

STATUTORY DIRECTION TO HALTON BOROUGH COUNCIL IN RELATION TO CHILDREN'S SERVICES UNDER SECTION 497A(4B) OF THE EDUCATION ACT 1996

WHEREAS:

1. The Secretary of State for Education ("The Secretary of State") has carefully considered Ofsted's report published 17 July 2024 in respect of Halton Borough Council ("the Council") following an inspection which was carried out between 13-24 May 2024. The inspection report found that children's services are overall 'inadequate'. The sub-judgements for the impact of leaders of social work practice with children and families, the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, the experiences and progress of children in care and the experiences and progress of care leavers were all rated as 'inadequate'.

2. The Secretary of State is therefore satisfied that the Council is failing to perform to an adequate standard, some or all of the functions to which section 497A of the Education Act 1996 ("the 1996 Act") is applied by section 50 of the Children Act 2004 ("children's social care functions"), namely;

a) social services functions, as defined in the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, so far as those functions relate to children;

b) the functions conferred on the Council under sections 23C to 24D of the Children Act 1989 (so far as not falling within paragraph a. above); and

c) the functions conferred on the Council under sections 10, 12, 12C, 12D and 17A of the Children Act 2004.

3. The Secretary of State has appointed Steve Walker as Commissioner for Children's Services in Halton ("the Children's Services Commissioner") in accordance with, and for the purposes of, the terms of reference ("the Terms of Reference") set out in the Annex to this direction. The Secretary of State has also appointed Stuart Smith as the Department for Education Improvement Adviser for Halton.

4. The Secretary of State considers it expedient, in accordance with his powers under section 497A(4B) of the Education Act 1996, to direct the Council as set out below in order to ensure that all of the Council's children's social care functions are performed to an adequate standard.

NOW THEREFORE:

5. Pursuant to their powers under section 497A(4B) of the Education Act 1996 Act, the Secretary of State directs the Council as follows:

a. To comply with any instructions of the Secretary of State, the Children's Services Commissioner or Improvement Adviser in relation to the improvement of the Council's exercise of its children's social care functions and provide such assistance as either the Secretary of State, the Children's Services Commissioner or Improvement Adviser may require;

b. To co-operate with the Children's Services Commissioner, including on request allowing the Commissioner at all reasonable times access:

- i. to any premises of the Council;
- ii. to any document of, or relating to, the Council; and
- iii. to any employee or member of the Council,

which appears to them to be necessary for achieving the purposes of, and carrying out the responsibilities set out in, the Terms of Reference.

c. To provide the Children's Services Commissioner with such amenities, services and administrative support as they may reasonably require from time to time for the carrying out of their responsibilities in accordance with the Terms of Reference, including:

- i. providing officers' time or support;
- ii. providing office space, meeting rooms or computer facilities;

d. To co-operate with a Children's Services Commissioner-led review to determine whether the Council has the necessary capacity and capability to bring about the required change and improve their children's services and to identify the most effective way of securing and sustaining improvement in Halton.

6. This direction will remain in force until it is revoked by the Secretary of State.

Signed on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Mark Taylor', with a long, sweeping flourish extending upwards and to the right.

Mark Taylor

A Senior Civil Servant in the Department for Education

Dated: 30 August 2024

ANNEX

Non-Executive Commissioner for Children's Services

Halton Borough Council

Terms of Reference

Halton Borough Council have been found to be 'Inadequate' across all of the key judgements in the recent Ofsted inspection report. In cases of persistent or systemic failure, children's social care services may be removed from local authority control, for a period of time, in order to bring about sustainable improvement.

In line with the recommendations set out in the Ofsted report of children's services, published 17 July 2024, the Children's Services Commissioner for Halton is expected to take the following steps:

1. To issue any necessary instructions to the Council for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the Council's delivery of children's social care; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements.
2. To bring together evidence to assess the Council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the Council.
3. To advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the Council, taking account of local circumstances and the views of the Council and key partners.
4. To report to the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State by 29 November 2024.