TOGETHER for Children and Young People

Together we will make Cheshire East a great place to be **young**

Parent and Carer Participation and Advocacy Procedure



Cheshire East Council

Children's Services | Working with families, not doing to them

1. PURPOSE

1.1 Cheshire East Children's Services is committed to working with families, rather than doing things to or for them.

1.2 Parents and carers should understand what is happening, be supported to express their views, be listened to and understand how their views have been considered when decisions are made about their children and family.

1.3 This procedure sets out the practice expectations for enabling meaningful parent and carer participation across Children's Services, including Child Protection Conferences, and for recognising when additional support or independent advocacy may be required.

1.4 Advocacy is one way of enabling participation. It does not replace good relational practice, accessible communication, reasonable adjustments or the responsibility of professionals to listen to parents and involve them in decision-making.

1.5 The child's welfare, wishes and feelings remain central to decision-making. Supporting parental participation does not dilute professional responsibility to identify, analyse and act on harm or risk.

2. LEGAL AND PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

2.1 This procedure should be read and applied alongside current statutory guidance and local safeguarding procedures. In particular:

- Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 requires practitioners to work in partnership with parents and carers as far as possible, support them to say what they think, provide clear and accessible information, create a culture of 'no surprises', provide adequate preparation and suitable access arrangements, and explain that a family member, friend or supporter may attend meetings.
- For Child Protection Conferences, Working Together 2026 requires parents and carers to receive appropriate information to support their participation, information about advocacy agencies, and an explanation that they may bring an advocate, friend or supporter.
- Working Together 2026 states that the Child Protection Conference Chair should meet the child and parents or carers in advance so that they understand the issues, purpose, process and possible outcomes of the conference, and should be prepared to answer questions openly.
- The Equality Act 2010 includes duties relating to equality and reasonable adjustments. Participation arrangements must therefore anticipate and address barriers for disabled parents and carers where the duty applies.
- Some parents may separately meet statutory criteria for independent advocacy under legislation such as the Care Act 2014 or Mental Capacity Act 2005. Those entitlements must be considered and acted upon where applicable; they are distinct from a general request for advocacy within children's social care.

3. SCOPE

3.1 This procedure applies wherever parents and carers are involved in assessment, planning, review or decision-making about their child. It is particularly important where decisions may have significant consequences, processes are formal or complex, or a parent may experience barriers to meaningful participation. This may include:



- significant disagreement between a parent and professionals;
- communication, literacy, language, cognitive, sensory or other accessibility needs;
- learning disability or learning difficulty;
- mental ill-health, trauma or emotional distress affecting participation;
- domestic abuse, coercive control, intimidation or another imbalance of power;
- a very young parent;
- previous experiences of services affecting trust or engagement;
- multiple agencies or complex professional networks;
- legal planning or proceedings; or
- a request from the parent for help to understand or communicate within the process.

3.2 Support must be considered according to the individual parent's circumstances. Diagnosis, service eligibility or a professional view that a parent is capable of speaking for themselves must not be used as a substitute for considering whether they can participate meaningfully in the process in question.

4. OUR APPROACH: PARTICIPATION FIRST

4.1 Meaningful participation requires more than inviting a parent to a meeting. Cheshire East uses four connected questions: is there Space to participate, can the parent exercise Voice, is there an Audience that actively listens, and can the parent understand their Influence on the process and decision?

Space

Parents need a genuine and safe opportunity to participate. Practitioners should consider notice, information, accessibility, safety, meeting arrangements and whether another way of contributing would work better.

Voice

Parents must be supported to express what they think, feel, want and disagree with. They may speak for themselves, bring someone they trust, provide views in writing or another accessible format, speak with the Chair or practitioner beforehand, use communication support, receive specialist support or use an independent advocate where available or required.

Audience

Professionals must actively listen. Disagreement, distress, communication difficulty or reluctance to engage in a particular process must not be treated as meaning that a parent has nothing meaningful to contribute.

Influence

Parents should understand how their views were considered. Participation does not mean professionals will always agree with a parent or that a parent determines the outcome. It does mean their views are genuinely considered and that decisions, reasons and next steps are explained.

5. PARTICIPATION AND SUPPORT CHOICES

5.1 These are choices, not stages a parent must progress through. Parents may combine options, change their mind or need different support at different points.



Participating independently

Professionals must provide clear information, explain processes and avoid unnecessary jargon. Parents should not be expected to understand Children's Services systems simply because professionals work within them every day.

