

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 17 to 28 June 2019

Lead inspector: Paula Thomson-Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

The quality of services for children has improved in all areas since the last inspection in 2016, when services were judged to be inadequate overall.

Early Ofsted monitoring visits in 2017 reported that progress was slow. Political and senior leaders recognised that more action was needed to increase the pace of improvement. The appointment of a new leadership team, including the Director of Children's Services (DCS), led to an accurate understanding of the deficits, as well as effective implementation of plans that have resulted in significant improvement. Services for children have become a central council priority and this has led to an accelerated improvement in the quality of social work practice that is making a difference for children.

Investment in additional social work posts alongside improvements in office space, equipment and professional development have assisted recruitment and retention and have led to a reduction in social work caseloads. This means that a better service for children is being delivered. Well-established performance and quality

assurance activity now gives leaders an updated and accurate understanding of practice. Implementation of a social work model has established a more consistent approach to working with children. Management oversight is effective in ensuring that work is completed but does not ensure that practice is of a consistently good standard.

A greater number of children now benefit from timely and good-quality early help. A new multi-agency integrated front door results in a timely and helpful response for children who are referred for social work support. Children who go missing and those who are at risk of exploitation are well supported via a new complex safeguarding service. Better quality assessment and care planning is leading to more timely work for those children who are the subject of care proceedings. Children in care have more safe and secure placements in the local community because of an improved fostering service. Care leavers now have access to a dedicated team that supports them well, and they report that this is really making a difference to them.

Not all areas of practice have improved at the same pace, and although the local authority has clear plans in place to address these, practice is not consistently good for all children. In particular, the quality of assessments and plans for children in need of help and protection requires further improvement. Plans for permanence are insufficiently developed and are not confirmed early enough for some children. More children need good-quality life-story work to ensure that they understand why they are in care. Children who need support with their emotional health and well-being do not get help quickly enough, and there are still gaps in services as they move into adulthood. All these issues are known to the local authority, which has plans in place to address them as part of the ongoing service improvement.

What needs to improve

- The quality of analysis within social work assessments to fully take account of the impact of lived experiences of children and lead to good-quality planning for children, including effective planning for permanence.
- The timeliness and quality of transition arrangements for young people who will require support from adult services.
- The availability of good-quality services to meet the emotional health and well-being needs of all children and young people at the time when they need it, without delay.
- The provision of education for children in care, including improving their attendance and the timeliness and quality of their personal education plans.
- The provision of direct work and life-story work for all children at the right time for them to make sure they understand their life experience.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. The experience and progress of children who need help and protection was inadequate at the last inspection in 2016. This was due to a serious systemic failure to apply thresholds of need, and led to widespread drift and delay in the response to children. This is no longer the case. Thresholds are understood across the partnership and the vast majority of children receive help from the right service at the right time. Over the last two years, the local authority has reviewed the level of need of large numbers of children already receiving a service. This has resulted in an appropriate increase in children subject to child protection plans and those children moving into court proceedings. These numbers are now reducing and stabilising because there are more effective systems in place and these are starting to have an impact on children.
2. Early help is making a positive difference for children. Early help workers use a range of direct work tools as part of a child-centred approach that helps them understand children's lives. They work well with other agencies to provide good multi-agency support. When risk to children escalates, it is almost always recognised and acted on quickly. Children are 'stepped-up' to statutory services when needed, so that they are safeguarded. The number of children getting early help has increased as a result of the effective commissioning of services and the reconfiguration of council provision.
3. When there are concerns about their safety or welfare, children are referred appropriately to the integrated front door (IFD). Timely and accurate evaluation of referral information leads to assessments and services that match those needs. Referrals from partner agencies show that thresholds for intervention are understood and that they provide relevant information to inform decision-making.
4. Staff in the IFD are aware of the need to obtain consent, and they ensure that it is sought and recorded. Workers swiftly gather and record good-quality information, including from partner agencies. This informs decision-making about next steps. Threshold decisions made by managers are accurate and clear and the rationale for them is mostly well recorded.
5. When children are at risk of significant harm, this is recognised. Strategy discussions are prompt and are now well attended by the relevant statutory and other partner agencies. This ensures good multi-agency information-sharing to inform next steps and is a significant improvement since the last inspection. Decisions in strategy meetings and subsequent child protection investigations are clear and evidence based. This leads to effective decision-making to ensure that interventions are at the right level for children to protect them when they need it.
6. Assessments are generally timely and identify key risks for children as well as strengths within the family network. The use of the social work practice model is helping to improve assessments by strengthening the focus on children's lived

experience and on outcomes. Although their wishes and feelings are sought and recorded, they are not consistently used to inform analysis, which is sometimes too adult focused and not sufficiently evaluative.

