

Inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services

Cheshire West and Chester Council

Inspection dates 1 – 12 November 2010

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Age group: All

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About this inspection

1. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services in the local area towards ensuring that children and young people are properly safeguarded and to determine the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. The inspection team consisted of three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one inspector from the Care Quality Commission. The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004.
2. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:
 - discussions with children and young people receiving services, front line managers, senior officers including the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, elected members and a range of community representatives;
 - analysing and evaluating reports from a variety of sources including a review of the draft Children and Young People's Plan, performance data, information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day care provision and the evaluations of a serious case review undertaken by Ofsted in accordance with 'Working Together To Safeguard Children', 2006;
 - a structured review of 22 case files for children and young people with a range of need, complemented by an examination of key aspects of a further 44 cases selected at random. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision making undertaken;
 - the outcomes of the most recent annual unannounced inspection of local authority contact, assessment and referral centres undertaken in September 2010;
 - discussions with directors, senior manager representatives and front line staff from NHS Western Cheshire and Central and Eastern Cheshire PCT, Countess of Chester Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, Mid-Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

3. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding (Grade 1)	A service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good (Grade 2)	A service that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate (Grade 3)	A service that only meets minimum requirements
Inadequate (Grade 4)	A service that does not meet minimum requirements

Service information

4. Cheshire West and Chester Council is in the north west of England. It was established as a unitary authority in April 2009 as a result of local government reorganisation and was formed from three district councils and a county council. The council area covers both rural and urban populations and services are centred on the three districts of Ellesmere Port, Chester and Vale Royal. It has a population of 326,600 of whom 76,400 are under the age of 19 years. This is 23.2% of the population and has decreased by around 3% over the last five years. The vast majority of the population is White British with around 4.6% of the child population from minority ethnic groups. The proportion of pupils with English as a second language is very low and according to the school census of spring 2010 there were 34 such pupils. Around 16% of children and young people aged 17 or under live in one of the 20% of wards identified as having the highest levels of deprivation in England. The authority's unemployment rate is currently 3.1% which is low compared to rates for the north west of England of 4%.
5. The Cheshire West and Chester Children's Trust Board has been established since July 2009 and includes a broad membership from key statutory agencies. It relates directly to the local strategic partnership, West Cheshire Together, which became operational in April 2009. The local government structural changes prompted a reorganisation of the Children and Young People's Directorate within the council. The Director of Children's Services together with a new senior team were in post by June 2009. New locality working arrangements are being developed through three locality teams which will incorporate children's centre staff, parenting support workers, the youth service and Connexions.

6. Commissioning and planning of health services for children and young people are carried out by two primary care trusts (PCTs): NHS Western Cheshire and Central and Eastern Cheshire PCT. Acute services including accident and emergency services are provided by the Countess of Chester Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and Mid-Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, although families may choose to access services at hospitals located in neighbouring authorities. Specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are provided by Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.
7. There were 151 children in receipt of a child protection plan on 11 November 2010. On that same date there were 348 children who were looked after, 42 of whom lived in external placements in residential or foster care. A further 124 were placed with the authority's own foster carers, 59 lived with family or other relatives and 27 were placed with their parents. There are four local authority children's residential care homes. Community-based social care services are provided by three child in need teams which include duty and assessment workers, three child in care teams which also provide services for care leavers, a specialist team working with children with disabilities, two fostering teams and an adoption team. Groups of family support workers are attached to each social work team. Other family support services are delivered through 20 children's centres and a family intervention project.
8. Education and care for pre-school children is provided by 314 childminders, 110 day nurseries, 67 pre-school settings, 35 maintained nurseries and 6 independent nurseries. Education for children and young people aged 5–16 years of age is provided by one infant and one junior school, 127 primary schools, 19 secondary schools including two academies, ten special schools and one pupil referral unit.
9. Post-16 education and training is provided by one sixth-form college and two colleges of further education. A number of secondary schools also include sixth form provision.
10. Services for young offenders aged 10–17 are provided by Cheshire Youth Offending Service, which is a partnership between the council, Cheshire Constabulary, Cheshire Probation Trust, the NHS, Connexions and the drugs and alcohol action team. Youth services and careers guidance are provided from within the Cheshire and Warrington Connexions Partnership.

The inspection outcomes: Safeguarding services

Overall effectiveness

Grade 4 (inadequate)

11. The overall effectiveness of the council and its partners in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in Cheshire West and Chester is inadequate. Statutory requirements are not met in important aspects of assessment and multi-agency child protection planning. Critical weaknesses in the organisation of services and in the quality of practice and management within children's social care became apparent to senior managers in the council following local government reorganisation in April 2009. This was reported to the Cheshire West and Chester Children's Trust Board (CWACCTB), to elected members and to the Cheshire West and Chester Children's Safeguarding Board (CWACSCB). A detailed improvement plan was drawn up to make the required improvements. However, the Ofsted unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in September 2010 identified a failure to manage known risks leaving some children at risk of significant harm. This inspection has also found serious deficiencies in the assessment of risk and in the quality of multi-agency child protection planning.
12. The council's commitment to improve frontline social care services has had insufficient impact on an existing inter-agency culture within which delay and a lack of decisive action feature prominently. The council and the CWACSCB have, through small-scale audits, identified some children and young people who received inadequate protection and have taken appropriate action to remedy this. However, effective multi-agency plans to remedy the known deficits are not yet in place. In some cases examined during this inspection, immediate risks of harm had not been identified and properly assessed. The overall quality of multi-agency child protection planning is poor and fails to produce improved outcomes for children and young people. Social care staff are dealing with too many inappropriate referrals. Action to develop a solid approach to multi-agency early intervention has been accelerated recently, but there is still much to do to ensure that the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is fully embedded in practice.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 4 (inadequate)

12. Capacity for improvement is inadequate. The council inherited an extremely challenging situation following local government reorganisation in April 2009 and underwent a period of instability and uncertainty as a consequence. The effects of this legacy were that fundamental weaknesses in organisation and professional practice, coupled with a lack of capacity, were endemic in children's social care services. Multi-agency case planning for those most at risk failed to incorporate a robust culture

of professional challenge. The senior leadership team in social care has been in post for less than 18 months and has acted quickly as the scale of these challenges was uncovered, to initiate a detailed improvement plan. There is a recent track record of implementing a more robust and appropriate structure for social care provision, of increasing management and staffing capacity, and of putting in place basic processes and systems for managing the work. However, this inspection finds that the extent of the current critical deficits in multi-agency and social care practice has not been fully grasped, and that evidence of impact from these improvements is limited.

13. Significant weaknesses remain in respect of the assessment of risk, the quality of multi-agency child protection planning and in the variability of practice and management. The scale of these weaknesses has been underestimated by the CWACCTB, the CWACSCB and partner agencies. Quality assurance and audit processes are insufficiently robust or effective. As a result, a clear understanding of the extent of concerns for all children subject to more detailed assessments or multi-agency child in need and child protection plans is not in place. There is insufficient staff within the frontline social care service with the necessary skills to close the gap between inadequate and satisfactory practice, and this is likely to take some further time to resolve. Nevertheless, performance against national indicators has improved and is largely in line with, or better than, comparative authorities and examples of good assessment and multi-agency case planning have also been identified during this inspection. The council has responded promptly and positively to reaffirm its determination and commitment to improve provision for children most at risk.

Areas for improvement

15. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Cheshire West and Chester, the local authority and its partners should take the following action:

Immediately:

- Ensure that all core assessments are timely, take suitable account of family history and contain a clear analysis of risks.
- Ensure that all reports presented to child protection case conferences are of a consistently acceptable quality and are shared with parents, children and other professionals in a sufficiently timely way prior to conferences.
- Ensure that all child protection plans are robust and incorporate realistic outcome focused actions which are reviewed appropriately at subsequent core group meetings.

- Ensure that the CWACSCB reviews the current functioning and performance of multi-agency core groups to assure the full and appropriate engagement of all agencies so that planning is effective in reducing risks and improving outcomes for children.

