Suggestion that services could be available to parents/carers on the same site/close to where their children/young people are attending sessions.
- **Longer hours:** Families would welcome longer sessions for activities.

6.4 Direct Quotes from children and young people

- “Being as independent as I can be, being positive, happy, loving life, family, and being able to choose what I want to do”
- “I want to be independent, have life skills, be healthier and be able to get a job”
- I want to become a volunteer when I am too old to come to club”
- “More activities to feel less isolated”
- “I enjoy coming to sessions to meet up with my friends and to make new friends”

6.5 Direct Quotes from Young Carers

- “Having time with other members of my family or my friends and having some independence”
- “Having time to do activities that I enjoy, relaxing or having some quiet time”

6.6 Direct Quotes from Parents and Carers

- “The social aspect is really important for my child to attend short break services”
- “Important to have a safe and trusting environment”
- “Knowing my child is in a consistent and safe environment, I get the opportunity to spend time with other family members knowing they are having a good time, have time to switch off and enjoy a hot drink, have time with other family members”
- “Flexibility within sessions”
- “Choice of both physical and non-physical activities”
- “Parents can have their own needs, and information is not always clear or easy to find, would be helpful to see in a variety of formats”
- “I’ve not thought about what I would do with my short break yet, as we’ve not accessed any services before, but may use the time to visit family members”

7. What does a good short break look like?

7.1 What families have told us is very important, together with our own data have helped create this Short Breaks Commissioning Strategy where we will work with partner organisations to:

- Deliver a more equitable and accessible, locally targeted service that meets the diverse needs of families
- Ensure smooth transitions beyond age 18, supporting access to appropriate services and activities beyond the Short Breaks offer
- Enhance the awareness of Inclusion through training of professionals and the wider community, promoting better understanding and accessibility
- Support the whole family, recognising and responding to how their needs evolve over time
- Provide clear, timely, and accessible information, enabling families to understand the support available and how to access if effectively

8. Our Commissioning Principles

8.1 The Short Breaks Commissioning Strategy is closely aligned with the core principles outlined in Cheshire West and Chester Council's overarching Commissioning Strategy for Children, Young People, and Families. These guiding principles include:

- **Commissioning for outcomes**: focusing on measurable improvements in the lives of children, young people, and families
- **Fairness and transparency:** ensuring open, equitable processes in decision-making and service delivery
- **Early intervention and prevention:** addressing needs proactively to reduce long-term challenges
- **Evaluation and learning:** using evidence and feedback to continuously improve services
- **Service user involvement**: engaging children, young people, and families in the design and decision-making process
- **Safeguarding**: prioritising the safety and wellbeing of all service users
- **Equality and diversity:** promoting inclusive services that reflect the diverse needs of the community
- **System-wide partnership working:** collaborating across sectors to deliver cohesive support
- **Decommissioning for improvement:** reviewing and refining services to ensure effectiveness and value

- **Embedding social value:** integrating community benefit into sourcing and procurement practices
- **Market shaping:** fostering a diverse and responsive provider market to meet varied service needs

9. Outcomes

9.1 Outcomes are the positive changes we hope to see as a result of putting this Commissioning Strategy into action.

For children and young people with SEND

- to choose the type, location and time of their short breaks
- develop independence through their short breaks
- be involved in the planning and design of their short breaks
- make new friends, learn new skills, develop confidence, and meet their full potential
- develop their strengths

For parents/carers and families of children and young people with SEND

- know what short breaks are available and how to access them
- have a choice of short breaks
- receive clear communication from professionals to help their family make choices
- feel more resilient and able to deal with their caring responsibilities
- know how to access support before they reach crisis point
- be confident their child receives high quality short breaks and are cared for by trained, professional staff in a safe environment.

For both children/young people with SEND and their parents/carers/ families

- choice and control over the services received
- children and young people with SEND are supported to remain safely within their families, reducing the need for higher-level interventions such as unplanned placements in health or social care residential settings.

For the system – providers, partners, professionals, and communities

- Resources and services targeted based on need and demand
- A shift in resource and focus across our system to earlier help
- Increased awareness of the Short Breaks offers

- Increased confidence for mainstream providers supporting families of children and young people with SEND
- Enhanced multi-agency collaboration across the system, leading to better alignment of processes and systems
- A strong, vibrant, and innovative provider market
- An increase in accessible, inclusive communities and greater availability of mainstream opportunities for children and young people with SEND.

10. Delivering the Strategy

10.1 Objective 1. Communication

10.2 Feedback from families during the engagement sessions highlighted they cannot find the information they need easily and sometimes the information is not easy to understand. Some of the barriers or challenges that families raised about short breaks is knowing what services are available and having the time to research potential providers.

10.3 When asked how parents/carers would like to receive information or communication about short break services, the majority reported their preferred method would be via schools. A lot of families indicated they found out about organisations through word of mouth or signposted by other services such as a School Nurse. To improve communication for parents/care it is proposed that it could be more beneficial to receive at various stages of a child or young person's journey of diagnosis / EHCP. Alternative suggestions received were around schools including information in their welcome packs about services that are available to families.

10.4 The Live Well website was felt to be difficult to navigate and for those who had not accessed short break services previously, would not know to search for "short breaks" on the website to find out about services available to their families. It was also suggested that communications should be made available in a variety of formats e.g. visual comms which would support both children or young people and their families.

10.5 Some of the barriers and challenges raised by parents/carers about accessing short breaks is knowing what services are available and having the time to research potential providers. Families indicated they had little time to conduct extensive research to find out what services are available, especially for those already managing complex care needs or needs of their own.