7. Social workers visit children regularly and are making increasing use of direct work to understand their lives. This work is not always as focused on key issues as it could be or used well to inform assessment and planning. Frequent visiting does allow many children to build relationships of trust with workers. For a small and reducing number of children, this is not as possible because they still have too many changes of social worker.
8. In most cases, child in need and child protection plans make good use of the new practice model to highlight what needs to change. Actions are generally clear and include timescales, but many measure activity rather than the outcomes being sought for children.
9. Child in need meetings and core groups are well attended by the right range of partner agencies. Information about activity is shared in meetings, but plans are not always used well as a tool to monitor and drive progress. For some children, this leads to professionals not recognising when things are not getting better quickly enough.
10. When children remain at risk, despite child protection planning, decisions are made to consider legal action. Decision-making to begin pre-proceedings processes is mostly timely, but the work that then takes place is not consistent in ensuring progress for children. A focus on this area of work has led to some improvement. However, too many children are still waiting too long within pre-proceedings before decisions are made as to whether an application to the court is required. For some children, the impact of this is limited because they are already living in placements with alternative carers. A small number of others remain in neglectful situations because their cases are not being stepped up to court quickly enough when progress is not being achieved.
11. When children are at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation or because they have gone missing, work to tackle these risks and to protect children is established and effective. Work with partner agencies, especially the police, has led to a strong multi-agency approach and this is making a positive difference for children. Information-sharing between agencies is regular and prompt, including at formal meetings, to ensure that there is a joined-up response to meeting children's needs.
12. Children with additional needs or disabilities have their needs appropriately assessed and are provided with a range of support that helps them. This is provided by a specialist team of workers who are co-located with other agencies. Although the service may be aware of young people's transition needs, planning is not actively undertaken until young people are 17. This is too late to ensure that there is an effective and smooth transition as they become adults.

13. The local authority has identified through its own audit work that social work practice with those children subject to supervision orders is weak. Planning and review of their situation is poor. Improved systems and oversight have been put in place. No children were seen to be at risk of harm, and all are receiving a service, but sustained improvement in the quality of work had not been achieved by the time of this inspection.
14. Despite some work to raise awareness across the partnership, there are only very small numbers of children identified as living in private fostering arrangements. In addition, the response to children in these arrangements has not ensured that the requirements of private fostering regulations are met. Although children have been seen and support has been put in place as part of child in need planning, the quality of assessments that have been undertaken of the arrangements is weak.
15. The local authority implemented a revised joint protocol with housing in 2018 to improve the response to children who present as homeless. At the Ofsted monitoring visit in December 2018, this was not operational. The monitoring visit letter stated that joint assessments did not take place and that not all young people are offered the opportunity to come into care, even when they have significant histories of involvement with children's social care. Since the visit, there have been some improvements, with more young people being offered immediate support with housing and a small number becoming children in care. Although inspectors found that all children who presented were provided with some support, they are not all having their needs met well. Joint assessments of need are not consistently offered as the protocol is not being routinely followed.
16. When children live in homes where domestic abuse is present, the risks to them are recognised and responded to. This recognition and the speed of response has improved since the time of the last inspection. However, despite there being a generally good range of services available, there are currently no perpetrator programmes available, information and intelligence sharing is limited, and services are not well coordinated. The local authority has plans in place to address this, but services are not currently making the difference they could.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

17. At the time of the inspection in 2016, the judgement for the experiences of children in care was that it required improvement to be good. The service for care leavers was inadequate. Early monitoring visits reported that, following inspection, new additional deficits in practice with children in care were also identified. In addition, the rate of children coming into care during 2016–17 rose dramatically from 29 per 10,000 to 51 per 10,000. As part of its improvement

work, the local authority reviewed children who were subject to child in need and child protection planning, and this consequently resulted in an increase in applications to court and children coming into care, as well as an increase in the scale of the improvement work required. This inspection identified improvement in most areas of service, but overall the quality of practice is not good.