A trusted supporter

A parent may wish to involve a family member, friend or other trusted person to help them prepare, understand information, communicate their views and manage the emotional demands of the process. A supporter should complement rather than displace the parent's own voice.

Any restriction on a proposed supporter must be based on a clear individual reason, for example safety, confidentiality, coercion, conflict of interest or the effective conduct of the meeting. The reason should be explained and recorded, and alternative support considered.

Additional or specialist support

Some parents may need additional or specialist support to participate meaningfully because of their individual circumstances. This may include support relating to communication, disability, mental health, domestic abuse, SEND or another identified need.

Practitioners should consider the **purpose of the support required** rather than assuming that one service or professional will meet all of a parent's needs. Specialist support and independent advocacy perform different functions, and more than one form of support may be appropriate.

Practitioners should use the **Participation Support Guide** and current **Cheshire East Parent Participation, Advocacy and Support Directory** to identify appropriate support and referral routes.

Independent advocacy

Independent advocacy supports a person to understand information, express wishes and views, ask questions and have their voice heard independently of the professionals' making decisions.

There is not a universal statutory entitlement to an independent advocate solely because a parent is involved in children's social care or child protection processes. However, some parents may have a separate statutory entitlement under adult social care, mental capacity, mental health or other legislation. Practitioners must consider whether such an entitlement may apply and seek appropriate advice or referral.

Where no statutory entitlement applies but an independent advocate appears necessary to enable meaningful participation, practitioners should consider any current local commissioned, discretionary or community advocacy route. Current service directories/referral information should be used rather than relying on provider names contained in this procedure.

Where an identified advocacy need cannot be met, the unmet need must be recorded and escalated in accordance with section 12.

6. PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

6.1 Participation is not something a parent has to earn or request. At significant points practitioners should ask:



Does this parent understand what is happening, can they participate meaningfully, and is there anything we need to do differently to enable that?

6.2 This should be revisited rather than treated as a one-off assessment, particularly before significant meetings and decisions, when circumstances or needs change, when there is disagreement, and when legal planning or pre-proceedings begins.

7. CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE: BEFORE THE CONFERENCE

7.1 Lead practitioner/social worker

7.1.1 Preparation for conference is part of direct work with the family and should not be reduced to sending an invitation. In line with Working Together 2026, the parent should receive clear and accurate information about the conference process and appropriate information to support their participation.

- The lead practitioner/social worker should ensure the parent understands:
- why the conference is being held and its purpose;
- who is expected to attend and why;
- the principal worries, strengths and evidence that will be considered;
- the possible outcomes and what they mean;
- how the parent can contribute and ask questions;
- that they may disagree and have their views recorded;
- that they may bring an advocate, friend or supporter, subject to any necessary individual arrangements;
- how to raise language, communication, disability, accessibility or safety needs; and
- how they can contribute if they are unable or do not wish to attend.

7.1.2 Conference information should be shared with the child and family beforehand where appropriate, in accordance with Working Together 2026 and local information-sharing procedures. The social worker should discuss their assessment and recommendation with the parent in advance so that, as far as possible, conference is not the first time the parent hears significant professional concerns or the proposed direction of the plan.

7.1.3 Where information cannot appropriately be shared, the reason and decision-making should be clear and recorded. Practitioners must not create a blanket expectation of disclosure where sharing would create risk, prejudice an investigation or otherwise be inappropriate.

7.2 Participation assessment and arrangements

7.2.1 Before conference, the social worker should actively consider with the parent whether anything could prevent or inhibit meaningful participation. This includes practical barriers and the impact of communication needs, disability, literacy, language, trauma, distress, domestic abuse, coercion, fear of professionals and previous experience of services.

7.2.2 Required arrangements should be communicated to the Conference Chair and relevant administrative support in sufficient time to make them wherever reasonably possible.

7.3 Conference Chair

7.3.1 Working Together 2026 states that the Conference Chair should meet the child and parents or carers in advance to ensure they understand the issues, purpose, process and possible outcomes of the conference, and should be prepared to answer questions openly.



7.3.2 The Chair should use this contact to understand how the parent wishes to participate, identify unresolved barriers or safety issues, clarify the role of any supporter or advocate, and check that the parent has an appropriate opportunity to understand the information being considered.

7.3.3 Where preparation or information-sharing has been insufficient, the Chair should determine what is required to enable fair and effective participation while maintaining the child's safety and avoiding unnecessary delay.

