

# Inspection of Wakefield local authority children's services

**Inspection dates: 8 November 2021 to 19 November 2021**

**Lead inspector: Victoria Horsefield, Her Majesty's Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Wakefield are of good quality and have significantly improved since the last inspection in 2018, when all aspects of children's services were judged to be inadequate. Leaders have made steady and sustained progress to establish a sustainable, ambitious and child-focused service. The changes have resulted in effective services being provided by motivated and skilled workers, who are supported by strong managers. There is unstinting corporate and political investment and commitment. Leaders have a comprehensive understanding of the quality of practice through effective management oversight and through a significantly improved performance and quality assurance system. Leaders use this to inform service delivery and the continuous improvements of practice. They are working effectively with partner agencies and have a clear and aspirational vision, 'Wakefield Families Together'. Vast improvements in partnership working can be seen at strategic and operational levels, which are having a positive impact on children and families.

A stable, permanent workforce, with manageable caseloads, allows purposeful relationships to be built with children and families. Children are at the centre of all practice. Children benefit from a significantly improved and effective help and protection service. Children in care receive a good service from workers who know them well, and children are consistently being involved in decisions about their lives.

Care leavers are increasingly well supported by dedicated workers and most achieve good outcomes. However, for a very small number of vulnerable care leavers, pathway plans are not identifying and addressing all presenting risks. Senior leaders were aware of this prior to the inspection and plans are in place to ensure that all care leavers receive a consistently good service. The quality of written plans could be further improved so that it is of a consistently high standard across all teams and workers, but this was not having an adverse impact on progress for children.

### **What needs to improve**

- The assessment of and response to risks for vulnerable care leavers
- The quality of children's written plans to ensure that they include the details of the interventions being provided to children and families.

### **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good**

1. Services for children who need help and protection in Wakefield are good. The response to safeguarding concerns is robust and ensures that risks to children are identified and responded to in a timely way. As a result, children get the right level of help and protection when they need it.
2. Children and families benefit from effective and accessible early help. The integration of early help within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) ensures that, for those children and families that do not meet the threshold for children's social care, but where an early help response is required, receive a prompt response. When children's needs change, effective step-up arrangements to social care mean that children receive a swift response with the right help being provided at the right time. When some delays in intervention occurred in the summer, these were quickly responded to by leaders, and children and families now receive a timely and proportionate response.
3. Partners have a good understanding of service thresholds when making referrals. Social workers are skilled at communicating with professionals and families to gather more information and explore solutions. Decisions are timely with evidence of management oversight. Consent is well understood and overridden where necessary. When information gathering goes over the expected timescales, there is careful monitoring, and a clear and proportionate rationale for the delay is included on the child's file. Information-sharing and communication between partners in the MASH help to identify changing levels of risk to children and assist the prioritisation of cases.
4. Following a successful pilot, the domestic abuse referral pathway between the police and children's social care is ensuring that the right children's cases are being prioritised in the MASH. The introduction of the daily multi-agency domestic abuse meetings to discuss the most high-risk incidents has resulted in better information-sharing and safety plans to safeguard children where domestic abuse is a feature in their life.

5. Children and families receive appropriate support and intervention from the out-of-hours (OOH) social work team. The integration of the OOH service within the MASH and the daily contact between the OOH manager and MASH managers ensure a quick and effective response to children. Where strategy meetings are required out of hours, these take place with most key partners in attendance.
6. When risks to children escalate, strategy meetings are held and result in the right decisions for children to safeguard their welfare. Partners attend and the information they share is well considered, and historical factors are appropriately considered to analyse risk. The outcomes of strategy meetings are well documented with a clear rationale of the decisions made.
7. Where children need a response from children's social care, there is a swift and effective response from the locality teams. Children are routinely seen alone to gather their wishes and feelings and gain an understanding of their lived experiences. Assessments include the views of family members and significant others, key professionals, children's views, and historical information alongside the presenting issues. The impact on children of living with parents who have mental ill-health, problems with substance misuse, or when there is domestic abuse present in the home is well considered. Assessments are of a consistently good quality, timely, comprehensive, and provide succinct evidence of the risks to children and a clear analysis and rationale for the next steps.
8. Children are seen regularly by social workers who are child focused, who work hard to build trusting relationships and engage children through creative direct work. Face-to-face visiting has been maintained throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and most visits are purposeful and are clearly recorded. The voice of the child is well captured, and children's views influence the outcomes of assessments and plans.
9. Child-in-need and child protection plans link to assessment outcomes, but there is variability in the quality of written plans. Social workers can articulate the child's plan and the actions being taken to progress the plan rather than this being reflected consistently in written records. However, there was no adverse impact on the progress for children. Senior leaders were aware of this variability from their audit findings and are addressing this through their workforce development programme.
10. Multi-agency meetings take place regularly, are child focused, and are well attended by appropriate partner agencies who share relevant information. Child protection conferences result in the right decisions for children. Child protection coordinators maintain regular oversight of children, subject to child protection planning, through mid-point reviews, preventing drift and delay.
11. When children are missing from education, the local authority carries out multiple and far-reaching checks to help track and identify their whereabouts. This is