Within three months

- Ensure that the CWACSCB reviews its business plan in the light of the multi-agency improvement plan developed in response to this inspection.
- Review membership of the CWACSCB to ensure it is compliant with statutory guidance and reflects the diversity in the local area.
- Review governance arrangements within the CWACSCB and its relationship with the Children's Trust Board to ensure that the work of the trust is monitored and evaluated.

Within six months

- Ensure that the CWACCTB sets clear, measurable and achievable targets to accelerate the use of the CAF to assess and meet children and young people's needs.
- Ensure that the CWACCTB secures a significant reduction in the volume of inappropriate referrals to children's social care within six months.
- Ensure that the council provides a published reporting of findings from complaints, and that learning from complaints is widely disseminated across agencies and informs service development.
- Ensure that the council enables elected members to be more effective in performing their scrutiny role through the provision of appropriate safeguarding training.

Outcomes for children and young people

The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe **Grade 4 (inadequate)**

16. The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure children and young people are safe is inadequate. The council and its partners are failing to ensure that all children and young people at risk of significant harm are safe. The impact of performance management in ensuring compliance with policies, procedures and guidance is inconsistent. Line managers do not provide sufficiently robust scrutiny of, or challenge to, the quality of child protection and children in need assessments and plans.

17. Arrangements to identify and support women and children affected by domestic abuse are good overall. Attendance by midwives at multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) is good and has led to improved information sharing with the police and a better identification of risks to unborn children. The provision of safe accommodation for women and children is satisfactory. Preventative action is taken through effective school programmes to challenge aggressive behaviour exhibited by young men. Good work is being undertaken with very young children who have been affected by domestic abuse, and a voluntary behaviour management programme for male perpetrators is in place.
18. Both the accident and emergency and the urgent care centres have appropriate systems in place to record children's previous visits and to track emerging concerns. Children's social care provides the named nurses with regular information on children with a child protection plan to ensure that the health alert system is up to date. All staff are aware of how to access information at evenings and weekends. Named safeguarding professionals are in post in all healthcare provider organisations; their roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and appropriate appraisal and supervision is provided to ensure they fulfil their roles safely.
19. Arrangements to identify and find children missing from home, care and school are good and children are appropriately safeguarded. The council and partners have begun to interrogate data in relation to missing children. However, they have yet to identify where children and young people go to when they are missing and the extent of their vulnerability during that time. Discussions have started with the police and neighbouring authorities to develop projects for children involved in sexual exploitation, but this work is at an early stage. The 130 children who are electively home-educated receive good support for their educational needs and advice on how to access school health services. A lack of information about pre-school children who may become home educated has been identified and the council and health agencies are working in partnership to address this.
20. Safe recruitment processes are satisfactory and comply with statutory requirements. Previous weaknesses, identified by the council have been satisfactorily remedied. Criminal Record Bureau checks are suitably undertaken and risk assessments in respect of staff identified as having a criminal record are appropriately completed. Local agencies, including health agencies, have satisfactorily implemented the learning from a recent serious case review and the lessons learned have been effectively disseminated.
21. The safety of some very challenging young people in contact with the youth offending service is undermined by a lack of suitable accommodation. In addition there are long delays in gaining access to provision at evenings and weekends, which impacts negatively on the

workload of the police. This is recognised as a priority by local agencies and is highlighted within the developing Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) 2011–13.

22. The very large majority of schools and post-16 provision inspected by Ofsted during 2009/10 were judged to be good or better for safeguarding. The majority of early years providers are also received good or better judgements.

The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people feel safe **Grade 3 (adequate)**

21. The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people feel safe is adequate. All the children seen by inspectors say that they feel safe and can turn to trusted adults for support. The views of children and young people are generally obtained within assessments and planning processes. Their views and wishes are captured well in the CAF process. The council and its partners have taken suitable action to obtain the views of children and young people, including those who are more vulnerable, on a wide range of issues and concerns. Their views are being effectively incorporated into the developing CYPP. A number of elected members demonstrate their interest in listening to children through a programme of regular visits to schools. However, although consultation at service level is frequent, the CWACCTB does not have a direct mechanism for ensuring that the views of children and young people, including the most vulnerable are systematically represented to the board.
22. Young people's views about their safety influence service provision. For example, improvements were made to the school transport system following consultation with children and young people through the young person's anti-bullying group YABA (Youth Against Bullying Association) when concerns about bullying on school buses were identified. This has successfully reduced the number of bullying incidents and children and young people say they feel safer when using school transport. The Sharpe (School Help Advice Reporting Page System) is currently established in five of the 17 secondary schools. This ensures that young people can report bullying electronically and have access to a confidential counselling service. Plans are in place to expand the system across more schools.
23. Children are appropriately supported to feel safe in school through good pastoral support. This includes a programme of targeted support to assist vulnerable children to make the transition to secondary school. Learning mentors, school counsellors, peer mentoring and buddying schemes offer access to a range of trusted adults. The Youth and Connexions Service work in partnership with schools and colleges to provide a good range of targeted programmes to support vulnerable groups including a focus on gun crime, drug and alcohol and sexual health. Young people with specific

needs, such as young carers are also offered well-focused support which enables them to feel safer.

The quality of provision

Grade 4 (inadequate)

24. The responsiveness of services is inadequate. Multi-agency child protection practice is weak and the quality of risk assessment is too variable. Additionally, there are significant variations within children's social care in the quality of services provided across the area. The council became aware of significant deficits shortly after local government reorganisation and has acted quickly to address these. This has had a positive impact, for example the services provided by the safeguarding children in education team and the emergency duty service were reviewed and as a result they have been considerably strengthened. However, important deficits still remain and the progress made, although significant, has been insufficient to ensure that the risks faced by the most vulnerable children are fully recognised and reduced and that outcomes for all children subject to child protection plans are improved.
25. The quality of multi-agency partnership working is very variable. Agencies work adequately to identify and respond to children and young people identified as having additional needs. The relevant agencies are appropriately consulted and involved during child protection enquiries and their engagement during assessments of need is improving. Nonetheless, the overall engagement of agencies in implementing child protection plans is poor. Until very recently there were no clearly agreed multi-agency thresholds for access to services at all levels of vulnerability. A good and inclusive multi-agency review process led to the launch of the Continuum of Care in October 2010. Staff already report that this provides much needed guidance to assist them in making referrals. However, its impact is at a very early stage and a significant proportion of referrals to the duty and assessment teams continue to be inappropriate. This creates additional work to identify which referrals should be dealt with through other processes such as the CAF and in turn limits the teams' capacity to progress work with those children whose needs are complex.
26. It is recognised by the council and its partners that the implementation of the CAF has been slow. Appropriate action has been taken by the CWACCTB to accelerate its development and monitoring has been strengthened. Although numbers have doubled over the last twelve months, the CAF is insufficiently embedded in everyday practice across all agencies and arrangements for the evaluation of its impact are not in place. Some specific pathways, such as in the accident and emergency department at the Countess of Chester NHS Foundation Trust, have been developed. However, implementation across schools, community health settings and the three localities remains too variable. Adult services are insufficiently engaged in identifying the needs of vulnerable children. Inspectors identified instances of emerging neglect where a CAF should

have been undertaken at a much earlier stage, but agencies had failed to recognise the need for this. Where CAFs are undertaken, they are of a good standard. Three parents seen by inspectors were satisfied with the process and the outcomes achieved for their children and themselves.

