

Children's social care national framework: Cheshire West and Chester Council

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How Cheshire West and Chester Council is using the national framework when working with families.

Cheshire West and Chester Council is putting the national framework into action by focusing on strong relationships with families. Their aim is to:

- spot problems early
- involve wider family and community networks
- help children stay safely with their families whenever possible

They are using the national framework's 'outcomes' to set clear, consistent goals. This case study shows how Cheshire West and Chester Council have used the 4 outcomes and the results they have achieved.

The 4 outcomes are:

- 1: children, young people and families stay together and get the help they need
- 2: children and young people are supported by their family network
- 3: children and young people are safe in and outside of their homes
- 4: children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes

Spotting needs early and strengthening support

To support outcomes 1 and 2 the council has redesigned their multi-agency referral form so practitioners capture wider family, friendship and community connections from the first point of contact. This helps identify natural support at the very beginning and ensures assessments look at the whole family, not just individual issues.

The service is also exploring the introduction of a dedicated Family Network Co-ordinator within the early help pathway. This person would help families plan and organise support even if they do not meet statutory thresholds, preventing problems from getting worse.

Strengthening family-led planning

Cheshire West and Chester Council have deepened their commitment to family-led practice by integrating an 'ecomap'. This is a tool to map the main relationships, connections and support systems surrounding a child and their family into the single assessment.

This enhances practitioners' ability to:

- explore relational dynamics
- identify individuals who can provide sustainable support
- co-produce plans grounded in real-life experiences

These actions strongly support outcome 2, by ensuring practitioners consistently identify, activate

and strengthen family and community connections.

A family-centred approach guides the whole service and staff receive training in:

- running family meetings
- managing group dynamics
- creating inclusive spaces where families feel ownership of plans and solutions

This ensures families have a real voice and influence at the main decision points.

The creation of new roles

To support outcome 4 which focuses on children in care and care leavers having stable, loving homes, the local authority has created 4 additional Family Network Co-ordinator posts.

These co-ordinators:

- lead family group conferences
- undertake family meetings and mediation
- ensure family options are thoroughly explored before children enter or remain in care

Their work is central to safe reunification planning and to enabling children to remain within or return to family and friend networks wherever possible.

Improving consistency through tools, guidance and training

To support all 4 national framework outcomes and reinforce high-quality and consistent family-led practice across the workforce, the council has introduced:

- clear practice guidance
- standardised agendas
- planning templates

They also provide flexible training online and in person, to help staff confidently use family network approaches and run child-focused meetings that stay on track.

Key successes and impacts

As a result of these changes, Cheshire West and Chester Council have:

- identified family and community support earlier
- strengthened safety planning by better understanding relationships and networks
- improved the quality and consistency of family-led planning
- supported more children to remain safely with family and friends
- strengthened pathways for safe reunification from care
- built a culture where family strengths and shared responsibility guide safeguarding practice

<https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/childrens-social-care-national-framework-cheshire-west-and-chester-council>