

Improvement Notice

To: Name **Herefordshire Council** ("the Council")
Address Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford, HR1 1SH

This Improvement Notice ("the Notice") is being issued due to poor performance in arrangements for the protection of children. On the basis of evidence contained in the report of the inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children, carried out by Ofsted dated 19 October 2012 ("the inspection report") which judged the overall effectiveness of the Council's child protection arrangements 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 Ofsted inspection report and ensure child protection arrangements meet all legislative requirements; and
- (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:

Leadership and Governance

1. In line with '*Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*'¹ ensure that across the partnership and within the Council assurance arrangements are in place to assess that the Lead Member and the DCS and senior leaders have the capacity to give Children's Services sufficient priority and focus.
2. Ensure the Council sets out a statement of their vision and ambition and plan, including targets and timescales for children's safeguarding services regarding the improvements planned as a result of this Notice by 31 March 2013. Ensure 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, ambition and improvements expected by the Council.
3. Review the membership, structure and operation of Herefordshire's Local Safeguarding Children Board by 31 March 2013 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*'.

¹ This is included in the '*Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families*' (figure 2 page 17).

4. Ensure that individual children, families and staff are engaged and provide regular feedback to improve the quality of service and shape practice.
5. Ensure that the views of staff are considered in relation to their work and workplace using appropriate feedback mechanisms. To support this, consideration should be given to the Children's Safeguarding Performance Information Framework (published 12 June 2012).²

Decision making, escalation management oversight and supervision

6. Ensure that all management oversight and decision-making by the Council is conducted in line with standards set out in '*Working Together*' and the Framework for Assessment and in local standards, and that evidence of such management oversight and decision making is set out in detail on each case file. Action must be taken to address areas of practice where performance does not meet standards.
7. Ensure professionals from all agencies understand their responsibilities with regard to child protection and make use of escalation procedures if they believe that children are not receiving appropriate services from any agency or organisation.
8. Ensure those with responsibility for supervising social workers and other social care staff have relevant experience and the opportunity to access training and support to fulfil this responsibility.
9. Ensure that supervision is regular, reflective, comprehensive and up to date, and robustly identifies any needs, risks or protective factors so that supervision is effective and leads to managers taking appropriate and timely action. Ensure that the Improvement Board receive management information to confirm that this is achieved and sustained.

Effectiveness of practice and risk assessment

10. Develop and implement a whole systems framework to manage family pathways from early help to statutory intervention. This should include the thresholds and referral mechanisms to step up to and down from specialist safeguarding services; and the criteria to assess whether a child is in need under S17(10) of the Children Act 1989. The framework should be communicated, understood and applied consistently across all partners working together to safeguard children. This will ensure that children, young people and their families receive support at the earliest opportunity and get the right help at the right time.
11. Develop and implement a system of risk assessment that informs the development of all child protection and children in need plans to ensure consistent judgments are made about the levels of risk, following the

²<http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/safeguardingchildren/protection/b00209694/perf-info>

“Conceptual Framework”³. Ensure that all relevant staff apply this Framework in their practice and that management information and the audit of the case files provide evidence that this is being done and the quality of social work practice is improving.

12. Ensure improvement in the timeliness of decision making on all referrals, that they are appropriately risk assessed and prioritised within the appropriate referral and assessment team.

Assessment quality and timeliness

13. Ensure all assessments are analytical, timely, comprehensive, regularly updated and are in line with the statutory guidance ‘*Working Together*’⁴ and the ‘*Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families*’⁵. Assessments must identify needs, risks and protective factors and lead to appropriate and timely action and take account of and record the views, experience and needs of children and families. New information or concerns must lead to a review of the current plan for the child and when required, additional action taken.

Care Planning

14. Improve the quality, delivery and management of child protection and children in need plans by ensuring that all plans comply with ‘*Working Together*’ and the *Assessment Framework* including setting out the actions that must be taken and by whom and the outcomes to be achieved with timescales.
15. Ensure that children in need and those subject to child protection plans are visited regularly by social workers in line with ‘*Working Together*’ and local policy.
16. Ensure that legal advice is consistently sought in a timely way, and that this leads to timely legal planning meetings and legal intervention where necessary.
17. Ensure that assessments and child protection case conferences effectively involve parents and children and ensure that parents are able to understand the purpose of children in need and child protection plans.
18. Ensure sustained improvement of the quality of core group meetings by holding them on a regular basis and effectively developing and implementing the child protection plan, which must be monitored by child protection conferences.