27. Individual complaints are managed satisfactorily and investigated in accordance with statutory timescales. Case records do not, however, demonstrate that children and families are routinely offered information on how to make a complaint. Families attending child protection conferences do not benefit from advocacy although plans are in place to make this available shortly. The council has not yet produced an annual report on complaints nor has the CWACSCB received a summary of child protection related complaints. The council plans to produce a report at the end of 2010–11 but in the absence of this, it is difficult to ascertain how the outcome of complaints is improving services or practice.
28. Statutory guidelines in relation to complaints made against staff working with children are robustly managed in accordance with statutory requirements by the Local Authority Designated Officer. Strategy meetings are well attended and managed, and referrals are appropriately made to the Independent Safeguarding Authority. The monitoring of investigations is sound and there is evidence that learning from individual cases is being actively used to improve the quality of provision.
29. Assessment and direct work with children and families are inadequate overall, although there is clear evidence of progress in some areas. Considerable action has been taken to improve the quality of initial screening and decision-making in all the council's duty and assessment teams. The recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements found that incoming contacts are not screened by qualified social workers. The council responded quickly and from December 2010 a social work manager will oversee all incoming contacts. All teams now have increased management expertise. Health staff comment that action taken by social care in response to referrals is now timely and appropriate. Importantly, the process for undertaking child protection enquiries has improved and is satisfactory, with evidence of prompt, well-recorded strategy discussions, clear decisions and appropriate actions taken. However, a historical legacy of poor casework practice is taking time to change and the quality of previous assessments and risk assessments remains unacceptably poor. Too many assessments demonstrate a lack of consultation with other agencies together with a limited analysis of risk. Consequently, risks are insufficiently assessed and plans to reduce safely the risks are unclear. The council, through recent audits of case files, is aware of some of these serious weaknesses, and has taken firm remedial action but this has not yet produced the desired impact across all provision. Nevertheless, in contrast, some initial assessments of children's needs examined by inspectors were promptly undertaken, demonstrated good engagement with other agencies and

contained clear plans to reduce risks. The number of core assessments completed within timescales has increased well from 75% in April 2010 to 93% in September 2010.

30. Progress is slow to address a longstanding issue in respect of the number of domestic abuse referrals received from the Cheshire constabulary. These are subject to internal scrutiny but this causes a delay before they are sent to social care for consideration. A draft protocol to manage this is under consideration and the council recognises the need for more coordinated action with neighbouring authorities. Local arrangements to forensically examine children who may have been sexually abused are variable and inadequate. Children who need these examinations may have to travel some considerable distance. This adds unnecessarily to their distress and is not sufficiently child-focused. Although agencies and the CWACSCB have identified this as unsatisfactory, they have been unable to resolve this issue.
31. Direct work to support children and young people's emerging emotional and behavioural difficulties is adequate. Community staff, including those in children's centres, provide a wide range of programmes such as the Webster Stratton training. However, children and young people aged 16 and under requiring an out-of-hours assessment of their mental health have to be admitted overnight to a paediatric ward as there is no on call assessment service provided by CAMHS. Young people aged 16–18 are seen promptly by the liaison team and those with learning disabilities who also have mental health needs receive an appropriate and responsive service. Although waiting times from referral to assessment for specialist CAMHS provision are less than six weeks, this is still experienced as too long for some with the most urgent needs. Most children with additional needs and those deemed to be 'in need' benefit well from direct work by family support workers and children's centres. Older young people at risk of abusing substances receive well-targeted group work from health and Connexions staff. The family intervention project, although at an early stage of development, is already improving outcomes for some very vulnerable families. The recent development of an outreach service for children on the edge of care means that children are beginning to receive flexible and responsive support to meet their needs. There are plans to extend this area of work by providing respite care and outreach support from a small residential unit. However, this new service has yet to develop specific targets or to agree how its impact will be measured.
32. Case planning, case reviews and recording are inadequate as the overall standard of care planning is unacceptably inconsistent. There are serious weaknesses in the management oversight and practice with children for whom there are significant concerns about their safety and those subject to child protection plans. In a significant proportion of cases examined during the inspection, there were unacceptable delays in assessing risks for children who were already in receipt of services and a lack of decisive

intervention to ensure that children and young people were properly protected. As a consequence, some children were left at significant risk of further harm. In some instances decisions were inappropriately taken without the involvement of more senior managers.

33. Attendance at child protection conferences by most agencies is adequate. The arrangements made by the two Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) to offer paid locum cover to enable General Practitioners (GPs) to attend are highly commendable and have resulted in higher levels of attendance. However, the involvement of workers from adult social care and health services is inconsistent. The practice of tabling reports for initial and review child protection conferences at the beginning of the meeting is inadequate. It fails to allow for proper consideration of important and complex material. This practice is insensitive to parents and carers who described the experience as a 'double criticism' and as 'humiliating', especially where the contents of the social worker's reports, including what their children had said, were not shared with them prior to the meeting.
34. Multi-agency child protection plans are inadequate. Chairs of initial child protection conferences provide good detailed guidance and outline plans, but these are not developed into effective and workable plans. In too many instances, plans consist of a list of tasks which are not linked to known risks. Required outcomes, contingency arrangements and clear timescales for implementation are unclear. A number of plans seen failed to take account of previous family history and consequently set unrealistic expectations of parents. There is a lack of engagement in, and understanding by local agencies about their responsibilities in the delivery of child protection plans. Records of core groups do not demonstrate that agencies are sufficiently challenging of each other's contribution and practice. Core group members are insufficiently clear about their contribution to reducing risks. As a result planning processes demonstrate drift and a lack of robust analysis about the degree of change that has occurred. Child protection conferences are effectively chaired and there is evidence that chairs are compensating for the lack of experience and skill of some staff. Social workers have unrestricted access to legal advice and are encouraged to seek this at an early stage to ensure effective planning. Good progress is now being made in relation to providing further support for children who are no longer the subject of child protection plans. However, this improvement is very recent and is not yet embedded in practice. Despite these overriding weaknesses, child protection planning for some children is robust, agreements with parents are clear, action to reduce risks is effective and outcomes for children improve.
35. The standard of case recording is very variable. It is hampered by the current electronic recording system that is being replaced. Records are stored in a number of places and this does not assist in managerial oversight or case audit. Although significant improvements have been

made to the templates for recording intervention, a child protection exemplar has not been developed and this is a significant omission. While a proportion of recording is of an adequate standard, other recording is devoid of the necessary detail and analysis. There is also delay in completing written records which means that information is not available to be shared. However, more encouragingly, other records examined during the inspection contained good detailed risk analysis and evidence of valuing and using children's wishes and feelings well.

Leadership and management

Grade 3 (adequate)

36. The leadership and management of safeguarding services are adequate. Ambition and prioritisation are adequate. Senior managers within the council and in children's services have demonstrated strong resolution to ensure that services are of a consistently good standard. However, critical shortcomings remain which leave some children and young people at risk of harm. The CWACCTB has been well informed of the risks to children arising from weaknesses identified in social care services and has responded appropriately by confirming clear priorities for improvement and ensuring that it is regularly updated in respect of progress. The council and its partners adopted the CYPP which was developed by the previous council and progress against targets has been suitably reviewed. A new plan is being developed and the identification of key safeguarding priorities is progressing at an appropriate pace. These now reflect a better understanding of the scale and urgency of some of the changes in multi-agency safeguarding practice that are required, such as strengthening the role of early intervention. However, the Board was insufficiently aware of the scale of problems in relation to multi-agency child protection planning. Within the two PCTs there is a good strategic awareness of safeguarding issues and safeguarding is a key strategic priority, but the quality of leadership provided to GPs across the area is inconsistent. Elected members are well informed of the origins, scale and complexity of the safeguarding challenges within frontline social care services by a lead member who is very committed to children. The independent chair of the CWACSCB provides a good level of challenge to partner agencies through her membership of the board.
37. Safeguarding policies and procedures, including those within health settings, comply with statutory guidance and support practice well. As a new authority, a number of multi-agency strategies have had to be simultaneously developed. As a consequence, some such as the parenting and family support strategy and the associated commissioning arrangements are at a relatively early stage. This has created a degree of uncertainty and instability for voluntary and community sector providers. There are good plans in place to update child protection procedures in conjunction with neighbouring local authorities to ensure a consistent approach to all children across 'Cheshire'. Multi-agency information sharing arrangements are effective.