18. Most children come into care at the right time. Wirral has many more children under the age of one who come into care than other local authorities. One fifth of those children who started to be looked after in the last six months were under one year old. This long-standing issue has been responded to by the current leadership team, which has ensured early support and intervention via a team of 'pre-birth' support workers. For most children, this work is timely, with support and assessment completed prior to birth to determine whether intervention is required to protect children. A scoping exercise has been completed to inform provision of further specialist support for parents of these children, and there are plans in place to commission additional services to respond to this need.
19. When children subject to care orders are placed with their parents, the support provided is informed by an assessment of need. Plans of support and placement with parents' agreements are not of a consistently good quality. Some reports provide a clear rationale for the decision to return home and there is an effective detailed assessment and plan of support in place which makes sure that children thrive. For other children, arrangements are less clear, and plans that are meant to ensure that children's outcomes improve are weaker.
20. There is significant improvement in the timeliness and quality of court work for children. Both the children and family court advisory support service (Cafcass) and the designated family judge confirm that there has been successful work to address the legacy of poor practice and improve the quality of current practice. Recent applications to court are increasingly timely, with better-quality evidence presented. This has resulted in better outcomes for children over the last nine months.
21. The majority of children live in suitable placements with carers and families who look after them well. Most children live close to their home community, which ensures that they maintain links with family and friends. Contact is encouraged and supported by social workers and support staff, who know their children well.
22. Children are seen regularly, and purposeful visits enable social workers to build relationships with children. Children's views are sought during the visit, although this could often be more clearly recorded in their files. Direct work is sometimes sensitively completed, but it is not happening for all children. Life-story work is not completed with all the children who need it in order to help them to understand their history prior to coming into care.

23. Assessments are detailed and evaluate risk and need. For most children, they are updated when things change. They provide a solid basis for planning, and most cover children's history, parents' views and key issues well. Analysis could be further sharpened, with a stronger focus on the impact on children of their lived experiences and their parents' needs. There is some evidence of consideration of the needs relating to children's culture and identity, but it is not always clear how this supports effective planning.
24. Children in care now benefit from stronger systems of care planning. Care planning meetings are held regularly and support progress, but do not always include the range of relevant agencies to ensure robust information-sharing. Written care plans are not always completed in a clear and succinct manner to support the work being done with children. They are often task focused and do not make it clear what the long-term overall plan for the child is. They often lack specific information about timescales and contingency arrangements.
25. Monitoring visits have previously reported on the need for improvement in permanence planning for children. For many children, planning is good and leads to timely alternative plans for permanence. For some children, although a permanence plan is identified at an early stage, it is not always progressed quickly enough, and for other children, changes in their situation result in further uncertainty due to a lack of early contingency planning.
26. Children in care have their plans reviewed on time. Recommendations are concise and smart. The quality and effectiveness of challenge by independent reviewing officers (IROs) are variable. There is sometimes clear evidence of oversight at the midpoint review point, but this is not as consistent as it needs to be.
27. The children in care council (CICC) and care leavers council (CLC) are both well-organised and influential groups. They are well supported and provide an opportunity for care-experienced children and young people to work together on a shared agenda. Young people have a positive view of current services, participate in the recruitment of staff and a range of other initiatives, and feel they are listened to by corporate parents. They were able to demonstrate many areas where they feel that their participation has made a difference. This included negotiating a reduction in housing costs with a provider, the design of new welcome packs for children in care, and a scheme where they nominate adults who have helped them for awards.
28. The number of children in care who have a suitable personal education plan (PEP) has increased since the last inspection. There continue to be delays in these plans being completed and the quality of most PEPs requires improvement. The virtual school has implemented a plan for improvement with schools and challenges them to show the impact of strategies and a review of academic outcomes. For some children, this is making a difference, and there is evidence of improved educational progress and greater impact from additional targeted

support via pupil premium. Children in care are broadly achieving as well in education as other children in care nationally. The progress that pupils in key stage 4 made from their starting points in 2018 improved from 2017 and was above the national average.