supported by newly written policies and procedures that provide clear guidance to ensure that school leaders know what to do if children are missing education. A log is maintained on all children who are not in full-time education and, through a monthly inclusion panel, there is joined-up thinking with other agencies and services so that they can identify any issues and offer support.

12. When children are identified as being at risk of exploitation, effective specialist teams provide dedicated support and interventions. Workers within the exploitation service and co-located partner agencies work hard and effectively to develop strong relationships with these children. Multi-agency approaches to identifying and disrupting exploitation are strong, risks are well understood, and protective action is taken. Workers in the exploitation service are having a positive impact on children's lives, with reductions in risk and appropriate disruption activity when needed. Arrangements for children who go missing from home or care are thorough. Workers are skilled in being able to engage children when they have been missing, gather information and use this to inform effective safety planning.
13. There is robust oversight of children who are in private fostering arrangements. Children are seen and spoken to alone. Assessments are detailed and show strong evaluation of the carer's capacity to meet children's needs. Awareness raising is ongoing with partners through the safeguarding children's partnership.
14. There are timely and effective responses to young people who present as homeless. Prompt and thorough joint housing assessments take place to consider support and all accommodation options available, including becoming looked after. This results in children, where appropriate, being found accommodation and given effective support as children in need.
15. Disabled children receive a responsive service that is focused on their needs. Regular visits to children by consistent social workers ensure that their needs are effectively considered. Plans are reviewed regularly through child-in-need meetings and there is good multi-agency working. Transition planning is in place to ensure that children with high needs receive the help and care needed post-18.
16. The pre-proceeding to the public law outline (PLO) process is used when concerns escalate and, for most children, this is timely. Reports to legal planning meetings are detailed, which assists with decision-making. There is robust oversight of the PLO processes, and for the majority they progress in timescales that are right for the child. Letters before proceedings clearly identify the concerns and expectations of the family, therefore ensuring that families are given clear support and opportunities to make effective changes for children before further legal action is taken.

17. Arrangements to manage allegations made against professionals are timely and effective. Actual and potential risks are identified well, with proportionate actions taken to protect children.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: good**

18. Children are supported to remain with their families when it is safe for them to do so. Effective edge of care services support children and families to make positive changes in their lives. This provides them with positive opportunities to remain together safely. As a result, children only come into care when it is in their best interests.
19. When children need to be looked after, they receive effective and sensitive intervention. This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who receive a supportive response to their needs. Where children cannot live with their parents, consideration is given to other family members and, as a result, children are being supported to remain within their wider family network where appropriate.
20. When legal proceedings are initiated, they are progressed in a timely way. Assessments and statements to court are of a good quality and care plans are clear. Both the local judiciary and CAFCASS concurred with this and told inspectors about the marked improvements to the quality of work and timeliness for children who are subject to care proceedings.
21. When it is safe and appropriate for children to return home, planning is responsive to their needs and wishes. As a result, children have benefited from a successful and lasting transition home. Sensitive and thoughtful work with children and families focuses on both risks and support. Social workers remain involved until it is established that their involvement is no longer required.
22. Children in care benefit from social workers who know them well, see them regularly and alone, and strive to build good relationships with them. Children's records describe children's strengths, abilities, likes and dislikes, and they bring to life children's experiences and why they are in care. Life story work is routinely carried out with children at their pace and in their timescale and this assists them to understand their journey. Direct work is consistently undertaken to ensure that children understand why decisions have been reached and what the plans are for their longer-term care.
23. Thorough and child-focused assessments of children's needs are regularly updated. Children's plans are regularly reviewed, and review minutes and reports are written to the child. They are easy to understand and show the child's journey and experiences. Children have a consistent independent reviewing officer (IRO) who maintains regular contact with them and knows them well. IROs provide valued insight into children's lives and challenge professionals effectively on behalf of children to ensure that they receive the right support and

that their plans are progressed. Children benefit from good advocacy support from a commissioned service.