38. Early progress was made in setting up an integrated health and social care commissioning team which has made appropriate progress in developing effective procurement and contracting arrangements. Some joint commissioning activity such as CAMHS, the outreach sexual health worker for 'hard to reach' young people, and the emerging approach to locality working is already in place and is informed by a comprehensive joint strategic needs assessment undertaken during 2009. This demonstrates a sound knowledge of local communities. An example is the innovative approach to appoint three community members as local health trainers in Ellesmere Port. However, it is recognised that progress needs to be accelerated and a draft strategy has recently been produced which identifies a significant number of areas of potential joint commissioning activity.
39. Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development, is inadequate. Performance management arrangements within children's social care lack rigour. The council has acknowledged that this is aggravated by an inadequate electronic social care recording system which does not support management information requirements and necessitates time consuming manual processes to ensure data accuracy and quality. Plans to replace this system are well advanced but the targets for full implementation are unrealistic given the scale of the task involved.
40. The CWACSCB does not have a performance management and quality assurance framework in place or a mechanism to evaluate the impact of the role of the independent chair. However, the Board has undertaken several small-scale multi-agency audits of practice. There is evidence that these have appropriately identified significant deficits in the quality of frontline work. However, not all audits are sufficiently rigorous and lead to improved outcomes. It has been known that the quality of multi-agency child protection planning is poor but insufficient action has taken place to provide the necessary assurance about all children subject to plans. The council's own audit of cases selected for this inspection failed to identify all instances of poor practice which left children at risk of significant harm. In addition, lines of accountability and authority within children's social care are unclear, so that decisions which affect children's safety are sometimes made without the involvement of more senior managers. The council has acknowledged this and is developing a strengthened decision-making process.
41. Secure arrangements to govern the relationship between the CWACSCB and the CWACCTB are not yet fully in place and currently the Board does not scrutinise robustly the Trust or hold individual agencies to account. Scrutiny by elected members is underdeveloped in relation to safeguarding and child protection. Some performance is reported to and challenged by the Overview and Scrutiny Board and this has supported the improvement in key indicators. However, members of the Every Child

Matters Select Panel have not received appropriate training and the respective roles of this group and Overview and Scrutiny Panel are unclear.

42. Progress to develop a strategy for the children's workforce is too slow and is not underpinned by a comprehensive analysis of skills. There has been insufficient urgency in developing the council's recruitment and retention strategy. Some work involving frontline staff has been undertaken but potential strategies for recruiting and retaining staff have been insufficiently explored. Capacity is generally satisfactory. There are sufficient health visitors and school nurses to ensure the provision of universal health care. Capacity has been significantly increased in children's social care, but the span of control is still too wide in frontline management given the scale of the challenges facing the council.
43. Progress in developing an integrated training programme for the children's workforce is also slow. However, managers in service areas such as parenting support and children's social care have responded appropriately to commission a suitable range of courses and the quality and availability of training has improved. The 'Back to Basics' programme for frontline social care staff is well focused and offers stimulating challenge. However, there is a lack of specialist and advanced training for experienced staff and some necessary training has not yet been delivered. Requirements for safeguarding training are incorporated in all health contract specifications. The designated and named professionals from both PCTs and provider organisations work effectively to provide and monitor training programmes. Access to basic and continuing child protection training fulfils requirements. However, the uptake of training by independent contractors, including GPs, remains below target.
44. Senior social care managers have taken firm action to prioritise the delivery of frequent and high quality supervision. Most staff now receive regular supervision and the quality of critical reflection is improving. The outcome of audit is being used to target further improvements. Social workers commented to inspectors that they feel safer as a result of improved supervision and effective line management. The council is aware that improvements to the standard of recording of supervision are still required. Named nurses and doctors ensure that adequate supervision is provided to staff involved in safeguarding and improvements have been made to the structure and quality of supervision sessions.
45. Adequate, regular performance monitoring arrangements are in place within children's services to oversee performance against national indicators which have improved. Unpublished data for 2009–10 show that the council is in line with the national average for the large majority of safeguarding outcomes, but did not achieve its own demanding targets. In particular the timeliness of assessments has improved and is better than in similar areas. As a new council, trend information against which to

judge improvement is not yet available. Both PCTs and all the major health provider trusts have satisfactory reporting mechanisms in place to provide assurance in respect of safeguarding arrangements and performance. Action plans are well-monitored. Health outcomes are generally good but a number of indicators, such as the number of teenage pregnancies, decreasing immunisation rates and the proportion of children who are overweight, are not improving at the expected rate.

46. User engagement is adequate. Children, young people and their parents have suitable opportunities to contribute their views in case planning. Strategic development to coordinate and integrate systematic participation is at an early stage of development with plans in place to develop this area of work. Processes for obtaining the views of children and young people in receipt of intervention through the CAF are good. Their views and wishes are captured well including through the effective use of CAF cards. Parents are also engaged well. Children and young people appropriately contribute to child protection conferences by making their views known through trusted adults but the council are aware that further work is needed to ensure that they can make their contributions in person. Those children, young people and parents seen by inspectors feel that they are treated with dignity and respect.
47. There are examples of promising initiatives to involve children and young people in service delivery. The virtual children's participation programme is an imaginative mechanism for ensuring that children with disabilities and those in rural communities are enabled to make their views known. Some young people have been involved in improving practice within schools through the Targeted Adolescent Mental Health and Schools project. Young people's involvement in sexual health services has been recognised through the 'You're Welcome' quality award. They have also been involved well through the safeguarding in education team in auditing safeguarding practice in schools. However, the systematic involvement of children and young people in strategic and service development and planning is underdeveloped in respect of the CWACCTB, the CWACSCB and both PCTs.
48. Partnerships arrangements are adequate overall. Local government reorganisation resulted in the need to re-establish the CWACSCB which after a slow start has picked up momentum. The independent chair has effectively increased the pace of delivery and highlighted a focus on outcomes. However, in recognition of the recent history and culture of safeguarding which was seen as largely the business of social care, the board is appropriately re-launching its work. The board is well structured and the executive group takes a strong lead role. Attendance at sub groups is good. The board has developed an adequate business plan which reflects agreed priorities. Capacity in resourcing the board and driving business planning has recently increased. The board regularly receives basic performance data and is in the process of developing a

quality assurance framework. The board is aware that its membership does not fully reflect statutory requirements, for example although health representation is good, including recent attendance of mental health providers, there is no GP representative, and the board is taking the appropriate steps to remedy this. A good quality multi-agency training programme, a proportion of which is accredited, has been developed by the board. This has been well received by staff.

49. There are examples of positive partnership working to meet the needs of vulnerable children, for example joint programmes to address health inequalities including comprehensive health programmes delivered by co-located professionals within children's centres. Older young people also benefit from effective partnership working to address substance misuse, such as the targeted group work in schools undertaken by the drug and alcohol team working in partnership with the Connexions service.
50. Multi-agency public protection arrangements effectively manage high risk offenders including those who are no longer on licence. However, attendance by some agencies is inconsistent. Partnership working to tackle domestic abuse through MARAC is satisfactory and has contributed well to the development of police actions in respect of domestic abuse. However, attendance is also inconsistent and the partnership is aware that the quality of some information requires improvement.
51. The effectiveness of services in promoting equality and diversity is adequate. Assessment and direct work with children and families generally take account of their culture, heritage and religion. Frontline staff across children's services and health agencies have good access to interpreters for non- English speaking families. Better consultation with communities and service users is a key priority for the council's equality action plan, and the need to provide more support for lesbian, gay and bisexual young people has been identified. A range of multi-agency programmes is available to support children and young people from minority ethnic groups. Work with families of Traveller heritage is good. Partnership working between the Traveller Education Service and community health provision has improved the use of patient-held records, increased access to children centres and increased immunisation rates; educational outcomes are beginning to improve. The council is developing services to respond to emerging new communities, including the Polish and Asian communities.
52. A coordinated multi-agency approach to promoting equality and diversity in schools supports community cohesion through the celebration of different religious festivals and of Black History month. The equality and diversity work of Cheshire West and Chester Youth Parliament is having a positive impact on supporting young people to consider these issues when contributing to service design and delivery. The council's self appraisal against level two of the local government equality framework benefited

from elements of peer review. The outcome of this indicates that the council is achieving in line with level two requirements although a formal assessment is yet to take place. A corporate responsibility for tackling inequality has been satisfactorily established. Good action has been taken to raise awareness in respect of forced marriages. Areas for improvement, such as a more systematic approach to monitoring and analysing equality information, are being addressed. The safeguarding related equality impact assessments viewed by inspectors during the inspection were satisfactory. Equality and diversity training and refresher courses and conferences are mandatory for all new staff. However, the council accepts that its current workforce strategy does not sufficiently address the need for greater diversity in the workforce.