29. Many children in care are persistently absent from school, and this prevents better achievement and progress. For the last three years, persistent absence for children in care has been above the national average and the gap is widening. The local authority recognises that there has been a historically weak approach to tackling poor attendance. As part of wider strategic reform, the attendance service has been reviewed and is to be reformed, but it is too early for this to have had any impact.
30. The local authority is progressively ensuring that a comprehensive range of alternative provision is in place. The commissioning of a range of alternative provision is ensuring that children are able to receive education packages that are better targeted to their needs and that will support swifter re-integration into mainstream education. Previously, a disproportionate number of children attended a pupil referral unit. Established for 100 children but with 167 pupils in June 2017, it was judged to be inadequate in November 2017. Since a final decision to close the provision was made in May 2019, alternative and more appropriate plans have been put into place for nearly all children, to provide them with appropriate provision to meet their needs.
31. Health assessments are completed but are sometimes delayed when children first come into care. There is good use of strengths and difficulties questionnaires to help understand children's needs, but there is sometimes a delay in getting help from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) because of their waiting times, which means that children can wait too long to receive appropriate therapeutic help.
32. There has been significant work to drive improvement in the fostering service. Improvement in recruitment has resulted in an increase in the number of foster carers approved to provide a home for children. Assessments are comprehensive, and carers benefit from regular supervision and support, which helps them provide a good quality of care. Foster carers receive effective training and the panel gives due consideration to the suitability of carers. When children live with family or friends, decisions are made on connected carer assessments that almost always assess and match the skills of carers with the needs of children appropriately.
33. Adoption is considered for a wide range of children, including older children and groups of brothers and sisters. Over the last 12 months, many children who had previously not had their plan for adoption progressed have been placed. The local authority is now part of a regional adoption arrangement, Adoption in Merseyside. This is not yet delivering the number of adoption placements required for children in Wirral or ensuring that children have sufficient choices of

placement. Young children who come into care are considered for adoption early. Despite ongoing early tracking, delay is still evident in the finding of suitable adoptive families.

34. The quality of child permanence reports is not consistently good and does not ensure good-quality information for children or their prospective adopters. Children are placed with adoptive carers who meet their needs well and make good progress. Life-story work is not undertaken or completed early enough, and children and their adopters do not have access to this until after they are legally adopted.
35. Care leavers are now receiving a better quality of service, with practice continuing to improve since the monitoring visit in December 2018. Contact with young people is regular and ensures that young people's changing circumstances are responded to promptly. The vast majority of young people live in appropriate accommodation. Personal advisers (PAs) in the team are experienced, supportive and knowledgeable about young people's needs. Packages of support are tailored to the needs of young people. The education support team works alongside PAs to help young people access a wide range of education, employment and training opportunities. This includes apprenticeship opportunities and help with driving lessons. The number in education, employment or training, at 55%, is in line with national and regional comparators. There is a significant number of young people who are not in education, employment or training due to poor emotional health. They are not currently receiving sufficient targeted support to address these specific challenges.
36. The emotional health and well-being needs of young people are recognised, but the range of support post-18 is limited. Care leavers often wait too long to get help and do not always receive the most effective support to meet their complex emotional needs
37. Young people are now routinely involved in updating their pathway plans, and, as a result, plans identify their needs well. Reviews of progress take place regularly with young people. This leads to regular updates on progress and oversight by the team manager. The stronger examples seen included clear timescales and targets. There is more to do to ensure that this is consistently embedded as a practice standard across the service.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

38. At the point of the last inspection in 2016, children in Wirral were not treated as a top priority by the council. Children's services had not had the attention they needed, and, as a result, services for children were inadequate. Although plans to improve were put in place after the inspection, these were not effective.

During early monitoring visits, inspectors reported that not enough progress was being made and that things were not getting better quickly enough for children.