24. Children's needs for permanence are considered at the earliest opportunity. In addition, adoption is considered for those children unable to live with their birth or extended families. Children benefit from timely adoptions or placements with special guardians and connected carers. A significant number of children are adopted successfully when the decision has been made that this is the best option for them. Child permanence reports are detailed, give a sense of the child, reasons for adoption and future plans.
25. Most children in foster care are living in stable placements and can build strong relationships with carers that help them to make progress. Foster carers reported feeling well supported, and the introduction of the Mockingbird hubs is creating support networks between foster carers and further enhancing the support available. Over the last two years, there has been a successful recruitment campaign resulting in an increase in foster carers available to Wakefield children. Children living in long-term residential homes are making good progress.
26. Children's physical, emotional and mental health and well-being are well addressed as part of care planning. Children benefit from timely health and dental checks, which have continued at a high rate despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Children's emotional and mental health has been given a high priority by leaders who have invested in the provision of an in-house therapeutic service. The emotional well-being team provides timely intervention which includes assessments, direct work and consultations for both children and their carers.
27. The virtual school headteacher has a clear vision of what is expected from the virtual school and this is increasingly shared by social workers, schools and other agencies. If children in care are not receiving an effective education, then leaders in the virtual school intervene. Social workers write and arrange meetings for personal education plans (PEPs), which has improved their knowledge of each child's educational needs. PEPs are improving in their quality and, through a robust quality assurance process, they now meet the minimum standards that leaders aspire to, with the better PEPs being ambitious and focused on future success.
28. The local offer to care leavers is detailed and care leavers have been actively involved in its creation, including helping to develop the Care4us website. All care leavers have an allocated personal adviser who knows them well, and who actively seeks to promote the care leaver's welfare and advocates on their behalf.
29. Personal advisers worked hard to keep in touch and provide support to care leavers during the more challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic. They maintained face-to-face visits and care leavers had continued access to a number of drop-in sessions, including an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child support group, mother and baby group and Friday brunch. For a very small number of

vulnerable care leavers, the level of contact was insufficient in considering their need. As part of their comprehensive improvement plan, leaders have identified the need for greater consistency of service delivery in the care leaver service and have recently taken steps to strengthen management oversight and service delivery. It is not yet sufficiently embedded to be able to assess the effectiveness.

30. The move to introduce personal advisers for children in care at age 16 has been well received and is allowing relationships to develop sooner. All care leavers have a pathway plan that is routinely completed and reviewed. Some pathway plans are good; they are ambitious and cover all aspects of a young person's life, and clearly demonstrate that the young person was involved in its development. However, the quality of plans was not consistently well developed for a small number of vulnerable care leavers, meaning that some presenting needs were not being addressed. Leaders are aware of this and have strengthened management oversight of the service, and are providing bespoke training on pathway planning as part of their workforce development programme.
31. Care leavers' physical health needs are addressed effectively, and personal advisers support young people to attend health appointments. Care leavers receive a personal MyHealthCare summary when they are 18. There has been the recent introduction of a care navigator in the emotional health and well-being service to provide liaison between children and adolescent mental health service and adult services, improving and addressing the emotional needs of care leavers.
32. The introduction of education clinics is helping young people who are struggling to progress in their educational progress or ability to find education, employment and training (EET). The multi-agency approach enables children and young people to be discussed and suitable actions identified. As a result, the number of care leavers who are not in EET is falling across all age groups and a significant proportion of 17 to 18-year-olds are now attending education, which is much higher than the national average. An apprenticeship scheme across all areas of Wakefield Council is a good example of how young people are supported by their corporate parent.
33. Care leavers are supported through staying-put arrangements to remain with their carers until they have the skills and confidence to live independently. Personal advisers complete a skills assessment with the young person to understand what areas they will need support with, and there is a 12-week programme of independence skills. Most care leavers benefit from a wide range of suitable accommodation, enabling young people to transition into independence with access to appropriate accommodation, with the right level of support and close to community resources and networks. A family group conference offer for care leavers has been developed to explore their networks of support to assist with this transition. This has led to increased and effective support for care leavers from within their community.

34. The Children in Care Council and the care leavers' forum are influential and those involved feel that their views and ideas are valued and listened to. They have been part of the consultation for the Mockingbird service, have delivered successful Building our Future conferences, delivered training for social workers and are part of recruitment processes.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: outstanding**

35. In 2018, Wakefield was judged inadequate across all areas. Since then, leaders have worked tirelessly to continually drive forward improvements, resulting in the delivery of good-quality social work practice and sustained improved progress for children. Senior leaders' determination, confidence and ambition to constantly improve services and an openness to learning have driven that successful change. The significant challenges caused by the pandemic have not tempered the drive and determination to improve services. The unstinting focus on improvement from the director of children's services, the leadership team, and managers at all levels, has resulted in significant and sustained improvements being made to the quality of social work practice from an extremely low base. Leaders and managers model child-centred practice, which has permeated throughout the workforce. They empower managers to deliver services of a high standard. This has ensured that the vast majority of children receive good-quality support.