7.4 Business Support/administrative arrangements

7.4.1 Business Support should ensure agreed invitations, joining information and administrative arrangements are completed in line with local conference processes. Known interpreting, accessibility, supporter/advocate or safe-attendance arrangements should be reflected in meeting administration.

7.4.2 Where an administrative barrier becomes apparent, it should be raised promptly with the social worker and/or Conference Chair rather than left until the conference begins.

8. DURING THE CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE

8.1 The Conference Chair is responsible for facilitating a fair, purposeful meeting in which safeguarding analysis remains clear and parents can understand and contribute.

8.2 The Chair should:

- introduce participants and explain their roles;
- explain the purpose, structure and possible outcomes in accessible language;
- check understanding at appropriate points rather than relying on a single question at the beginning;
- minimise jargon and require professional language to be explained;
- actively create space for the parent's views, questions, factual corrections and disagreement;
- enable an agreed supporter or advocate to contribute appropriately without displacing the parent's voice;
- ensure all participants are encouraged to contribute their views independently;
- notice and address professional behaviours, volume of information or power dynamics that unnecessarily inhibit participation;
- use breaks, pauses or other reasonable adjustments where helpful;
- ensure domestic abuse, coercive control or intimidation does not result in unsafe participation arrangements;
- distinguish disagreement, distress and challenge from non-engagement;
- summarise key areas of agreement and disagreement; and
- ensure the parent understands the decision, rationale and next steps before the meeting closes.

9. CONFERENCE DECISION-MAKING AND DISAGREEMENT

9.1 Parents should understand the basis on which conference decisions are made. Their views form part of the information and analysis considered, but they are not required to agree with the professional analysis, recommendations or outcome.

9.2 Where a parent disputes factual information, this should be distinguished from disagreement with professional analysis. Material factual inaccuracies should be considered and corrected where appropriate. Where accounts or interpretations differ, the record should make that difference clear rather than presenting a contested account as agreed fact.



9.3 Where a parent disagrees with the conference outcome, category of harm, plan or another significant conclusion, the Chair should ensure the nature of the disagreement is understood and accurately reflected in the record. Disagreement alone must not be treated as evidence of increased risk, lack of insight or unwillingness to work with services.

9.4 The parent should be told about the route for raising concerns about the conduct or outcome of the conference and about the Children's Services complaints process where applicable.

10. WHERE A PARENT DOES NOT ATTEND

10.1 Attendance and participation are not synonymous. Non-attendance must not automatically be interpreted as lack of interest or unwillingness to engage.

10.2 Before or during the conference, consideration should be given to the reason for absence, attempts made to enable attendance, whether it remains appropriate to proceed, and how the parent's views can be obtained and considered.

10.3 Alternative participation may include written or recorded views, a pre-conference discussion with the Chair, contribution through the social worker, remote or partial attendance where appropriate, or contribution through an advocate or agreed supporter.

10.4 Where the conference proceeds without the parent, the conference record should show how their views were sought and considered and any relevant reasons why the meeting proceeded.

11. AFTER CONFERENCE, CORE GROUPS AND REVIEW

11.1 Following conference, the lead practitioner/social worker should ensure the parent understands the outcome, the outline plan, what professionals have agreed to do, what is expected of the parent and what happens next.

11.2 The Child Protection Plan should be developed with the family and family network as appropriate. Working Together 2026 requires the Core Group to meet within 10 working days of an Initial Child Protection Conference where a child becomes subject to a Child Protection Plan, and the lead practitioner to record decisions/actions and written views from those unable to attend.

11.3. The first Review Child Protection Conference should take place within three months of the Initial Conference and subsequent reviews at intervals of no more than six months while the plan remains in place. Preparation and participation arrangements for review conferences should follow the same principles as the Initial Conference.

11.4 Participation arrangements must be reviewed rather than automatically repeated. Where participation was significantly impaired at the previous meeting, the social worker and Chair should consider what needs to change before the next Core Group or Review Conference.

12. UNMET ADVOCACY NEED AND ESCALATION

12.1 A gap in available advocacy provision must not make an identified participation need invisible.

12.2 Where a practitioner considers that independent advocacy is required or would materially improve a parent's ability to participate, but no statutory or current local route can meet the need, the practitioner should:

- discuss the need and its impact with their manager;
- record the identified participation/advocacy need and attempts to meet it on the child's electronic record;



- consider with the Conference Chair, where relevant, what other adjustments can reduce the immediate barrier;
- escalate through the agreed service route where the unmet need materially affects the fairness or effectiveness of participation; and
- ensure the unmet need can be identified through quality assurance/service-development activity.

