

Improvement Notice

To: Halton Borough Council 'the council'
Municipal Buildings
Kingsway
Widnes
WA8 7QF

This Improvement Notice is issued to Halton Borough Council on 30 October 2026 by the Department for Education following the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) Area SEND Inspection, published on 26 January 2024 and the Area SEND Monitoring Inspection, published on 12 March 2026 in response to the areas for priority action and improvement highlighted in the reports.

1. This notice is given following the Local Area SEND inspection published on 26 January 2024. This notice is given to address the area of ineffective action highlighted in the subsequent Local Area SEND monitoring inspection published on 12 March 2026 and replaces the Improvement Notice published on 21 March 2024.
2. To comply with this notice, the following actions are required of the Council, working with Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB) and its other local partners ("partners"), as set out in section 28 (2) of the Children and Families Act 2014.

Improvement steps to be taken

3. The Department requires the Council to prepare and submit a Priority Action Plan and an updated Strategic Plan, which will set out how the Council will address the areas of concern identified.
4. The Council's improvement plans working with the ICB and partners, should deliver appropriate and sustainable improvement, taking account of the views of parents, children and young people, school and education leaders and wherever possible, putting co-production at the centre of improvement activity. The improvement plans will be set out in the Priority Action Plan and must cover the area of ineffective action specified in the Ofsted and CQC monitoring inspection reports published on 12 March 2026. The priority areas identified as ineffective action for the Council, working with the ICB and partners to take action on was to:
 - a. improve the early identification of needs and access to specialist health pathways and the support available, while children and young people wait;
5. The Council have recently worked with partners to produce a Local SEND Reform Plan, and if the Reform Plan is treated as the "Strategic Plan" then it

is this document that will need to be updated to address the areas of concern above. Whether the Council and its partners update the Reform Plan, and/or a separate strategic planning document, we require that plans for improvement align with plans for reform.

During the period in which they are delivering necessary improvements against the specific areas set out in this Improvement Notice, the Council and its partners must demonstrate the ability to also show progress against these reform requirements.

6. The Council's plans, working with the ICB, should deliver appropriate and sustainable improvement. They should take account of the views of parents, children and young people, school and education leaders, and put co-production at the centre of improvement activity.
7. The Department has also provided a SEND adviser and a finance adviser to offer support and challenge to the Council in identifying and delivering the necessary improvements. The Council must work constructively with these advisers, and with any other experts deployed by the Department to provide support and challenge, until such time as the Department is satisfied that this is no longer required.
8. To ensure there is clear evidence of progression:
 - a. the Council must ensure there is an Improvement Board, with an Independent Chair, which is attended by key leaders across education, health and care services, Parent/Carer Forum and appropriate Elected Members of the Council, to a timetable agreed with the Department. It is expected that the Chief Executives of the Council and the ICB, and the Children's Services and ICB Accountable Officers, are held to account for the improvements required to be made through effective engagement with the Board and escalation/resolution of matters arising as the Board identifies;
 - b. the Improvement Board must have clearly assigned accountabilities for all actions agreed, along with clear and measurable targets covering the areas of concern identified and any additional actions recommended by the Department;
 - c. the Improvement Board must take equal responsibility to ensure that it also delivers against the core minimum requirements of the Local SEND Reform Plan, that there is clear accountability through a named Senior Responsible Officer for the Local SEND Reform Plan and that improvement actions are progressed in alignment with the Local SEND Reform Plan;
 - d. those accountable for the actions in the Priority Action and Local SEND Reform Plans must keep the content up to date, with a risk register and mitigation plan updated in line with the meeting cycle and provided to the Improvement Board in advance;
 - e. reports to the Improvement Board should include data, analysis and evidence of the impact of improvements on the lived experience of

- children and families, and the Council ensures that they submit quarterly SEND Reform Plan data returns;
- f. the Improvement Board should maintain an action and impact log which is updated at each meeting, highlighting objectives which are slow to progress and where contributions need to be strengthened.
 - g. The Council must ensure that a standing Improvement Board item focused on Area for Priority Action 4 is established.
9. Invitations to Improvement Board meetings must be sent on each occasion to the DfE-appointed SEND adviser, NHS England adviser and to the Department's lead as external attendees, rather than as members of the board.