10.6 What we will do:

- Ensure families receive regular updates about short break services through a variety of methods
- Ensure families are able to access advice and guidance which meets their needs, reduces stress, and enables them to feel connected with local services and their local communities
- Ensure families are able to access information, advice, and guidance earlier in their journeys, helping them to feel stable and supported through the short breaks offer
- Engage with partners across the system to identify the scope of our current offer and opportunities for alignment, improvement, and expansion

10.7 Objective 2. Centralised Platform

10.8 Following on from the communication theme, parents/carers fed back that they have to contact various providers to see if they are suitable and cater for their child or young person's needs, which can be time consuming. It also highlights the feedback around families not having time to carry out extensive research to what services are available.

10.9 The majority of families spoken to as part of the engagement sessions, felt it would be more beneficial to be able to have information for services in one place through a centralised platform where the family only needed to register once and then could view services available in the borough but also be able to book sessions all within the same platform.

10.10 What we will do:

- Provide a centralised platform that can hold information about providers, including services they offer, and be able to book sessions through one centralised platform
- Ensure families are able to access the centralised platform
- Ensure families are able to access information, advice, and guidance earlier in their journeys, helping them to feel stable and supported through the short breaks offer.
- Engage with partners across the system to identify the scope of our current offer and opportunities for alignment, improvement, and expansion.

10.11 Objective 3: Increase choice, flexibility, and availability of provision

10.12 Develop a wider range of short breaks options that accommodate different age ranges, needs, interests, and levels of support, offering flexible timings, longer or more frequent sessions (especially during

school holidays), and increased choices of physical and non-physical activities.

10.13 What we will do

- Commission a diverse range of groups for short breaks delivery
- Engage with families to measure the satisfaction of session length and timing
- Engage with partners to ensure waiting times are kept to a minimum
- Engage with providers to ensure the sessions are staggered throughout the holidays to give more choice and flexibility to families
- Engage with providers to ensure there is a mixture of activities available.

10.14 Objective 4. Enhance inclusion and accessibility across levels of need

10.15 Ensure that all children and young people can access appropriate short breaks by addressing gaps in provision and broadening the range of universal options.

10.16 What we will do

- Work with providers to ensure that families are able to access more universal groups
- Promote the Department for Education “Inclusive provision” toolkit
- Monitor reporting of families being able to access universal groups

10.17 Objective 5. Support whole-family wellbeing

10.18 Recognising the importance of short breaks for the whole family including siblings

10.19 What we will do

- Ensure families are signposted to activities for young carers service
- Ensure short breaks groups are delivered locally where parents and children can easily access

10.20 Objective 6. Strengthen social opportunities and reduce isolation for children and young people and support personal growth and independence

10.21 Provide opportunities that enable children and young people with SEND to build friendships, develop confidence, try new experiences, and feel less isolated through high-quality, fun and inclusive activities.

10.22 Ensure short breaks contribute to developing life skills, independence, and confidence as children and young people grow, including those preparing for adulthood.

10.23 What we will do

- Ensure feedback processes are in place to capture children or young people with SEND reporting they have made friends at sessions; reporting a reduction in feelings of isolation; and growth in participation in life-skills-based sessions
- Ensure feedback processes are in place where families can report improved independence skills in their children or young people
- Work with providers to ensure they are capturing regular feedback from children, young people and their families and how they are adapting sessions based on the feedback they receive

11. Important Partners on this strategy

11.1 Whilst this is a Strategy by Cheshire West and Chester Council, this cannot be done in isolation, therefore, work is required to take place with a range of other agencies. Cheshire West and Chester Council will work with the following partners and encourage them to work alongside us and consider what more they could do to bring about improved outcomes.

- Health
- Education
- Voluntary and community organisations
- Parent Carer Forum
- Cheshire West Voluntary Action
- Young Carers Forum
- Local businesses

12. Measuring Impact

12.1 We will employ a range of data collection methods to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of this Strategy. This includes enhancing our technical systems to improve reporting capabilities, alongside maintaining strong, ongoing engagement with families. These efforts will help us build a detailed understanding of who our families are and which services they value most.

12.2 To support this, we will establish a clear performance framework that enables consistent data collection and analysis across the borough, incorporating both quantitative metrics and qualitative insights.

12.3 We will know this Strategy is having a positive impact when we see:

- An increase in the number of children and young people with disabilities registered and actively participating in community-based services

- Parents, carers, and young people expressing confidence in the quality, accessibility, and relevance of the Short Breaks offer
- Community providers feeling supported and empowered to become more inclusive, with a broader and more equitable range of clubs and activities available across the borough
- Greater clarity and understanding of the offer among services, practitioners, and families, with families reporting they know what support is available and how to access it
- Delivery of our agreed outcomes for children, young people, and families, demonstrating meaningful and measurable improvements in their lives.

13. Roadmap of Intended Changes

13.1 The roadmap sets out some key milestones that will evidence that we are implementing and delivering change in line with what children, young people and Parent/Carers have told us.

- New system for centralised platform to be assessed and procured
- Short breaks, clubs and activities programme recommissioned
- Launch of short breaks commissioning strategy
- Ensure locally targeted service is equitable and accessible and meets the needs of families
- The offer is clear to families, services, and practitioners and they report they understand what the offer means to them
- More children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities are registered and accessing community-based provisions
- Parents, carers, and their children and young people report confidence in the quality of the short breaks offer
- Community provisions feel supported in becoming more inclusive and the clubs and activities offer is reported to be more equitable

13.2 A full action plan will be developed to detail and deliver the key actions associated with this strategy

Accessing Cheshire West and Chester Council information and services

Council information is also available in audio, Braille, large print or other formats. If you would like information in another format or language, including British Sign Language, please email us at: **equalities@cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk**

You can also telephone: **0300 123 8 123**
or textphone: **18001 0300 123 8 123**
website: **www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk**