



Edward Timpson MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Councillor Mike Bird
Leader of the Council
Civic Centre
Darwall Street
Walsall
WS1 1TP

Den Mike,

1 November 2012

As you will know, I have now taken over from Tim Loughton as Minister with responsibility for children and families policy. Following a long standing interest in this area, I share his commitment to improving the lives of vulnerable children and children in care. I look forward to working closely with you in Walsall on this important issue.

Thank you for your letter of 1 November to James Holden agreeing the terms of the Improvement Notice. It is important to me that all children get the best possible services to improve their life chances, delivered in a timely and efficient way. The Improvement Notice sets targets and measures in relation to those areas of the council's work with these most vulnerable children and young people, which need urgent focussed attention. I recognise the council's commitment to tackling the challenges it faces and understand that you are already making progress through drawing up improvement plans, establishing an improvement board to monitor and drive improvement, and that you have appointed an independent chair.

As is standard practice, the Improvement Notice will be published on the Department for Communities and Local Government's website. You are encouraged also to publish it on your own website.

Finally, I would like to thank officers at Walsall for their positive contribution to helping my officials draft the Notice. I wish you all the best on your improvement journey and look forward to hearing of good progress being made.

I am copying this letter to Councillor Rachel Andrew (Portfolio Holder for

Children's Services, Paul Sheehan (Chief Executive of the Council) and Rose Collinson (Executive Director, Children's Services).

Yours sincerely,

Edward

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

Improvement Notice

To: Name Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council (“the Council”)
Address The Council House, Lichfield Street, Walsall, WS1 1TW

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

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

- the report of the inspection of local authority arrangements for the for the protection of children carried out by Ofsted dated 27 July (“the inspection report”) which judged the overall effectiveness of the Council’s safeguarding services to be ‘inadequate’.

The following measures are needed for you to comply with this Improvement 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 and effectiveness of frontline practice

- **To improve the quality, and consistency of initial and core assessments** by taking account of the safeguarding risks to the children and young people and ensuring their views are recorded, where this is appropriate. Take account of the analysis and views of the Council’s partners and ensure all assessments are completed to the timescales set out in statutory guidance ‘*Working Together*’¹. Ensure that the assessment informs decision making and planning in line with statutory guidance. Ensure that qualitative evidence arising from performance management systems and case audits confirms that this has been carried out satisfactorily.

¹ 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>

- **Improve the quality, delivery and management of child protection plans** by ensuring that all child protection plans comply with '*Working Together*' including ensuring that the plans set out the actions that must be taken and by whom and the outcomes to be achieved with timescales. Ensure that 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 this has been carried out satisfactorily.
- **Develop and implement a whole systems framework to manage families pathways from early help to statutory intervention.** As part of this develop and implement early intervention services with thresholds and referral mechanisms to step up to and down from specialist safeguarding services which will ensure that children, young people and their families receive support at the earliest opportunity. Ensure thresholds and criteria for assessment of the child² and what to do when children and young people do not meet the threshold for statutory intervention but require targeted, multi agency, or early help, are communicated, understood and applied consistently across all partner agencies. Improvements would reflect a reduction in re-referral rates and positive feedback from partners and staff that children are receiving the help they need when they need it. Review and monitor the use of thresholds and criteria to ensure their effectiveness.
- **Develop and implement a system of risk assessment** that will inform all decisions, including Child Protection and Children in Need Plans to ensure consistent judgments are made about the levels of risk, following "the Conceptual Framework for Thinking about Risk Assessment and Case Management in Child Protective Service"³. Ensuring that all staff (including across the partnership) are engaged in safeguarding work are applying the 'Conceptual 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.
- **Ensure the Council's quality assurance systems are prepared** in line with the Safeguarding Improvement Plan and quality assurance processes 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

² under section 17 of the Children Act 1989

³ "the Conceptual Framework for Thinking about Risk Assessment and Case Management in Child Protective Service" as described in Statutory guidance 'The Framework for The Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families'
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Framework%20for%20the%20assessment%20of%20children%20in%20need%20and%20their%20families.pdf>

by the Improvement Board (“the Improvement Board”) who should also work with the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board (“LSCB”). Regular qualitative feedback reports must be made available to the Improvement Board and LSCB which demonstrate continuing improvement in the quality and effectiveness of support to vulnerable children.