Improvement against the above measures will be assessed as follows:

10. The DfE-appointed SEND adviser and NHS advisers, working alongside DfE and NHSE officials, will provide regular updates to ministers and the Department more generally on progress or concerns relating to the areas set out in this notice; and any other information relevant to the improvement journey. This includes the quality, ambition and implementation of the Local SEND Reform Plan by the Council and its partners.

Department for Education Stocktake Reviews

11. Officials from the Department will undertake reviews of progress against the Priority Action Plan and the Strategic Plan at least every six months and more regularly where appropriate. We will also discuss delivery of your local SEND Reform Plan at least every three months, as part of the ongoing monitoring of these reforms – and where possible, we will seek to align timings so that the stocktake review meetings can also cover that quarter's monitoring of your Reform Plan.
12. Reviews, including deep dives into areas of concern, may cover but are not limited to: leadership; governance; co-production; quality of workforce training and support; multi-agency arrangements including joint commissioning, education, health, and social care provision; the timeliness and quality of Education, Health and Care plans; alternative provision commissioning; and engagement with children, young people, families and carers.
13. Prior to reviews, the Council should provide to the Department its own assessment of improvement. This may include, but is not limited to:
- a. progress against the Priority Action Plan and Local SEND Reform Plan objectives;
 - b. feedback from parents, carers, children and young people;
 - c. clear information about local accountability and governance structures;
 - d. the documentary evidence used to plan, track and evaluate the impact of actions. This may include:

- I. A progress update against each area of priority action, each area for improvement and DfE recommendations;
 - II. A dashboard of performance measures showing whether targets and milestones are being met in a timely manner; any slippage; evidence of impact and whether the local area is on track to meet the next set of milestones.
 - III. Evidence that key partners, including children and young people, families and schools are playing an active role in improving services.
14. From time to time, the Department may require that a diagnostic review or assessment is undertaken by a party agreed with the Department.
15. For any review or assessment, the Council must provide the person(s) conducting it with:
- a. access to, and time with, staff and leadership;
 - b. accurate and up to date data on performance and quality;
 - c. facilities to carry out the reviews; and
 - d. access to minutes of meetings or any other relevant information.
16. Following the January 2026 Area SEND monitoring inspection, which found ineffective action on Area for Priority Action 4, the Department for Education requires a diagnostic review or assessment to be carried out by a party agreed by the Department, in line with the expectations set out in the earlier Improvement Notice. The review must report to both the Improvement Board and the Department. Once the report is received, the local area partnership should update its Priority Action Plan.

Timescales:

17. The Council should aim for actions included in the Priority Action Plan to be delivered by the end of September 2027 and for the impact measures to be evidenced by the agreed target dates. The Council should also ensure that delivery of the Local SEND Reform Plan is evidenced.
18. This Improvement Notice will not be stepped down until the Minister agrees that there is sufficient evidence of improvement against all of the areas for improvement. The Council should continue to deliver its local SEND Reform Plan alongside this improvement activity – if implementation of the Reform Plan is not in line with expectations, the Department may consider a revised or new Improvement Notice to address this.

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

19. Should the Council be unwilling or unable to comply with this Improvement Notice or should the Secretary of State not be satisfied with the Council's

progress at any stage, she may choose to invoke her statutory powers of intervention (s497A Education Act 1996) to direct the Council to take any further actions deemed necessary to secure the improvements required in SEND services.

Signed:

Date: 30 October 2026

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'HP' followed by a long, sweeping horizontal stroke.

Helen Pledger

Senior Civil Servant in Department for Education