

# Inspection of the Isle of Wight local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 30 October to 3 November 2023

**Lead inspector:** Amanda Maxwell, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Most children and families in contact with children's services continue to receive a good service, with some improvements to quality since the last inspection in 2018. There has been some recent deterioration in discrete areas of practice, in particular in relation to children who need help and protection. The 10-year strategic partnership between the Isle of Wight Council and Hampshire County Council ends in January 2024 and leaders are focusing on achieving a seamless transition. The partnership has brought about stable and consistent leadership. The island presents unique challenges and opportunities that leaders have understood and used to create a service that improves the experiences and progress of most children and families.

Demand for services has increased rapidly since the pandemic. Senior leaders have been resilient and adaptable in their response and have been supported by additional funding agreed by elected members. There has been investment in and commitment to the early help offer, the chosen social work approach and increasing sufficiency, to provide more and varied options so that children and care leavers can remain living on the island. Consultation with partner agencies is not consistently strong, and management oversight in discrete areas is not robust enough. Children's voices are not always heard at the most senior levels. Caseloads in some teams are too high.

## What needs to improve?

- The routine inclusion by the local authority of partner agencies in child protection strategy discussions and assessments.
- The opportunities for the voices of children and care leavers to be heard at a corporate level.
- The quality of oversight and monitoring of:
  - the pre-proceedings process in the Public Law Outline (PLO)
  - permanence for children
  - private fostering.
- Caseloads in the children's assessment and safeguarding teams.

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

1. Children and families have good access to a wide variety of early help services that deliver the right support to families at an early stage. Skilled lead practitioners work effectively with families and other key professionals to support and enable families to make positive changes. Family plans ensure that timely progress is made for children. If concerns escalate, referrals are made promptly to statutory services.
2. Workers in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) undertake checks swiftly and gather information from partner agencies to help to understand and identify children's needs, including levels of risk and harm. Partner agencies and schools understand thresholds well. There is consistent management oversight at all stages and decision-making is robust and appropriate, although the detail and quality of management recording are variable. While attempts are made to inform parents or carers of referrals at an early stage, consent is not routinely sought.
3. A significant number of children are subject to repeat referrals. For some of these children, the support provided has not helped to achieve sustained improvements to their lives. Senior managers continue to analyse these figures to identify any contributory factors.
4. Arrangements to provide children, parents and carers with support at times of crisis and distress outside of office hours and at weekends are effective. Staff in the out-of-hours service liaise appropriately with daytime services to help to ensure that they provide coordinated support to children.
5. When children are at risk of harm, child protection strategy meetings are held in a timely way; decision-making is clear and is based on the information available. However, relevant multi-agency partners are not routinely invited to attend strategy meetings. This means that there is not effective sharing of

information at these meetings, where important decisions are being made about action to be taken.

6. Children subject to child protection enquiries are seen swiftly and spoken to alone, and most enquiries are used purposefully to help to safeguard children and to inform children's assessments and outcomes. The majority of child protection conferences and core group meetings are timely and well attended by family and professionals; the subsequent plans are shaped to improve children's lives.
7. Most children's assessments are comprehensive and contain helpful information about children's needs, experiences and family life, including consideration of previous concerns and interventions. However, for some children, the assessments are being closed too quickly and without relevant input from other agencies. They lack thorough analysis, and the cumulative impact of neglect and domestic abuse is not always recognised.
8. Most children are seen regularly at home and alone by workers who get to know them well. Direct work helps children's wishes and views to be understood and articulated within their assessments, plans and reviews.
9. The resilience around the family team (RAFT) works intensively with children and families to enable children to remain with their families or as part of focused intervention identified within child protection plans. The team is successful in strengthening parenting capacity, helping to reduce risk and support children to remain living safely at home.
10. Disabled children in need of help and protection receive good support from their workers, who know them well. Person-centred assessments and plans support them to remain living with their families.
11. Children at risk outside of the home are supported and reviewed effectively through the missing, exploited and trafficked risk assessment conference (METRAC) group. High-risk strategy meetings consider the risks to children and appropriate action is taken when necessary to secure their physical safety.
12. Social workers are well supported by accessible managers, although in the children's assessment and safeguarding teams (CAST), where caseloads are high, this was not routinely evidenced in records.
13. Children aged 16 and 17 who are at risk of becoming homeless are provided with information in respect of their rights and entitlements. Children are supported into safe accommodation when needed and appropriate.
14. The small number of children known to live in private fostering arrangements are not always identified, assessed or supported in a timely way. Senior leaders

do not have robust oversight of these children's arrangements and support and services are not delivered in line with regulations.

