

Improvement Notice

To: Cheshire East (“the Council”)

Address Dalton House, Dalton Way, Middlewich, CW10 0HU

This Improvement Notice (“the Notice”) is being issued due to poor performance in the arrangements to protect children on the basis of evidence contained in:

- the report of the inspection of the Council’s local authority arrangements for the protection of children carried out by Ofsted dated **20 March** (“the inspection report”) which judged the overall effectiveness of the Council’s child protection services to be ‘inadequate’.

The following measures are needed for you to comply with this Notice:

The Council must take action to:

- (i) improve areas of weakness identified in the Ofsted inspection report and ensure safeguarding and looked after children’s services meet all legislative requirements.
- (ii) put in place arrangements to sustain and build on the improvement secured.

In respect of the above the Council, working with its partner agencies, as identified by the Council, (“the Council’s partners”) must demonstrate evidence of improvement in outcomes by the following:

Quality of practice

Develop and implement a **whole systems framework to manage families’ pathways across the continuum of need from early help to statutory intervention**. This includes:

- Developing and agreeing a local protocol for assessment as set out in *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2013*;
- Developing and implementing early help/intervention services as part of step/up step down to statutory service provision to ensure that children, young people and their families receive support at the earliest opportunity; and
- Reviewing and monitoring the use of thresholds and criteria to ensure their effectiveness.

Improve the quality, delivery and management of child protection plans by ensuring:

- Child protection plans comply with the requirements of ‘*Working Together*’ including ensuring that all plans set out the actions that must be taken; by whom and the outcomes to be achieved with timescales;
- Review points with other professionals and the child and family to evaluate the impact of any change on the welfare of the child;
- Evidence of management oversight of case work and decision making is set out in detail on each case file; and
- Information arising from case audits confirms that all actions have been carried out in accordance with statutory guidance.

Ensure that in all cases, the views of children and young people, their experiences and needs are recorded on their case files and used to inform their individual care plans and the work of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). To support this work regard must be had to the Children’s Safeguarding Performance Information Framework (published 12 June 2012) ¹. The Council’s Quality Assurance Framework must include a requirement that the Council set up systems to ensure that this information is recorded and a report of children and young people’s views, experiences and needs is shared with the LSCB.

Developing and implementing a **system of risk assessment** to inform the development of all child protection and children in need plans to ensure consistent judgments are made about the levels of risk.

All **management oversight** must be conducted in line with standards set out in ‘*Working Together*’ to ensure safe practice and decision-making on individual child protection cases. The Council must set standards which must be agreed by the Improvement Board. Regular qualitative feedback reports must be made available to the Improvement Board and LSCB which demonstrate continuing improvement in quality and effectiveness of management and decision making and that no case is closed prematurely leaving children and young people at risk of harm.

Ensure that individual children, families and staff are engaged and provide regular feedback to improve and shape practice. Ensure that the views of staff are considered in relation to their work and workplace using feedback mechanisms such as staff surveys and report the results to the Improvement Board.

Performance Management Systems

Ensure that **performance management systems** are reviewed, focusing on management oversight and the role of the Child Protection Conference Chair (“Chair”) and Independent Reviewing Officers (where the child is a looked after child) - and any points for action from the review are implemented. The impact of any changes must be monitored to ensure that they have resulted in improvements to the quality of social care practice.

¹<http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/safeguardingchildren/protection/b00209694/perf-info>

Adoption

Ensure the Council is on track to meet the 2013-16 adoption scorecard timeliness thresholds by:

- Working closely with voluntary adoption agencies to share projections of the demand for adopters and ensure the right number and type of adopters are available at the right time;
- Developing and implementing a robust plan to place older children, those with disabilities and sibling groups more swiftly with an adoptive family; and
- Making best use of the funding available through the Adoption Reform Grant to put in place innovative and sustainable processes to clear any backlogs, find adopters for harder to place children and address any structural challenges.

Quality Assurance Systems

Ensure the **Council's quality assurance systems** are prepared taking into account the Children's Safeguarding Performance Information Framework, LSCB quality assurance and joint-auditing, and the LSCB local learning and improvement framework referred to in '*Working Together*'. Ensure that quality assurance systems focus on qualitative evidence and the experience of the child and family and are implemented by all those in the Council's Children's Service. The system must include regular qualitative auditing arrangements of case files, with independent oversight and challenge to ensure the quality and timeliness of recording and compliance with recording in individual case records (as set out in '*Working Together*') and that an assessment of risk is recorded. The frequency of the oversight and challenge must be agreed by the Improvement Board who should also work with the LSCB. Regular qualitative feedback reports of the audits must be made available to the Improvement Board and LSCB which demonstrate continuing improvement in the quality and effectiveness of support to vulnerable children.

Auditing

Agree with the Improvement Board and the LSCB the frequency, **scope and number of quality assurance audits**. Ensure that the quality assurance audits are carried out and the performance information and evidence from the audits are analysed and reported to the Improvement Board and LSCB. Analysis should be used to inform action taken by the Council and partners to bring about improvements in safeguarding social work practice and casework. The Council and agency partners must demonstrate that findings from file audits are used to improve social work practice and that there is compliance with management and case work practice standards. The impact of these areas will be evidenced through the continuous improvement of social work practice.

Staff capability and capacity

Implement a **programme of induction, training, mentoring and continuous professional development** for all children's social care staff including managers – and working with partners to improve this within their own organisations - to ensure staff have the skills to complete high quality and timely assessments. Attention must be paid to the eight standards for employers of social workers². In particular, ensure that this programme includes training for staff and managers on risk analysis. The Council should report the impact of the training on improving outcomes for children to the Improvement Board.