39. Since late 2017, there has been an increase in the pace of change, and the needs of children are now a priority. Significant changes to the senior leadership team, including the appointment of a corporate director for transformation, deputy director of children's services and the DCS, have ensured that the improvement of services for children is at the centre of a wider corporate agenda to transform council services.
40. Senior and political leaders now have an accurate understanding of the quality of practice in children's services. They all actively participate in a comprehensive strategic improvement framework that provides good governance. There is a clear structure to ensure regular reporting of key priorities that are understood and acted on. Regular and effective reporting of accurate performance management information, particularly to the improvement board and Wirral safeguarding children's board (WSCB), ensures that all elected members and senior leaders have a shared understanding of the quality of services that children receive. This provides them with the information that they need to continue to support and progress the improvement journey that is now well underway.
41. Significant work has been undertaken to develop stronger strategic relationships with partner agencies. This has included regular challenge by leaders and the WSCB to partners to ensure that they are supporting practice improvement. Progress has been achieved that has improved frontline practice, particularly in respect of the front door and participation in child protection investigations, in addition to improving the response to complex safeguarding. There remains more work to do to develop better emotional health and well-being services and ensure that transition arrangements for children into adult services are more effective.
42. The council now acts as a strong corporate parent. Children in care and care leavers are now a priority for the council. There have been significant improvements for children in care, particularly for care leavers, and the fostering service has increased recruitment and improved the quality of work. Children and young people feel that they are listened to by senior leaders. They now have a say in service developments in their local authority, and this is having an impact on future planning, such as the work to develop alternative housing options for care leavers.
43. There are good systems in place to ensure that leaders have an accurate understanding of practice. A clear quality assurance framework incorporates performance data, outcomes of audit and complaints and feedback from young people, in addition to any external reviews such as monitoring visits. This is integrated to evaluate progress and to inform service improvement.

44. A range of regular and focused audits provide an effective ongoing evaluation of the quality of work with children, and include strengths and areas for development. The outcome of work is evaluated, and the themes identified are used to inform service planning. There are good systems in place to ensure that feedback from audit work on individual cases is carried through and leads to improvement. In most cases, audit work on practice results in action that improves work with children, although in some cases there is delay in these actions taking place.
45. At the start of the inspection, leaders presented an accurate understanding of the quality of practice for children. All weaknesses identified during inspection were already known to the local authority and part of the ongoing improvement plans. Leaders were open and honest about the progress they had made and the improvement that it is still required. The plans in place reflect leaders' understanding of the impact on children of historically poor services and the underlying fundamental systemic change that is required in the organisation to address this. They are realistic about the complexity and challenge that this presents and the work that will be required to ensure that further progress is embedded and built on to ensure that it is sustainable.
46. Supervision and management oversight are routinely in place. This has been an improvement since the time of the last inspection. However, the quality is not consistent. Most records provide a brief note on key developments, and many provide some direction, but few provide wider guidance or reflection. Supervision and oversight are not consistently effective in ensuring that all work with children is of a good quality.
47. Leaders have undertaken significant successful recruitment activity, and staff turnover and numbers of agency workers have reduced considerably. An improvement in stability of the workforce has led to children experiencing greater continuity, with fewer changes in social worker. Feedback from children and young people in care, care leavers and carers is that they are experiencing improved relationships as a result of less change.
48. The numbers of children that frontline staff are working with are carefully monitored, and managers take action when these increase. Caseloads have reduced in the service over the last 12 months, and workers report feeling that workloads are manageable. The local authority would like to reduce these further to support further improvement in practice. There are still some social work vacancies, and when these are filled, the increased capacity will enable this further reduction to happen.
49. The vast majority of the workforce have embraced significant changes and greater oversight and scrutiny to improve practice standards. They are enthusiastic about continuing to make further improvements. Frontline staff and managers are consistently positive about the impact of leaders on improving the conditions for social work. This includes the provision of good-quality office space

and electronic equipment, as well as increased support, guidance and professional development. Young people, carers, independent chairs, partners, and frontline staff all report improvement in the service and confirmed the view of inspectors that improvements in practice are resulting in improved experiences for children.

Pre-Publication

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2019