15. When concerns escalate or remain too high for children, appropriate steps are taken to initiate the pre-proceedings phase of the PLO process. Letters to parents are purposeful and of good quality. Children and parents routinely spend extended periods of time within the pre-proceedings phase to support diversion from care, and diversion rates are high. The rationale for this prolonged time period is not well recorded. The quality of senior leaders' oversight and tracking is insufficiently robust to ensure that families achieve timely change within children's time frames.
16. The local authority designated officer provides an efficient and effective service in response to concerns that are raised about adults who are in positions of trust.
17. The local authority's work to support children who are not in full-time education or are identified as missing from education is effective. Much of this work is carried out by experienced members of staff who fully understand the importance of their work in this area. Numbers of children who are electively home-educated have increased considerably in recent years; appropriate action is taken to safeguard them when concerns arise.

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

18. Children come into care when they need to. They benefit from consistently good support and care from committed and caring social workers and foster carers.
19. Children's reviews are timely, and the voice of children is evident in their plans. Independent reviewing officers monitor children's progress between reviews effectively. Children's records are mostly well written directly to them.
20. Children return home in a planned way when it is safe for them to do so. Reunification plans focus on their best interests and needs. Plans are implemented at a pace that supports a successful return home. When reunification with parents is not an option, many children are supported to live within their wider family network, following connected persons assessments and other considerations of the child's wider family.
21. The vast majority of children in care are settled in foster families that embrace them and they make good progress. Children are supported and encouraged to have interests and hobbies. Children, including those who are adopted, live with their brothers and sisters whenever possible, when it is in their best interests. They are helped to understand the reasons why they are in care and how this influences the time that they can spend with their families. While many children live in successful long-term arrangements, some of them have not had the

opportunity to experience the emotional and practical sense of security that formal confirmation of these arrangements brings.

22. Regular social events and ceremonies are held to celebrate children's achievements. Senior children's services and corporate leaders and members attend these celebration events. They have opportunities to talk with Isle of Wight children in care and hear about their experiences. However, children's attendance and influence at the corporate parenting board are very limited. Leaders have recognised this and have appropriate plans in place to address this swiftly. There is minimal consideration of how to engage and reflect the voice of those children who live at a distance from the island.
23. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive high-quality support from specialist workers. Children are seen regularly and are supported by interpreters who are familiar to them. There are positive relationships between children and their social workers. This helps workers to fully understand children's circumstances, situations and journeys. This information is well considered in drawing up effective plans that support children. Children are helped to trace their family when connections have been lost.
24. The majority of children in care are supported effectively by their social workers, who build meaningful relationships with them. Some children experience helpful and powerful life-story work with a specialist worker, which helps them to understand their individual stories. Children placed for adoption benefit from thoughtful, detailed and well-illustrated life-story books. However, there is insufficient capacity to offer this more widely and so not all children who could benefit from life-story work are able to do so.
25. Children in care who are at risk of extra-familial harm have their needs considered and addressed effectively; this helps to minimise risk for children. When children go missing, they are offered a return home conversation, although current recording problems mean that take-up rates are not clear.
26. Planning for disabled children's transition into adulthood begins at an early stage. Social workers advocate for the support and funding that is needed to meet children's needs as they become adults. 'Staying put' arrangements, Shared Lives or suitable residential provision are explored, and parallel planning is undertaken so that any uncertainty about adult services is managed and mitigated early.
27. Children's physical health needs are met and regularly reviewed. For some children, there is delay in accessing more specialist assessments to meet their emotional and mental health needs. This is a particular challenge when children live at a distance from the local authority.
28. Children are encouraged to attend and engage in education. They are well supported by their carers, who encourage them to be aspirational in their

learning and educational achievements. Recent changes to improve the quality and impact of personal education plans for children are beginning to have a positive effect, although senior leaders know more work is needed to ensure that this is embedded. Staff at the virtual school are ambitious for children and some children are making positive progress within their capabilities as a result of the support that they receive.

29. The local authority has robust systems in place to assure itself that its commissioned supported accommodation providers have been, or are in the process of being, registered with Ofsted. Children living in supported accommodation have their individual needs well met and this is evident through their plans and through the progress that they make. Children are very rarely placed in unregistered children's homes, and none are in use at this time.
30. Senior leaders demonstrate an effective commitment to increasing the sufficiency and stability of foster homes and children's homes for children in care. They maintain an ongoing focus to positively support foster carers in meeting the needs of the children in their care. This is alongside the continual foster carer recruitment programme and a recognition of the need to improve the response rate to enquiries and applications. The approach of the fostering team provides carers with comprehensive and informed support.

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

31. Care leavers benefit from the allocation of personal advisers (PAs) at the age of 16. This affords them opportunities and time to develop positive and trusting relationships with their PAs. These positive relationships form the foundation of the support that assists care leavers as they move into adulthood. PAs are committed to their young people and advocate for them well; they also help them to maintain positive relationships with family and friends. Care leavers are visited regularly by their PAs and the use of digital communication helps them to stay in touch and ask for help and support if needed.
32. Most care leavers are helped to maintain good physical and mental health through the support and guidance given to them by their PAs. However, additional emotional and mental health support is not readily available to care leavers, so PAs signpost them to alternative services while they wait to access universal services.
33. Care leavers are routinely provided with passports and the other important documents that they need. Care leavers know how to access their health information and PAs support young people to access their information and records when needed.
34. The local offer for care leavers is lengthy and not easily accessible. It does not demonstrate a genuine commitment to support care leavers, nor does it show ambition and aspiration for them to succeed. Senior leaders are currently

reviewing the local offer and working to improve its accessibility. PAs advocate for care leavers, which ensures that their individual needs are met. Care leavers living on the Isle of Wight are exempt from council tax, but this support is not consistently available to those living elsewhere.