The **development of an overall workforce strategy** which is based upon an analysis of training needs and informed by a demographic and service needs analysis. The workforce strategy must include clear recruitment and retention strategies. It should be implicitly linked to the improvement plan, and clearly related to service plans and audit outcomes.

Social worker responsibilities and workloads must be clearly and tightly defined and reviewed, and staff have a manageable and equitable range of work consistent with their level of experience and competence. Evidence must be provided to show that **supervision** and support meets social workers needs and that practitioners' workloads do not prevent them carrying out what they and their managers feel to be effective social work practice. Ensure that: workloads and supervision take into account the experience of social workers' and reflect the expectations of the Employer Standards and Supervision Framework³, particularly paying attention is paid to case allocation, and case management; and provision of a workload management scheme is used. It is vital that those with responsibility for supervising social workers have relevant experience and have the opportunity to access training and support to fulfil this responsibility. Ensure that the Improvement Board receives management information to confirm that this is achieved and sustained.

Partnership and Governance

Ensuring the Council sets out a **statement of their vision and ambition** for children's services (with a clear set of objectives and timescales). Ensuring this statement is communicated to and implemented by staff and partners such that they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and are held to account in delivering this vision and ambition of the Council, and overall improvement.

Ensure that the Council and Council partners on the Improvement Board **agree objectives, actions and timescales and have clear mechanisms in place to measure the impact** of improvement in the delivery of children's safeguarding services. The Improvement Board must ensure that these actions and timescales are communicated to all staff and the Council's partners who require this information so that they understand their roles and responsibilities in delivering these objectives

²http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/workforce/-/journal_content/56/10171/3511605/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

³ http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=7e6d2140-fc0e-47cd-8b2f-2375812700ad&groupId=10171

and improvements. The Improvement Board must also ensure that plans are implemented to agreed timescales.

Undertaking a **review of the effectiveness of partnership working**, particularly the LSCB with a view to agreeing with the Council's partner's actions to address any issues concerning partnership working. The implementation of those actions and the impact on improving the working relationship of the Council and their partners will be monitored by the Improvement Board. Working with senior representatives from health, police, schools and voluntary sector to support the LSCB through providing it with the information it requires to undertake an effective role.

Ensure leadership, scrutiny and challenge is exercised and impacts on the quality and effectiveness of safeguarding and looked after children services. Ensure these arrangements are sustained after improvements have been made.

- A culture of accountability is developed with managers, staff and partners holding each other to account with action taken when required to challenge poor and unacceptable performance;
- Elected members of the Council understand and deliver their corporate parent role for looked after children and meet all the statutory requirements, including statutory visits;
- Effective assurance arrangements are in place within the Council and across the partnership in line with DfE statutory guidance 'roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children Services'⁴ and 'Working Together'; and
- The ambition for children and young people across Cheshire East is understood and endorsed in practice throughout the Council and across the partnership.

Developing a strategy for strengthening the leadership team across children's services which includes a plan for permanency, in structure and appointment of personnel, and effective lines of accountabilities to ensure an effective delivery of services.

Ensuring the LSCB is able to scrutinise, monitor, challenge and provide strategic direction in relation to the quality of services provided by the Council and the outcomes for vulnerable children and meets all statutory requirements as set out in 'Working Together'.

Ensuring that multi-agency audits are undertaken by the LSCB and reported to the Improvement Board outlining the key lessons to be learnt and improvements to be made.

Establishing a clear remit for the Improvement Board, Children's Trust (where relevant), and the LSCB with clear governance, lines of accountability and specific roles of each body in driving forward improvement.

⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/statutory/g00223224/guidance-for-director-and-lead-member-childrens-services>

Establishing procedures that will ensure that each member of the Improvement Board, Children’s Partnership Board and the LSCB are aware of the terms of reference for their respective boards and the overall governance, responsibilities and specific roles and the organisations that they represent, in driving forward improvement.

Communications

Developing and implementing a communications strategy, which includes mechanisms for listening to ‘the voice of the child’ (including those who are under five years of age), families, staff and delivery partners.

Taking account of the measures set out in this Improvement Notice

We expect the Council to put in place an Improvement Board which shall have an independent Chair (“Board Chair”) and which we expect will meet every 4 weeks initially. If in the future the Improvement Board wishes to vary the frequency of meetings this must first be agreed by the Department for Education. The Improvement Board should include in its membership the Council’s partners. An official from the Department for Education will attend as a participant observer.

An Improvement Plan should be developed by the Improvement Board with the Council’s partners to carry out the recommendations identified in the Ofsted inspection reports of 20 March 2013 (published on 23 April) and those set out in this Improvement Notice. With members of the Improvement Board, the Council must agree a dataset of performance targets with clear and realistic targets and timescales. The Council must report to the Improvement Board on progress against these, and reporting must include analysis of performance trends that are failing to meet the targets and timescales set. The Council should aim for all targets to be met by **eighteen months** from the start of this Notice. The performance targets will form part of the discussion at the formal review meetings with the Department for Education.

Improvement against the above measures will be assessed as follows:

- The Board Chair must provide to the Minister of State for Schools a written 6 monthly report including specific commentary against the targets set out in this Notice. The Board Chair must also provide an initial report 2 months after the commencement of this Notice. Additional external validation of progress, such as a peer review, should be commissioned and carried out before the end of this Notice to inform decisions on next steps.

The progress reports from the Board Chair will inform reviews of progress which will be conducted by Department for Education officials and take place after six, twelve, and eighteen months from the start of this Notice, or at the specific request of the Department. The Board Chair’s report will be supplemented by a report on progress from the Leader of the Council. Such reviews may result in an amendment to this Improvement Notice and further action being required.

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

The Secretary of State for Education using statutory powers 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: 

**David Laws MP
Minister of State for Schools**