

Improvement Notice

To: Name Cumbria County Council (“the Council”)
Address 5 Portland Square, Carlisle CA1 1PU

This Improvement Notice (“the Notice”) is being issued due to inadequate performance in:

Children’s Social Care Services, on the basis of evidence contained in:

- the Ofsted reports of the inspection of safeguarding and looked after children’s services, published 29th May 2012, and the inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children, published 24th June 2013, (“the inspection reports”) which judged the overall effectiveness of the Council’s arrangements to protect children to be ‘inadequate’.

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

The Council must take action to:

- (i) improve areas of weakness identified in the inspection reports;
- (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 (“partners”) as identified by the Council, must demonstrate evidence of improvement, and also take the following actions:

1. Leadership and Governance

- 1.1. Ensure that Children’s Social Care Services are adequately resourced, that workforce capacity is sufficient to meet the demand for services, and that there is a robust strategy for recruitment, retention and ongoing training of staff. The impact of this strategy should be reported to the Board.
- 1.2. Appoint a new Independent Chair of the Cumbria Safeguarding Children Board (“CSCB”), following consultation with the CSCB Partners¹, with a remit to:
 - (i) ensure that Council staff and the Council’s partners understand their roles and responsibilities as set out in Working Together 2013, and to hold all agencies to account for delivering their contribution to the vision and ambition for overall improvement;
 - (ii) review the membership, structure and operation of the CSCB to

¹ regulation 4 of the Local Safeguarding Children Board Regulations 2006

ensure the Board is constituted correctly², and is fulfilling its statutory objectives and functions³.

- (iii) arrange for an independent, external review of CSCB progress, including governance arrangements, within six months of the date of this notice; report the results to the Improvement Board (“the Board”); and act promptly on any recommendations.

2. Quality of Practice

- 2.1. Work with all partners to ensure that the Triage team is provided with adequate and reliable resources, and that there is a robust agreement between partners to assure the sustained, long-term future of the team.
- 2.2. Audit the work of the Triage team, to ensure that responses are timely, consistent, and effective, and report to the Board.
- 2.3. Take action to reduce delays in case transfers and improve information sharing throughout the service, ensuring that all workers remain focussed on the needs of the child at all times.
- 2.4. Take action to reduce the variability of practice across teams: ensure that all staff have a shared understanding of the quality of work that is acceptable, apply this standard consistently across the service, share good practice, and seek to bring all workers up to the standard of the best.
- 2.5. Ensure that all management oversight is conducted in line with Working Together 2013 to ensure safe practice and decision-making on individual child protection cases, and set ambitious quality standards which must be agreed by the Board.
- 2.6. Regularly review all plans to ensure that children and young people receive social care services for as long as is needed, and are stepped down to universal services promptly when it is appropriate and safe to do so.
- 2.7. Provide regular qualitative feedback reports to the Board and CSCB which demonstrates continuing improvement in quality and effectiveness of management and decision making, and provide assurance that no children and young people known to the service are left at risk of harm.

3. Early Help and Partnership Working

- 3.1. Work collaboratively with partners to develop and implement an early help strategy which:
 - (i) identifies children and families who would benefit from early help;

² section 13 of the Children Act 2004 and regulations 3 and 3A of the Local Safeguarding Children Board Regulations 2006

³ section 14 of the Children Act 2004 and regulations 5 and 6 of the Local Safeguarding Children Board Regulations 2006

- (ii) ensures effective assessment of the need for early help, and sets out agreed assessment processes and clear thresholds⁴ which all staff working within social care services of the Council and across partner agencies understand and consistently apply;
 - (iii) sets out the services that will be provided to those children and young people who do not meet the threshold for statutory intervention or referral to children's social care services, but who require early, targeted, or multi-agency help; and
 - (iv) ensures that consistent, effective, co-ordinated early help services are provided by the most appropriate agencies.
- 3.2. Develop protocols with partners for the identification of, and help for, children and young people who are at risk of going missing and/or child sexual exploitation; and ensure that all children who go missing are given independent support on their return.
- 3.3. Work with partners to develop, deliver and regularly audit early help services; and review and adapt practice in the light of lessons learned from audits, serious case reviews, and any other new evidence.

4. Improvement support measures

Delivering improvement places additional pressures and higher expectations in terms of the performance of both senior officers and members. Taking account of the measures set out in this Improvement Notice we expect the Council to:

- 4.1. Continue to support the the Board and its Independent Chair ("the Chair"). The Board is expected to meet at least every six weeks. If in the future the Board wishes to vary the frequency of meetings this must first be agreed by the Department for Education. An official from the Department for Education will attend Board meetings as a participant observer. The Board should include partners in its membership. The Council must provide the Chair with administrative support to a level sufficient for the Chair to undertake their role efficiently and for the Board to operate effectively.
- 4.2. Develop and implement an Improvement Plan which will set out the actions required to comply with this Notice.
- 4.3. With members of the Board, the Council must agree a dataset of performance indicators with targets and timescales. Targets should be set at appropriate intervals. The Council must report to the 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 within six months of the commencement of this Notice, and have in

⁴ under section 17 of the Children Act 1989

place plans for continued monitoring of performance against targets to ensure that improvement is sustained and embedded. 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:

- Two months after the commencement of this Notice, and at six-monthly intervals thereafter until this Notice is lifted, the Chair must provide the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families with a written progress report including specific commentary against the targets set out in this Notice. These reports should be supplemented by progress reports from the Leader of the Council.
- The Chief Executive, members of the CSCB and, where appropriate, the Lead Member will hold the Chair of the CSCB to account for the effective working of the CSCB, and the Chair of the CSCB will report regularly to the Board on the functioning and progress of the CSCB.
- Additional external validation of progress such as a peer review should be commissioned. Alternatively should an Ofsted Inspection occur then similarly this will inform progress and decisions on next steps.
- The progress reports from the Chair will inform reviews of progress which will be conducted by Department for Education officials and take place six months after commencement of this Improvement Notice, or at the specific request of the Department for Education. Such reviews may result in an amendment to this Notice and further action being required.

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

Should the Council be unwilling or unable to comply with this Notice, or the Secretary of State for Education not be satisfied with the Council's progress at any stage, the Secretary of State for Education may choose to use his statutory powers of intervention (s497A Education Act 1996) to direct the Council to enter into an appropriate arrangement to secure the improvements required in children's social care services.

Signed:  Date: 7.1.14

Edward Timpson MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State