53. Value for money is adequate overall. The management of resources to support the safeguarding and child protection service is satisfactory. The council's analysis of its performance in relation to similar authorities identified that safeguarding services are relatively low cost and low performing. However, strong corporate and political support has provided additional funding of £5.7 million since the summer of 2009 which has been directed well to areas of greatest weakness. Key improvements have been made including a significant increase in frontline capacity, reduced workloads and managerial spans of control, and improvements to the duty and assessment service. It is acknowledged that the legacy of a multi-agency 'welfare' approach to child protection will take longer to turn around. However, although the impact of additional resources can clearly be seen within the management of frontline services, insufficient effort has been focused on evaluating the impact of resource allocation on outcomes for children. Expenditure is well controlled and monitored. An intelligent approach balances cost and quality and is supported by benchmarking activity to compare costs and performance. Senior managers and politicians within the council have supported the drive for improvement by requiring fewer efficiency savings within children's services than in other areas of the council's business. Nonetheless, a well-conceived project to restructure and improve business support has reduced costs and enabled a reduced workforce to be more flexibly deployed. Procurement arrangements are sound and are beginning to involve service users. Better procurement has enabled additional services to be purchased for the same price; for example additional hours at no extra cost in the new children and young people's on-line counselling service.

The inspection outcomes: services for looked after children

Overall effectiveness

Grade 3 (adequate)

54. The overall effectiveness of looked after children's services is adequate. The council and partners meet their statutory requirements for looked after children and care leavers. Some outcomes are improving well, such as the timeliness of reviews, increased school attendance and reduced exclusions. Good action has been taken to provide additional support to prevent placement breakdown. Outcomes in children's homes and the adoption service are good and are satisfactory in the fostering service. However, placement stability is below that found in similar authorities, particularly in short-term placements. There is mixed performance in relation to attainment at GCSE. Recent arrangements to improve the quality of services are beginning to demonstrate impact, for example the increase in foster care recruitment and in better decision making at the point of care.
55. The changing profile of the looked after population is understood and there is evidence of a number of effective service developments plans, but these lack coordination and prioritisation within an overarching multi-agency strategy. Looked after children and young people make a satisfactory contribution to their care plans and make some contribution towards the effectiveness of service provision. The council accepts that there is scope for improvement in relation to their contribution to strategic planning through the CWACCTB. Staffing resources are generally adequate to deliver priorities and workloads are manageable. However, many staff are relatively inexperienced and require rigorous managerial support to consistently improve outcomes. Some family support workers providing additional support to children and carers are inadequately supervised. Sufficient financial resources have been made available to support an increasing looked after population. However, it is recognised that current commissioning practice is reactive to need, and a more considered strategy is required to improve supply, create choice and improve value for money.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 3 (adequate)

56. The capacity to improve the looked after children's service is adequate. The council has existed in its current form for approximately 18 months and started with generally inadequate service provision and practice for looked after children, together with a lack of basic management information. Since the end of 2009, priorities have been clearly established and there is a recent but significant track record in achieving improvements in the quality of residential care and the availability of local foster care placements. The plan to reorganise looked after children's

social care services through dedicated teams is a recent but positive development and is already showing some improved outcomes in the quality of care planning. Nevertheless, there are a number of processes and practices which require review and implementation. These include the development of a targeted workforce strategy and more sophisticated arrangements for commissioning placements. There is on the whole a good understanding of these issues. The work has yet to commence to ensure that improvements achieved within social care are expanded to involve fully other disciplines and partner agencies. There is strong commitment from elected members and senior managers in the council to ensure that sufficient resources are made available to sustain and accelerate these recent improvements.

Areas for improvement

57. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for looked after children and care leavers in Cheshire West and Chester, the local authority and its partners should take the following action:

Immediately:

- Ensure that all family support workers dealing with looked after children receive regular and good quality supervision.
- Ensure that all relevant reports, plans and background information are made available to independent reviewing officers at least three working days prior to each review meeting.

Within three months:

- Strengthen existing arrangements for independent reviewing officers to meet with looked after children prior to the first review of their care plan, to ensure that they are able to meet with children and young people prior to each subsequent review meeting.
- Ensure that all looked after children and young people who have little or no contact with their birth families have access to an independent visitor if this is their wish.
- NHS Western Cheshire to ensure that good quality health assessments are completed for all looked after children and care leavers and that the performance of the looked after children's health team is part of its integrated governance system.
- Ensure that all services, including those newly developed, have clear targets to achieve and that mechanisms are put in place to evaluate impact.

Within six months:

- NHS Western Cheshire and Central and Eastern Cheshire PCT to ensure that arrangements are put in place to monitor the quality of health care provided to looked after children in out of area placements.
- Ensure that looked after children and care leavers are accorded a priority access to timely specialist mental health support.
- Develop and agree a multi-agency strategy for looked after children and care leavers to include a full analysis of the reasons for the recent increase in numbers and the actions needed to sustain an increase in the availability of local placements and to improve commissioning arrangements.

Outcomes for children and young people

57. Health outcomes for looked after children are inadequate. There are unacceptable variations in the quality of initial and review health assessments. Although the proportion of completed assessments and dental checks at 79% is in line with the national average, there are significant variations in the performance of the two health providers. The quality of all health assessments and reviews carried out in NHS Western Cheshire is poor. Until June 2010 assessments were undertaken by GPs who had received no additional training and there is an absence of management oversight or audit. Very little training has been given to health visitors and school health advisors to enable them to carry out good quality health assessment reviews. Additionally, monitoring of the quality of initial and review health assessments is inadequate and an annual health report is not provided by NHS Western Cheshire. However, looked after children in the Central and Eastern Cheshire PCT area receive an adequate level of health care. Specialist staff receive appropriate training and this is reflected in the satisfactory standard of health reviews which are also effectively monitored for timeliness and quality. The Central and Eastern Cheshire PCT also produces an annual report. Arrangements to monitor the health of children in external placements are inadequate in both PCTs as is the provision of health support for care leavers who receive poor levels of health related information.
58. Looked after children and their carers do not receive priority access to CAMHS and although waiting times are reduced to below six weeks, this means that some children do not receive support in a sufficiently prompt and responsive fashion. Until recently there has been no access to a specialist sexual health outreach worker and the looked after children nurses relied on providing opportunistic sexual health advice at health reviews. Health promotion activity is adequately carried out by the nurses during health assessment reviews and includes advice on healthy lifestyle choices. Information sharing and coordination between children's social

care and both looked after children's health teams is poor and contributes to the delays in carrying out assessments. The fact that the specialist health teams are not co-located contributes to this situation.