- **Feedback from individual children, families and staff improves and shapes practice.** Ensure that the views of staff are considered in relation to their work and workplace through engagement and using feedback mechanisms such as staff surveys and report the results to the Improvement Board. To support this, consideration should be given to the Children’s Safeguarding Performance Information Framework (published 12 June 2012).⁴
- **Ensure that all management oversight and decision-making is** conducted in line with standards set out by the Council (and agreed with the Improvement Board) and ensures safe practice. Evidence that management oversight and decision making is taking place must be set out in detail on each case file. Regular qualitative feedback reports must be made available to the Improvement Board and LSCB which demonstrate continuing improvement in the quality and effectiveness of management and decision making.

Capacity, capability and culture

- **Implement a comprehensive programme of induction, training, mentoring and continuous professional development** for all children and families staff – and working with partners to implement 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 workers⁵. In particular, ensure that this programme includes training for staff and managers on risk analysis. The Council should report the impact the training has on improving outcomes for children to the Improvement Board.
- **Social worker responsibilities and workloads** are 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’, ensure attention is paid to case allocation and case management and that 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

⁴<http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/safeguardingchildren/protection/b00209694/perf-info>

⁵http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/workforce/-/journal_content/56/10171/3511605/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

access training and support to fulfil this responsibility. Ensure that the Improvement Board receives management information to confirm that this is achieved and sustained.

- **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
 - **Effective assurance arrangements are in place** within the Council and across the partnership in line with DfE statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children Services.
 - **The ambition for children and young people across Walsall is understood** and endorsed in practice throughout the Council and across the partnership.

Improving the quality of partnership and governance

- **Strengthen the role and leadership of Walsall Safeguarding Board ("WSCB")** in areas of support, challenge and scrutiny of safeguarding activity to:
 - **Establish clear multi-agency thresholds** which are shared with and understood by all partners and ensure children access appropriate services and that there is consistency in referrals across all agencies.
 - **Implement a borough-wide multi-agency quality audit system** to ensure that case work and recording, management oversight and decision making is rigorous.
 - Provide evidence of the implementation of recommendations from **serious case reviews** and complaints and their subsequent impact in shaping and informing practice.
 - Put arrangements in place for **prompt information sharing** once a child enters the care system so that coherent health support is provided.
 - **Support the Clinical Commissioning Group** to discharge their safeguarding responsibilities.

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 key partners and agencies. An official from the Department for Education will attend as a participant observer.
- **An Improvement Plan** must be developed by the Improvement Board with partners and agencies to carry out the recommendations identified in the Ofsted inspection reports of 31 July 2012 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 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.

Delivering improvement in these key areas requires the commitment of the whole council - councillors and staff - and partners, with clear roles and responsibilities, clarity of purpose and direction, and appropriate monitoring and challenge. The Council must develop and maintain the environment to achieve this by:

- **Ensuring the Council sets out a statement of their vision and ambition** for children’s services (with a clear set of objectives and timescales) regarding the improvements planned as a result of this intervention by December 2012. Ensuring this statement is communicated to and implemented by staff and partners such that they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in delivering this vision and ambition of the Council, and overall improvement;
- **Ensuring that the partners of the Council on the Improvement Board work with the Council to agree objectives, actions and timescales** which will provide the evidence to monitor progress and assess impact for 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 partners of the Council who have been identified by the Council as requiring this information so that they understand their roles and responsibilities in delivering these objectives and improvements. The Improvement Board must also ensure that plans are implemented to agreed timescales.
- **Ensuring WSCB** 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*'. As part of this that multi-agency audits are undertaken by WSCB and reported to the Improvement Board outlining the key lessons to be learnt and improvements to be made.

- Establishing procedures that will ensure that each member of the Improvement Board, Children's Partnership Board and WSCB 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.

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:

- **Work with representatives of the Children's Improvement Board⁶ 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. The outcome of such activities is to help support delivery of improvement in outcomes for children, young people and families in Walsall and to increase the skills, knowledge and professional practice of staff.

Improvement against the above measures will be assessed as follows:

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.

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:

⁶ The Children's Improvement Board is a partnership between LGA, ADCS and SOLACE
http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/cyp-improvement-and-support/-/journal_content/56/10171/3487171/ARTICLE-TEMPLATE

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: 1.11.12

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