12.3 Escalation does not create an automatic entitlement to a commissioned advocate. It ensures that significant unmet participation needs are considered, managed and visible at service level. Managers should provide oversight where significant participation barriers remain unresolved or where identified advocacy needs cannot be met through available provision.

13. DOMESTIC ABUSE, COERCION AND SAFETY

13.1 Participation arrangements must not inadvertently increase risk. Where domestic abuse, coercive control or intimidation is known or suspected, professionals should consider separately what each parent needs in order to participate safely.

13.2 This may include separate pre-meetings, separate or staggered attendance arrangements, remote participation, careful information-sharing and scrutiny of proposed supporters. Parents must not be required to participate together where doing so would be unsafe or would materially inhibit a person's ability to speak freely.

13.3 Where domestic abuse is known or suspected, practitioners should consider whether specialist domestic abuse support is required alongside any separate participation or advocacy need.

13.4 The involvement of an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate or other specialist domestic abuse practitioner does not remove Children's Services responsibility to make its own processes safe and accessible or to consider separately what the parent needs in order to participate meaningfully.

13.5 Practitioners should refer to the **Participation Support Guide** and current **Cheshire East Parent Participation Advocacy and Support Directory** for available support and referral routes.

14. COMMUNICATION, INTERPRETATION AND REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

14.1 Communication and accessibility needs should be identified early and addressed proactively. The Equality Act reasonable-adjustment duty is anticipatory in relation to services and public functions: services should not simply wait for a disabled person to encounter an avoidable barrier.

14.2 Support may include professional interpreters, British Sign Language interpretation, communication aids, Easy Read or other accessible information, additional time, breaks, alternative meeting arrangements, support to understand written material and specialist communication support.

14.3 Interpreting and advocacy are different functions. In line with Working Together 2026, practitioners should not rely on family members or partners for interpretation services, including British Sign Language, where professional interpretation is needed.



15. RECORDING

15.1 The child's record should evidence meaningful consideration of parent and carer participation where relevant. Recording should include:

- the parent's views and significant areas of agreement or disagreement;
- how the parent wishes to participate;
- identified communication, accessibility or safety barriers and agreed adjustments;
- the involvement of a trusted supporter or advocate;
- advocacy or specialist support considered, referrals made and outcomes;
- any unmet advocacy need and escalation;
- how significant factual disputes were addressed; and
- how the parent's views were considered in planning and decision-making.

15.2 Recording should avoid unsupported shorthand such as 'parent refused to engage' where a fuller account can explain what happened, the barriers or context, the impact on the child and what professionals did to seek engagement.

16. COMPLAINTS, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGE

16.1 Supporting participation includes enabling parents to question and challenge Children's Services. Parents should receive clear information about the appropriate route for raising concerns, correcting factual inaccuracies, challenging conference process or decisions where a local route applies, making a complaint, obtaining independent advice and using relevant legal processes.

16.2 A parent's decision to complain, seek advice or challenge a professional decision must not, by itself, be treated as evidence of unwillingness to work with Children's Services.

17. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND LEARNING

17.1 Participation and advocacy should form part of Children's Services quality assurance rather than being measured solely through attendance.

17.2 Quality assurance should draw on case records, conference practice, complaints, feedback from children and families, advocacy intelligence and audit activity to understand:

- whether parents understand and are meaningfully involved in decisions;
- whether preparation and 'no surprises' practice is evident;
- whether reasonable adjustments and communication needs are identified and met;
- whether disagreement is recorded fairly and analytically;
- patterns of unmet advocacy need;
- whether particular groups experience disproportionate barriers; and
- where practice, workforce development, partnership arrangements or commissioning need to change.

18. WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

18.1 Good participation is not demonstrated simply because a parent attended a meeting, received a leaflet, was asked for their views or because a recording field was completed.

18.2 Good participation means the parent can say:

I knew what was happening.

I understood what people were worried about and what decisions were being considered.



I had a genuine opportunity to say what I thought.

I could get help to do that when I needed it.

People listened to me, even when we disagreed.

I understood what was decided and why.

I know what happens next.