59. Staying safe outcomes for children and young people are adequate. Looked after children and care leavers surveyed for the purposes of this inspection and those seen by inspectors say they are safe and are able to easily discuss their worries with trusted adults to whom they can turn for assistance. The vast majority of looked after children and young people whose cases were examined by inspectors are in safe placements that met their needs. However, a recent case audit identified that the needs of small proportion of children on care orders placed by the council with their parents were inadequately assessed and the council has taken the appropriate action. The overall effectiveness of all four local authority children's homes is judged as good. The adoption service, inspected in October 2010 was found to protect children from harm and neglect well. The fostering service was judged satisfactory in its last inspection and has made good progress in addressing the recommendations made. Outcomes of inspections along with evidence from regulation 33 visits are appropriately incorporated into the council's quality assurance framework and actions to tackle recommendations are regularly monitored. All looked after children and care leavers are allocated a qualified social worker who coordinates their care plan and visits them regularly.
60. The council inherited a challenging situation following local government reorganisation with too few local foster carers. Some children's homes also failed to adequately meet children's needs and the council moved swiftly to close this provision. Partly as a consequence of these closures, the number of children experiencing three or more placement moves during 2009–10 was higher than the national average. The council has taken robust steps to respond to this, for instance through opening a new specialist children's home and making use of external placements which are also in the local area. There is an extremely low use of formal exemptions for foster carers to exceed their agreed number of placements which is positive practice. Good action has been taken to minimise placement moves and disruptions. Following the restructuring of the service in February 2010, the level and range of services are improved. Family support workers attached to each social work team provide a good range of additional assistance to children and carers. The integration of an education consultant into the children in care teams provides additional support when children's emotional needs impact adversely on educational outcomes. The effective use of the 'Staying Put' and the 'Right 2B Cared 4' projects is appreciated by care leavers who see it as a strong indication of the council's commitment to them. Along with tenancy support programmes, these initiatives have reduced the risk of care leavers becoming homeless or living in inappropriate conditions.

61. The missing from care protocol is working well. Children missing, including those placed externally, are promptly followed up by the police and social workers and are seen quickly following their return. The council is in the process of negotiating a strengthened contract for advocacy provision which will increase the availability of advocates to young people in this situation. Although the council reviews data on the children who go missing regularly, there is insufficient understanding of where young people go to when they are missing.
62. Education outcomes for looked after children are adequate. Strong strategic leadership is provided by the headteacher of the virtual school. The Children in Education team is developing a coordinated approach which enables children and young people to receive well-targeted support and minimises barriers to learning. Good partnership working between education and social care is successful in ensuring that the key adults in children's lives have a shared vision and high aspirations for looked after children. The virtual school team plays a significant role in the lives of looked after children and young people. Appropriate monitoring systems are in place to identify individual progress against starting points. One to one tuition and tailor made packages of support are available according to needs and there is good access to a weekly virtual learning drop-in session which provides individualised guidance and helps to ensure that educational concerns are dealt with in a timely manner. Effective arrangements are in place to monitor the attendance and progress of children placed externally and they receive the same level of support as those looked after in local authority placements. This is an area of good practice.
63. Good attention is paid to selecting an appropriate school for individual children and young people. They are given priority for school places and benefit from good support from designated teachers and learning mentors. Looked after children are prioritised for access to supplementary programmes including 'Time for Children', a volunteer scheme providing one to one support with reading in schools. To ensure those working in education receive up-to-date information, the children in care education team routinely provides training for staff, produces a termly newsletter and has developed comprehensive guidance. School governors receive an annual report on the education of children in care to support them in carrying out their statutory duties. Effective monitoring through Welfare Call has resulted in school attendances of looked after children being better than that of other school children in the council area. The number missing 25 days or more from education is low, with the best performance among similar areas. There have been no permanent exclusions of looked after children for two years and good behaviour management strategies, including a managed school transfer system, are successfully reducing fixed term exclusions. Good arrangements are in place to support children who are excluded from school include individual packages of support, ensuring that they remain engaged with education.

64. Monitoring of individual children's progress shows that most looked after children are making satisfactory progress against their starting point. The attainment of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and progress for children in Key Stage 2 have recently improved. The number achieving level 4 at Key Stage 2 in English is in line with national averages; however, attainment in mathematics is below the national average. In 2009, 84.2% young people sat at least one GCSE, which is the best performance in relation to similar authorities and all obtained at least one award. Additionally, 68.4% of young people obtained 5 A* to G grades which is also best performance. However, the numbers of young people achieving grades of A* to C are low. This is an acknowledged area of development and data are being better used to ensure that information is captured and used effectively.
65. A Personal Education Plan (PEP) coordinator has been appointed to improve the quality and frequency with which plans are developed. However, the quality of PEPS remains variable and only 87% of those eligible have an up to date plan. The council has plans in place to deal with this by introducing a quality assurance audit tool. An early years PEP has been developed and this is used in all settings including the private, voluntary and independence sector. This is a model of good practice and has had a positive impact on the outcomes for young looked after children. It also supports the development of life story work by providing a good record of the child's education journey.
66. Personal education allowances and extended school activities provide children and young people with good opportunities to participate in a range of sport, cultural and leisure activities. Arrangements are in place to ensure that those who live some distance from their school are able to be involved in extended school activities. The service is creative in seeking the views of children including the use of away days and surveys. Achievements are routinely celebrated by the council and its partners with an annual event and on-going instant recognition of achievement. Looked after children are given free leisure passes but these are not currently made available to their foster families.
67. Opportunities for looked after children and care leavers to make a positive contribution are adequate. The Children in Care Council is well established and has a growing membership including interest from younger children. It has been effective in improving how the council communicates and consults with looked after young people, including the development of the Pledge for children in care. Elected members have very effectively involved young people in a scrutiny review. Children and young people are able to influence strategic planning through links and 'shared' membership with the corporate parenting board. For example, council policy was changed to align allowances for foster children with those for children in residential care, and a decision was made to fund driving lessons. Looked after children and young people make an effective contribution to the

appointment of new staff and to the recruitment and training of newly appointed foster carers, ensuring that carers are challenged to understand the child's and young person's perspective.

68. Levels of attendance at care plan reviews are satisfactory. The 24 looked after children and young people seen during the inspection report that that their views and those of their parents and carers are taken into account. One young person said 'we get a sheet after the review with everything on it; it's written so we can understand it'. However, in contrast too few children and young people are actively involved in the development of their care plans. Most children and young people are seen separately by Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) prior to their first review. However, this is not then maintained in subsequent reviews due to constraints on the time available to IROs to meet with children.
69. Children and young people, including those placed externally, are generally made aware of their right to independent advocacy through their social workers and carers who receive regular updates about the service. Independent advocates regularly visit all four children's homes and are able to identify issues common to all children and young people through their attendance at the children in care council. However, arrangements to ensure that all looked after children can access an independent visitor are not in place as no looked after child currently benefits from this provision.
70. The youth offending service provides a good extended offer of additional support to those looked after young people who commit offences. Effective partnership working with children's services, education and the Connexions service has contributed to a good reduction in the numbers of look after children offending from 11% to 3% over the last 12 months.
71. Outcomes of the provision to promote the economic well-being of looked after young people and care leavers are adequate. Good action is taken to ensure that young people can stay in their placements after the age of 18 and currently 19 young people aged 18–20 have benefited from the opportunity to remain in stable placements. The quality of pathways plans is adequate overall. A recent audit has identified that a minority of young people do not have up to date plans and appropriate action has been taken. The 'Right to be Cared For' and 'Staying Put programmes' make a satisfactory contribution to reducing numbers not in employment, education and training. Although those aged 19 and over are proving harder to engage, over 86% of the 70 or so young people aged between 16 and 18 are benefiting from an appropriate placement. This has exceeded the council's own target of 75%. However, there remains difficulty in finding work opportunities for looked after young people who are offenders. Care leavers who are parents value the intensive and wide-ranging support they receive. The 'Care2Work' multi-agency steering group is developing an ambitious range of employment, work placement and training opportunities. Funding has been obtained to provide 'wrap

around' support to enable young people to sustain their placements. The council has made securing work and training opportunities a priority and a scrutiny review is currently underway in partnership with young people. This has produced a clearer awareness of the expectations and needs of care leavers and the council has recognised that the provision of two apprenticeships is insufficient and is planning to increase its offer.