³ This is included in the ‘*Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families*’ (figure 2 page 17).

⁴ Statutory Guidance: ‘*Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*’
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00305-2010>

⁵ Guidance: ‘*Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families*’
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DH-4014430>

19. When making plans for offenders who have significant contact with children and other young people who are known to them, ensure effective communication takes place between all partners, but in particular relevant probation services and children's social care services.

Quality Assurance, LSCB and Audit

20. Conduct within one month of this Notice an audit of all cases closed in the last three months and risk assess all current cases within children's social care services, to assess whether children and young people are at risk and whether any further action is required. If action is required take the appropriate action to safeguard the child.

21. Ensure the Council's quality assurance systems are prepared in line with the Children's Safeguarding Performance Information Framework⁶ and the quality assurance processes that are referred to in '*Working Together*'. Alongside any quantitative information, an understanding of qualitative evidence should be demonstrated including the experience of the child and family.

22. Ensure regular qualitative auditing arrangements of case files, with periodic independent oversight and challenge to ensure the quality and timeliness of recording and compliance with the guidance on recording in individual case records (as set out in '*Working Together*') and that an assessment of risk to the child is recorded in the case file.

23. Ensure the performance information and evidence from the audits are analysed and reported to the Improvement Board in accordance with the report published by Ofsted '*Good practice by LSCB children boards*'⁷. Analysis of the audits must be used to inform action taken by the Council and partners to bring about improvements in safeguarding social work practice and casework.

24. Ensure effective assurance arrangements are in place within the Council and across the partnership in line with 'Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services'⁸.

25. Ensure that multi-agency audits are undertaken by the Hereford Safeguarding Children's Board and reported to the Improvement Board outlining the key lessons to be learnt and improvements to be made.

Workforce, training and workloads

Attention must be paid to the eight standards for employers of social workers⁹.

⁶The Children's Safeguarding Performance Information Framework can be found at <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/safeguardingchildren/protection/b00209694/perf-info>

⁷<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/good-practice-local-safeguarding-children-boards>

⁸<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00034-2012>

⁹http://www.local.gov.uk/web/quest/workforce/-/journal_content/56/10171/3511605/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

26. Implement a programme of induction, training, mentoring and continuous professional development for all social care staff including managers to improve the quality of front line social work. In particular, ensure that this programme includes training for staff and first line managers on risk analysis. The Council should report the impact of the training on improving outcomes for children to the Improvement Board.
27. Following an analysis of the needs of the service, develop and implement an overall workforce strategy. The strategy should provide clear evidence of impact in creating a capable, stable and sustainable workforce which requires fewer agency staff and which includes clear recruitment and retention plans. The aim should be to improve the quality and continuity of social care staff experienced by children and families.
28. Review and monitor social workers' responsibilities and workloads to ensure staff have a manageable range of work and a caseload consistent with their level of experience and competence. Ensure that the Improvement Board receives workforce management information to confirm that this is achieved and sustained.

Improvement Support

Delivering improvement places additional pressures and higher expectations in terms of the performance of both senior officers and members. Therefore the Council must:

29. Work with representatives of the Children's Improvement Board to formalise a package of sector support to address the issues set out in the inspections or raised through any sector peer review or challenge activities. This is to help support delivery of improvement in outcomes for children, young people and families in Herefordshire and to increase the skills, knowledge and professional practice of staff.

Taking account of the measures set out in this Notice

30. Put in place an Improvement Board which shall have an independent Chair ("Board Chair") and which 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.
31. Develop an Improvement Plan with the Council's partners to carry out the recommendations identified in the Ofsted inspection report of 19 October 2012 and those set out in this Notice. With Improvement Board members, the Council must agree a dataset of performance targets with clear and realistic targets and timescales. Regular qualitative feedback reports must also be made available to the Improvement Board which demonstrate continuing improvement in quality and effectiveness of management and


decision making so that no child or young person is left at risk of harm and that children and families receive the most appropriate support and help at the most appropriate time. 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 18 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:

32. The Board Chair must provide to the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families 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.
33. 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 6, 12 and 18 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 Notice and further action being required.

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

34. 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: 14 Feb 2013

**Edward Timpson MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families**