35. There is limited evidence of care leavers being involved in, influencing and participating in the development of services.
36. The availability of suitable housing is a challenge. A very small number of care leavers live temporarily in bed and breakfast accommodation, although PAs do all that they can to identify more suitable arrangements and encourage care leavers to make more permanent choices. Senior leaders have been successful, as need rises, in increasing and improving their housing offer options for care leavers.
37. Care leavers' pathway plans, known as 'My life, my future', are dynamic and personal. They capture care leavers' needs and ambitions and detail what is required to meet those needs and to help care leavers to make progress in their daily lives. Some care leavers chair their own reviews. Many plans celebrate their individual achievements and detail their circumstances, and the relationships and support that they experience.
38. Care leavers who are parents receive vital person-centred support that assists them to care for themselves and their children. Care leavers in custody and on release receive regular and effective support.
39. PAs provide highly effective support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers and seek to understand the complexities of their needs and vulnerabilities. PAs take time to gain insight into their journeys to the UK and the impact this has had on them.
40. PAs are sensitive and supportive as care leavers explore their gender and sexuality.
41. Care leavers are supported to engage with a range of services that help them to access education and employment. There is currently no active plan or offer in place to address and provide wider occupational opportunities for training and employment, including apprenticeships.

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

42. The inspection took place at a very difficult time for the local authority, following closely on from the serious illness and subsequent death of a senior manager. During this time, a number of her colleagues had stepped in to cover more senior roles, while managing their own as well as colleagues' sadness and grief.

43. Senior leaders have sustained and further developed the quality and impact of social work practice on the island since the inspection in 2018. They have maintained a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service through some very challenging times, including the pandemic, the rise in demand and workforce turnover. While some areas of practice have improved since the previous inspection, the experiences of children in need of help and protection are not as consistently strong as they were in 2018.
44. Corporate and political leaders and members are well informed and supportive, and maintain a thorough understanding of the service's strengths and weaknesses.
45. The corporate parenting board has recently undergone some changes to improve its effectiveness. New members are undertaking training to ensure that they fully understand their responsibilities. Corporate parents have a clear action plan that identifies areas they wish to improve and develop, which includes that children are fully visible and engaged in the corporate planning board meetings. However, the plan is not sufficiently aspirational for children overall. For example, there is not a collective sense of responsibility for all children for whom they are the corporate parent.
46. Senior leaders, together with political leaders, have responded well to growing demands. There has been significant pressure on the workforce due to the increase in demand in the MASH, alongside a churn in workers within some teams, but especially in the children's assessment and safeguarding teams. This has meant that some workers have had much higher caseloads than senior leaders would like, and this has had a negative impact on some areas of practice. Senior leaders made some amendments to the structure and number of social work teams a few months ago in an effort to improve resilience and address this. However, demand has continued to increase, and senior leaders have recently identified that additional workers and teams are needed to reduce caseloads to the desired level; some agency social workers have been recruited recently to assist with this.
47. The majority of staff in the service benefit from regular, effective and reflective supervision that guides and supports workers with their practice. However, social workers in the children's assessment and safeguarding teams do not routinely receive this level and quality of supervision. Senior leaders are taking action to improve this area of practice.
48. A wide variety of programmes and initiatives are helping to increase and develop the workforce. This is alongside the various additional learning and development opportunities, including the apprenticeship scheme. Staff value the opportunities available to them.



49. Senior leaders have continued to take assertive steps to increase the sufficiency of accommodation for children on the island. They are continuing to develop and improve their sufficiency offer through the modernising placements programme. This has included strengthening the offer for foster carers and being creative in the commissioning of accommodation and placements to meet children's needs.
  
50. Senior managers use learning from feedback, surveys and complaints effectively to inform them of areas of practice that require review or improvement and development. They have commissioned reviews of aspects of the service to improve their understanding, such as a review of services in the MASH.
  
51. There is a wealth of reporting systems and a clear structure for quality assurance and performance oversight. However, workers have been significantly hindered by the inaccurate data produced by the current electronic recording system, which is cumbersome and inefficient and does not support effective social work practice. Plans have been in place for some time to address this and senior leaders report that the new system will be in place shortly. Managers have had to create workarounds to ensure that the data that they gather provides them with clarity and a true reflection of their work. Audit activity also provides senior leaders with an insight into the quality of practice. There are regular performance meetings and reports that provide helpful and insightful information about all areas of practice and impact.

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