18.3 That is the standard Cheshire East Children's Services should work towards for every parent and carer.

APPENDIX 1: CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION PRACTICE PROMPT

Stage	Lead responsibility	Key question	Evidence of good practice
Before conference	Social worker / lead practitioner	Does the parent understand why conference is happening and how they can take part?	Information shared appropriately; assessment/recommendation discussed; views sought; barriers and adjustments identified; supporter/advocacy options explained.
Pre-conference	Conference Chair	Does the parent understand the issues, process and possible outcomes, and what do they need from the meeting?	Chair meets parent/carer in advance; questions answered; participation and safety arrangements clarified.
Administration	Business Support	Are the practical arrangements capable of delivering what has been agreed?	Invitations/joining information issued; interpreting/access/support arrangements reflected and problems escalated promptly.
During conference	Conference Chair	Can the parent understand, contribute and respond without safeguarding analysis being diluted?	Accessible language; understanding checked; views/questions enabled; disagreement explored; supporter/advocate enabled; adjustments used.
Decision	Conference Chair / conference	Does the parent understand what has been decided and why?	Parent's views considered; factual disputes distinguished from analytical disagreement; rationale, disagreement and next steps clear.
After conference	Lead practitioner / social worker	Can the parent understand and participate in the plan?	Outcome and plan explained; Core Group arrangements clear; challenge/complaints routes explained; participation arrangements reviewed.
Review	Social worker and Conference Chair	What have we learned about what enables this parent to participate?	Previous barriers and adjustments reviewed; changes made rather than ineffective arrangements being repeated.



APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPATION AND ADVOCACY CONTINUUM

This continuum should be used alongside the **Parent and Carer Participation and Advocacy Procedure** and the current **Cheshire East Parent Participation, Advocacy and Support Directory**.

Its purpose is to help practitioners identify **what a parent needs in order to participate meaningfully**, before deciding what service or support may be appropriate.

A parent may need more than one form of support. These are **choices and responses to identified need, not a hierarchy or sequence of eligibility tests**.



What does the parent need?	Consider	Key practice question
I want someone I know and trust alongside me	A family member, friend or other trusted supporter	Who would help the parent feel supported and able to participate?
I need independent help to understand what is happening and have my voice heard	Independent advocacy or specialist parent advocacy/support	Would independence from Children's Services materially help this parent understand, express their views or participate?
I need specialist support because of my circumstances	Relevant specialist support, including domestic abuse, mental health, SEND or other services	What is the particular need, and what type of support is intended to address it?
I am experiencing domestic abuse or do not feel safe	Specialist domestic abuse support and safe participation arrangements	What is needed to address risk and safety, and does the parent also have a separate participation or advocacy need?
I find information, communication or meetings difficult to access	Reasonable adjustments, professional interpretation, accessible information or specialist communication support	What barrier is preventing meaningful participation and what can we change?
I may have a statutory right to advocacy because of my own circumstances	Check the relevant statutory advocacy criteria and referral route	Does the parent meet a statutory entitlement arising from their own care, mental health, mental capacity or other circumstances?
I cannot or do not want to attend a meeting in the usual way	Alternative ways of contributing, including written or recorded views, pre-meeting discussion, remote or partial attendance, supporter or advocate	How can the parent's views still be heard and considered?
None of the available routes meets my identified advocacy need	Record and escalate the unmet advocacy need and consider interim participation arrangements	What does the parent still need to participate meaningfully, and how will Children's Services respond?

Remember

Start with the need, not the service.



The involvement of one person or service should not automatically be assumed to meet another identified need. For example, specialist domestic abuse support may address safety and risk but may not meet a separate need for independent advocacy.

Similarly, interpretation, reasonable adjustments, family support and advocacy perform different functions.

Practitioners should:

- discuss with the parent what would help;
- identify each participation barrier or support need separately;
- consider whether more than one response is required;
- be clear about the role of each supporter, advocate or professional;
- avoid unnecessary duplication;
- record the parent's preferences and agreed arrangements; and
- review arrangements when circumstances change.

For current services, eligibility criteria, referral arrangements and contact details, use the **Cheshire East Parent Participation, Advocacy and Support Directory**.

APPENDIX 3: REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

Department for Education, Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 (statutory guidance).

Equality Act 2010, including the duty to make reasonable adjustments in relation to services and public functions where applicable.

Care Act 2014 and Care and Support Statutory Guidance – independent advocacy duties for qualifying adult care and support/safeguarding processes.

Mental Capacity Act 2005 – Independent Mental Capacity Advocacy duties where statutory criteria are met.

Cheshire East Safeguarding Children's Partnership – current Child Protection Conference and safeguarding procedures.

Cheshire East Children's Services – current complaints, accessibility, interpreting and advocacy referral arrangements.