72. Most care leavers are in suitable accommodation and are allocated the highest priority banding for council housing. There has been positive joint work by Housing Solutions and children's services to ensure that care leavers receive flexibly delivered tenancy and financial advice and support. Use of bed and breakfast accommodation is extremely rare and staff remain continuously involved with young people until suitable accommodation is found. Transitional arrangements for disabled young people are adequate. The 'Aiming High' multi-agency sub group appropriately reports to the CWACCTB and corporate parenting board. It has established a number of ambitious workstreams, such as the plan to improve support for disabled care leavers at university. However, there is sometimes delay in identifying key workers in adult services for those young people with less complex needs.

The quality of provision

Grade 3 (adequate)

73. The quality of provision for looked after children is adequate. In the cases reviewed by inspectors, outcomes generally improved for children and young people on becoming looked after. Looked after children and young people describe the positive impact of supportive and enabling care and have a clear understanding of the reasons they became looked after. Following local government reorganisation, the council undertook a timely review of the needs of looked after children and young people, and made significant improvements to service provision. These include the creation of three local teams to work specifically with looked after children, young people and care leavers. Staff from all agencies clearly describe the positive benefits of this restructuring which accords a higher priority to these children and young people and enables a sharper focus on meeting needs. The actions taken to reduce workloads and the span of managerial control and as well as the provision of more focused administrative support have had a positive impact on the quality of provision. However, limited resources within one of the two PCTs have had a negative impact on the contribution of health.
74. Additional care provision has been commissioned and a new children's home has recently opened. An outreach service has been developed for those on the edge of care providing very flexible and intensive support to families in crisis to ensure that young people only become looked after when there is no alternative. Experienced and skilled adoption workers ensure that early action is taken to ensure that children who require permanency through adoption are identified at the earliest stage.

Prospective adopters are rigorously assessed and plans are effectively tracked.

75. The majority of children and young people seen during the inspection indicated that they understand how to make a complaint. However, a very small minority are concerned that doing so might lead to their situation becoming worse. Complaints receive a timely and effective response and most are satisfactorily resolved at the earliest stage. Most young people report that they are fully satisfied with the outcome and have particularly appreciated the written apologies they have received. However, a very small minority are concerned that historically they received inadequate feedback. Learning from complaints is satisfactorily used to inform service improvements, for example in the annual review of foster care approval. Complaints are not currently monitored as a matter of routine by the corporate parenting board and an annual complaints report has not been prepared. Statutory guidelines in relation to complaints against staff and foster carers working with children are effectively managed. Robust arrangements ensure that allegations are fully investigated and effectively monitored. This learning is translated well into improving the quality of provision.
76. The quality of assessment and direct work with looked after children and young people is adequate. This is due to improvements made over the last year to create dedicated staff teams and due to satisfactory planning at the point of, and immediately following, children becoming looked after. However, some young people's needs have not been thoroughly assessed prior to becoming looked after as the quality of core assessments is poor; this means that information available to foster carers is limited. Most children benefit from good quality and well-focused direct work from social workers and family support workers. Family support workers are available from early morning to late evening each day of the week, and offer a flexible and responsive service addressing emotional and behavioural needs. Inspectors identified examples of good sensitive life story work, and this is also reflected by the findings of the recent adoption inspection. Other agencies such as Connexions and the youth service provide additional targeted work. However, there is a gap in the multi-agency provision of accessible preventative emotional and behavioural support.
77. Children and young people are enabled to have a good level of contact with their wider family and this is well and sensitively managed and suitably recorded. However, the number of children who require regular skilled supervision of contact is high and an audit is currently being undertaken to determine how to best meet the significant demands placed on family support workers that supporting contact creates.
78. Case planning, review and recording are adequate. The review of children's case files for this inspection identified a legacy of poor placement planning, including a lack of action to progress children's plans

in an appropriate timescale and a lack of urgency to ensure that children permanently placed. Suitable action was taken and most children's plans are now progressed in a timely way, although a minority still experience unacceptable delays. The vast majority of children receive regular visits from social workers in accordance with statutory requirements, and children and young people report that they are seen alone during these visits. Reviews of children's plans are very timely; during 2009–10, 94.5% of reviews were held on time which is better performance than nationally. Reviews are well managed by a highly motivated and imaginative group of IROs who encourage innovation. For example, they have supported young people to chair their own reviews and offer challenge to those working with them. There is good multi-agency attendance at reviews. The IRO team effectively challenges drift and inappropriate decision making, and appropriately brings issues to the attention of senior managers. The availability of reports in advance of reviews is poor and children and young people and their parents may be insufficiently prepared as a consequence. It is unacceptable practice for them to have to read reports at the start of their review meeting. The service has recognised this deficit and has taken action to strengthen requirements in this respect. The adoption service provides an effective and timely contribution to case planning where adoption may be being considered, through attendance at an early review meeting. This contributes to reducing the time taken to match and complete the adoption process.

79. Decisions in respect of children leaving care are generally made following a full review of the situation. Suitable support plans are put in place to enable children to resettle effectively at home. However, in a minority of cases this process has not been followed in respect of plans to discharge the care orders of children placed with parents. It is acknowledged that these decisions have until very recently not been routinely considered by managers at the appropriate level.
80. Overall, case recording is adequate. All files of looked after children contain chronologies, and there is suitable evidence of management oversight and the recording of decision making in most cases. However, the quality of recording on care plans is variable and not all reports of statutory visits contain a full evaluation of the child's situation. This is appropriately challenged and followed up by the IRO team. Although records of reviews are completed in a timely way, there has been delay in the distribution of the written record due to a lack of administrative capacity, which is now being resolved.

Leadership and management

Grade 3 (adequate)

81. The leadership and management of services for looked after children are adequate. Ambition and prioritisation are adequate. The CYPP, which was adopted from the predecessor council, suitably prioritises looked after children and young people, in particular the need to improve placement

stability. The current plan, which is under development, integrates their needs well, reflecting known areas for improvement including the need to reduce the number of external placements and to improve educational attainment. However, it does not identify the need to improve the quality of health assessments. Elected members are very determined to improving outcomes for looked after children. The knowledgeable lead member offers a strong lead in this respect and the council's scrutiny function is effective. Members of the Every Child Matters Select Panel have undertaken a comprehensive review of provision, in partnership with the children in care council, and their report 'The 39 Steps' has won national recognition. Its detailed action plan is being closely overseen by elected members.

82. Senior managers in children's social care have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of current resources and the needs of looked after children feature strongly in the social care transformation plan. The swift reorganisation of provision to focus management responsibility on a small number of managers is an acknowledgement of this, as is the recognition of the need to review the extent to which the current arrangements meet the needs of care leavers'. The profile of the looked after population is well understood as are the reasons underpinning the recent increase from 308 children in April 2009 to 346 at the time of the inspection. This is due to a number of factors which include a lack of effective provision for those on the edge of care and more notably the positive impact of action to act decisively when protection planning fails to lessen risks. Considered action has been taken to reduce the numbers safely, including the consideration of children whose care orders could be discharged, and an increased focus on special guardianship and adoption. In April 2009, five children were subject to special guardianship orders; by September 2010, this had risen to 21 and is projected to increase to 40 by March 2011. Management decision making to ensure that children only become looked after when this is necessary has been variable and has been recently strengthened by the formation of a multi-professional placement panel. However, there is a lack of coordination and clarity about the respective roles of the placement panel and the multi-agency panel which agrees funding for complex placements. Placements made out of hours now have to be agreed by a senior manager and these have reduced. Improvements have been made in the management of foster home vacancies but it is too early for these to demonstrate impact.
83. The supply of local foster carers diminished during, and following, the local government reorganisation. Action to tackle this has been accelerated well and has had a positive impact. In 2009–10, 210 enquiries were received and a total of 10 carers were approved. In the first eight months of 2010, a marketing campaign has used a range of local media to attract 250 enquiries and 17 carers have already been approved in a shorter timescale, with a further 10 undergoing assessment. The council

has commissioned a new children's home and has commenced a review of residential provision. However, although action has been taken, the council and its partners do not have an agreed multi-agency strategy which sets out their plans to manage the commissioning of placements in the context of increasing numbers of looked after children; this is a significant omission.

84. Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development, is adequate. The latest unpublished data show that the council is generally in line with national averages in relation to timeliness of adoption placements and long term placement stability. Suitable systems are in place to monitor performance through a systematic review of national indicators and some local priorities. However, the monitoring of health provision is inconsistent across the area and children placed externally receive an inadequate level of monitoring of their health needs from both PCTs. A range of performance information is available to frontline managers, but this does not include accurate and timely data in respect of care plans or personal education plans which have not been updated. IROs undertake appropriate monthly monitoring which provides evidence of the level of performance in the service.
85. Evaluation of the impact of services is limited. For example, the new team working to prevent children from becoming looked after can identify improved outcomes for individual children. However, targets have not been set and there is no mechanism in place to evaluate the impact of the scheme. There has been satisfactory learning from a recent serious case review, which involved a care leaver, and risk assessments for pregnant care leavers and those who are young parents have improved as a consequence.
86. Management oversight of casework decision making is adequate and decisions are routinely recorded within electronic case files. Many staff within the service are relatively inexperienced and report that the availability and quality of supervision are now good. A recent audit has found supervision to be mostly compliant with the council's supervision policy. However, the supervision of family support workers attached to child in care teams is not universally robust and there are unacceptable gaps in some area of the service, with workers left unsupervised for considerable periods. Specialist staff within health agencies do not benefit from regular management support and supervision. A programme of regular auditing of children's case files is in place and is effectively supplemented by thematic audits conducted around areas of pressure, such as short term placement stability. The council's audit of cases completed for the inspection correctly identified most areas of strength and weakness in frontline practice. Staff working within the children in care service have manageable workloads. There are no cases awaiting allocation, and transfer arrangements are prompt and effective. The arrangements for the review of foster carers' suitability have been

strengthened. They are now rigorous and comprehensive and benefit from being independently chaired. The external scrutiny of children's homes is adequate. Elected members have benefited from training and support to undertake these visits. However, in some instances the findings do not sufficiently identify strengths and shortfalls and the monitoring of these reports is not robust.

87. The development of a targeted workforce strategy for those working with looked after children is at an early stage of development. However, staff have adequate access to a training programme including the opportunity to undertake national vocational qualifications. There is satisfactory provision of pre-approval and induction training of foster carers along with access to peer group support.
88. User engagement is adequate. Children and young people are engaged well in care planning. They and their parents report their views are taken into account and that they influence outcomes. There has been an appropriate level of consultation with children and young people about how to improve the quality of their participation in reviews. This has led to a complete revision of feedback documentation with new feedback sheets now being used. The views of children, young people and their parents' views make an important contribution to the annual review of foster carer suitability, and to recruitment and training of foster carers. Looked after children also contribute to the improvement of fostering services, for instance one young person suggested there was value in foster carers producing a family album to help the familiarisation of children and young people within the placement. This has now been adopted as good practice. The Pledge for Children in Care was developed in consultation with children and young people; their views were fully considered and changes made to the pledge as a result. Children have also been consulted during the preparation of the new CYPP and as a consequence changes have been made. For example, their views about education, employment, and training opportunities have led to changes in the council's plan to provide apprenticeships.
89. Partnership working to secure improved outcomes for looked after children and young people is adequate. The CWACCTB is at an early stage in developing effective leadership for the integrated commissioning of services for looked after children and the CWACSCB has not as yet considered their specific needs. There is a satisfactory and improving understanding of the corporate parenting responsibility within the authority. Although the Corporate Parenting Board was not formally established until April 2010, it has quickly established a committed and clear leadership role. There is a broad membership, including from housing and the virtual school head, Connexions, health and the voluntary sector. The board enjoys strong all-party political support, and elected members have been suitably trained. Strong links have been made with the Children in Care Council and representatives regularly attend each

other's meetings to ensure effective communication. A good range of workstreams has been developed and these are driving forward developments, including a 'Care to Work' group which is developing opportunities for employment. The board has taken early action to ensure the development of a comprehensive Pledge.

90. At an operational level there are some effective partnerships. The accommodation, training and education needs of care leavers are being addressed through a satisfactory partnership between managers and practitioners from housing, education and children's services. There is good multi-agency working by the local authority designated officer who provides effective individual advice to all agencies where allegations have been made, and there is evidence of positive impact on the quality of care environments. Partnership working with the police in relation to children missing from care is good.
91. The promotion of equality and diversity for looked after children and young people is adequate. There is a suitable focus on establishing a corporate responsibility for tackling inequalities and discrimination. The council's self appraisal against level two of the local government equality framework benefited from elements of peer review. The outcome of this indicates that the council is achieving in line with level two requirements although a formal assessment is yet to take place. The children's services equality impact assessments viewed by inspectors during the inspection were satisfactory. However, the current safeguarding workforce strategy does not consider issues relating to equality and diversity, although the council has plans in place to remedy this. Children and young people told inspectors during the inspection that they are treated respectfully by those who work with them and feel there is good consideration given to their cultural and religious needs. Assessments of looked after children and young people adequately consider ethnic, cultural and religious needs. Inspectors found some good evidence of support to children in trans-racial placements which ensured their needs are sensitively addressed. Recent pro-active foster carer recruitment campaigns have had a strong emphasis on equality and diversity. This has resulted in the provision of a more diverse range of culturally sensitive placements with an increase in the registration of same sex foster parents, foster parents from mixed heritage backgrounds and of carers able to provide placements for children with disabilities. Children from travelling communities have been provided with good support. Equality and diversity is a standing item agenda on the Children in Care council meetings and helps to ensure that children and young people become increasingly familiar and confident in considering these issues when planning for service development and delivery.
92. Value for money is adequate. Effective work has been undertaken to ensure that the costs of foster care are known. Additional resources were provided during local government reorganisation to ensure that foster carers receive allowances in line with national requirements. In the light of

insufficient local placements to meet need, senior managers in the council have, as a matter of priority, ensured that additional resources are made available to purchase placements from a range of local providers. Additionally, efficiencies have been secured in the current financial year as the council has negotiated with providers that fees will be set at 2009–10 levels. Commissioning arrangements are sound. Good use is made of existing regional and sub-regional commissioning and contracting arrangements which can provide economies of scale. However, no use is made of collective block contracts. Contracts are monitored well. A programme of monitoring is undertaken by contracts officers in partnership with first line managers and this has a good focus on the safety and protection of children and young people in placement. An increasing use of special guardianship orders is leading to more decisive planning and decision making for children who have remained in care for longer periods than necessary.

Record of main findings: Cheshire West and Chester

Safeguarding services	
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate
Capacity for improvement	Inadequate
Outcomes for children and young people	
Children and young people are safe: effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe	Inadequate
Children and young people feel safe: effectiveness of services in helping to ensure that children and young people feel safe	Adequate
Quality of provision	
Service responsiveness including complaints	Inadequate
Assessment and direct work with children and families	Inadequate
Case planning, review and recording	Inadequate
Leadership and management	
Ambition and prioritisation	Adequate
Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development	Inadequate
User engagement	Adequate
Partnerships	Adequate
Equality and diversity	Adequate
Value for money	Adequate

Services for looked after children	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate
Capacity for improvement	Adequate
Outcomes for looked after children and care leavers	
Being healthy	Inadequate
Staying safe	Adequate
Enjoying and achieving	Adequate
Making a positive contribution	Adequate
Economic well-being	Adequate
Quality of provision	
Service responsiveness	Adequate
Assessment and direct work with children	Adequate
Case planning, review and recording	Adequate
Leadership and management	
Ambition and prioritisation	Adequate
Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development	Adequate
User engagement	Adequate
Partnerships	Adequate
Equality and diversity	Adequate
Value for money	Adequate