36. The leaders in the local authority have been extremely influential in bringing partners across Wakefield together to significantly improve and sustain the delivery of services at both a strategic and operational level. This has had a demonstrable impact on improving services to children. Relationships with key partners, in the police, schools and the judiciary, are now maturing into strong and effective partnerships and are delivering strong multi-agency responses to children. Some examples of strong partnership service delivery are demonstrated through the development of locality hubs to deliver the Wakefield Families Together service, and the investment in the development of health and well-being services for children. In addition, there is also a linked social worker to every school to provide guidance and advice. Safeguarding partners are ambitious to build on this as they further develop the Wakefield Families Together vision, delivering early intervention and prevention across local community hubs.

37. There is significant and sustained investment in the workforce through additional staff, increased managerial support and a visible and approachable leadership team. This, together with manageable caseloads, provides workers with an environment where good and effective social work practice is flourishing. The need for agency workers has significantly reduced and there is now stability within the workforce across workers and managers and leaders. This means that children are benefiting from consistent support and build and sustain relationships with workers. Workers are, without exception, very enthusiastic about working for Wakefield. They recognise and celebrate the progress that has been made and want to stay in Wakefield to be part of the continued drive to further improve the

quality and effectiveness of services to children. There is a dogged determination across senior leaders and managers at all levels in the service to continually improve the quality of practice. They place children at the centre, and provide workers with the support, tools and skills to deliver good practice. As a result, workers are tenacious, skilled and thoughtful, with a strong commitment to delivering good-quality services to children.

38. There is effective management oversight of work to ensure that children's identified needs are met and plans are progressed in a timely way. Social workers reported that they felt very well supported and described managers as available, approachable and knowledgeable. Social workers receive regular reflective supervision, which is recorded on the child's file. The recording of some supervision is variable, with actions being task or process focused, but there was no evidence that this was having an adverse impact on the progress for children.
39. The local authority now excels as a learning organisation with a clear vision of what it wants to achieve. Senior leaders have an excellent understanding of their service, their strengths and where further improvement is needed. They hold themselves and others to account to continually strive to improve practice and services. There are processes in place to learn from a variety of sources, including data, audits, complaints, disruption meetings and the views of children. Senior leaders use these processes successfully to identify gaps in provision and respond proactively. The investment to develop the emotional health and well-being team to ensure that children in care receive timely and high-quality therapeutic support, and the introduction of family group conferences for care leavers, are examples of the innovative use of resources by the local authority.
40. Performance and quality of practice is scrutinised regularly through a robust performance and quality assurance process. Managers across all levels of the organisation use data daily to track and monitor cases and provide clear case direction to workers. Auditing case work is embedded and embraced throughout the service and is providing high-quality information to managers and leaders about the quality of practice and the progress for children. Performance and audit findings are collated, and themes and trends are identified, providing leaders with an excellent understanding of the areas where practice is stronger and where further improvement is needed. This informs the comprehensive workforce development offer and closes the loop of the learning cycle.
41. There are very strong governance and scrutiny arrangements in place to hold senior leaders in children's services to account and to maintain the focus on improvement. The chief executive, the leader, the lead member, and the chair of the Scrutiny Committee have robust information through data and performance reports. They have an in-depth understanding of what reports are telling them, enabling them to provide strong oversight and effective challenge back to children's services. Corporate and political leaders have an excellent understanding of the improvement plan, the key challenges and the key achievements, and are ambitious for the future. The council has prioritised

children's services and provided significant investment and resources to improve and develop services, which are sustainable for the future.

42. The determination of leaders to improve outcomes for children is evidenced by their recognition that there is further work to do to deliver the service that they aspire to for children in Wakefield. They know their strengths and their areas for development and have a comprehensive strategy in place to address these. The chief executive has introduced a monthly corporate management meeting attended by all corporate directors to ensure that strong support is provided to care leavers throughout the council. This has been informed by care-experienced young people who have been able to attend and present their views and state what they want to see in the future.
  
43. The 'Learning Academy' provides an excellent and comprehensive workforce development offer. Workers have access to a high level of quality training, resources and support and this has been adapted throughout the pandemic to ensure that this has continued with the launch of the Learning Academy website. Social workers were extremely positive about the opportunities they have for learning, and workers were able to demonstrate how they had used training to improve their practice. There are ambitious plans to further develop the Learning Academy to enable all professionals across Wakefield to have access.



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