

Improvement Notice

To: Name CHESHIRE WEST AND CHESTER COUNCIL (“the Council”)
Address HQ Building, 58 Nicholas Street, Chester CH1 2NP

This Improvement Notice is being issued due to poor performance in:
Children’s Services in Cheshire West and Chester.

On the basis of evidence contained in:

The report of the inspection of safeguarding and looked after children’s services carried out by Ofsted (published December 2010) which judged the overall effectiveness of Cheshire West and Chester Council’s safeguarding services to be ‘inadequate’.

The following measure(s) are needed for you to comply with this Improvement Notice:

The Council must take action to:

- i) meeting all statutory and statutory guidance requirements in assessment and multi-agency child protection planning;
- ii) improving the areas of weakness identified in the Ofsted inspection report, having regard to the recommendations contained therein; and
- iii) putting in place robust arrangements to increase the pace of improvement and sustain and build on the improvements secured.

The Council, working with their identified partners must demonstrate clear evidence of improvement in outcomes by:

Partnerships and Governance

- Working with identified partners to establish clear remits for the Improvement Board, Children’s Trust and the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board, and ensure that the Council’s partners and staff are informed of and understand the specific roles and accountabilities of each for delivering services and driving improvement;
- Reviewing the membership, structure and operation of Cheshire West and Chester’s Local Safeguarding Children Board by May 2011 to ensure the Board provides rigorous scrutiny, monitoring and challenge of services and outcomes for vulnerable children, and meets all statutory requirements and statutory guidance requirements as set out in ‘*Working Together to Safeguard Children 2010*’;

Social Care Practice

- By the end of September 2011, ensuring all those staff who are required to use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), including

those of partner agencies in the Cheshire West and Chester area, have training made available to them and ensuring partners are aware of this; monitoring take-up of training by partner agencies, and the use of and impact of CAF by partner agencies.

- Reviewing and developing a system that sets out thresholds and criteria for access to children's social care. Ensuring these thresholds and criteria are communicated, understood and applied consistently across all partner agencies so that the number of referrals that do not meet children's social care thresholds are reduced and the percentage of referrals to children's social care which result in initial assessment being undertaken increase from the 2009-10 baseline of 50.8% to 65% over the period to May 2012;
- Developing and implementing a standard format for recording all child protection plans and ensuring that all child protection plans are clear, unambiguous, detailed, focused on outcomes and highlight specific needs, risks, responsibilities and timescales in line with standards set out in chapter five of *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2010*;
- Ensuring all child protection plans are monitored and reviewed at intervals of not more than six months, and that reviews are brought forward to address changes in the child's circumstances, as set out in *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2010*. Ensuring that where appropriate concerns about the content and implementation of the plan are raised with the appropriate lead professional with responsibility for implementation of the plan;
- Ensuring all reports are shared with parents, children and other professionals not less than 24 hours in advance of a child protection case conferences and not less than five days in advance of case reviews;
- Ensuring implementation of the new Integrated Children's System (ICS) is completed by May 2011 and demonstrates that it provides an improvement in the quality of case recording, including information on family history, the views of children and families and analysis reporting. Minimising operational risks by providing all relevant staff with training and support throughout the 'implementation and roll out process';
- Undertaking effective regular supervision of child protection social work practice the detail of which is to be recorded on the case file. The frequency should be dependant on the particular needs and qualifications of the individual social worker;
- Ensuring there is rigorous management oversight and decision-making on individual cases which is set out in writing on the case files;
- Ensuring regular case file audits are undertaken and that social work practice which falls below the standards set out in *Working Together to Safeguard Children* is identified and addressed promptly. Also ensuring performance monitoring information is accurate, up to date and

demonstrates that the quality of front line practice is improving;

- Developing and implementing a programme of induction, training, monitoring and continuous professional development for all specialist and social care staff. Providing evidence that staff's skills levels are at least adequate to undertake their role. Such evidence to include feedback gathered from staff as part of the performance monitoring process;
- Within six months of the issue of this notice, producing and publishing an annual report of the findings of investigations into complaints against Children's Social Services of the Council. Demonstrating that lessons learnt from these complaints have been disseminated across providers of children's services in the Cheshire West and Chester area;
- Securing sufficient staffing capacity and capability within the frontline social care service, taking action to ensure the vacancy rate for qualified social workers is not above 10% at any given time and that caseloads for an individual are appropriate and manageable; it is suggested that an average figure of between 16 -18 cases are held per Social Worker by April 2012;
- Ensuring elected members undertake training and development opportunities in their role in performance challenge and scrutiny of safeguarding role in accordance with best practice identified by the sector.

Improvement against the above measures will be assessed as follows:

We expect the Council will produce an Improvement Plan to be shared and agreed with their identified key partners and agencies and which addresses recommendations set out in the Ofsted report. The plan should be reviewed and monitored by the Improvement Board, which are expected to meet once a month.

It is expected the Improvement Board will include key partners and agencies within its membership, a representative of the Department for Education as well as independent peer support from another local authority. We expect the Council to consider whether further support and challenge should be obtained from the local government sector and if this is considered appropriate secure such challenge.

The Local Safeguarding Children's Board chair and Health partner representatives should report to the Improvement Board on progress in achieving actions identified for their organisations within the Ofsted report and Cheshire West and Chester's Improvement Plan.

The Department for Education will undertake a review of progress in October 2011 and a final review at the end of April 2012.

Failure to comply with this Improvement Notice by the assessment date may lead to:

The Secretary of State for Education using statutory power of intervention (s497A Education Act 1996) directing the Council to enter into an appropriate arrangement to secure the necessary and rapid improvements required in children's services.

Signed: 

Date: 17/3/11

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families