

Inspection of Wirral local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 18 to 29 September 2023

Lead inspector: Teresa Godfrey, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the last inspection in 2019, there have been improvements in the quality of social work assessments, direct work, life-story work with children and the response to domestic abuse. The early help partnership response is creative and effective, and the response to children at risk of exploitation is well coordinated.

However, the standard of social work practice for children is variable across the service and not all areas of practice have improved at a sufficient pace to meet children's needs. For example, the response to 16- and 17-year-old homeless children and the identification of and response to those in private fostering arrangements remain underdeveloped. Transition planning for children in care is not always effective in order to ensure that children feel prepared for leaving care. Decision-making when children are on the edge of care is sometimes too adult-focused, which means that a small number of children remain for too long at risk of ongoing harm.

The last focused visit, in 2022, highlighted that the progression of permanence plans for children needed to improve to ensure that they can live in stable homes and are not left subject to statutory intervention for too long. This is still an area of practice which requires further improvement, including the management oversight provided by independent reviewing officers (IROs).

These issues are known to senior leaders, who have introduced locality-based working and are in the process of implementing a new model of social work practice to drive improvements forward. It is too early to see the impact of this new model of practice on children and families in Wirral.

What needs to improve?

- The response to 16- and 17-year-old homeless children, to ensure that they are made aware of their rights and entitlements.
- The awareness-raising and identification of, and response to, children living in private fostering arrangements.
- The quality of decision-making, to ensure that children come into care in a timely way.
- The timely progression of permanence plans for children, to ensure that they are not subject to statutory intervention for too long.
- Escalation by IROs, to robustly challenge plans for children.
- Transition planning for 16- and 17-year-old children in care, to ensure that they feel better prepared for leaving care.
- The offer to care leavers so that it is consistently accessible and understood to ensure that all care leavers receive their full entitlements.

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

1. Early help services in Wirral are effective. Identified needs are responded to quickly and there are a wealth of resources and services available to support families' needs. Skilled family workers carry out purposeful work which makes a positive difference to children's lives. When risk to children escalates, it is recognised and acted on quickly. Children are stepped up to statutory services when needed, to ensure that they can be appropriately safeguarded.
2. The integrated front door (IFD) provides an effective response to contacts and referrals when there are concerns about the safety and welfare of children. Referrals from partner agencies provide relevant information and demonstrate that thresholds for intervention are well understood. Parental consent is well recorded and overridden when necessary. Domestic abuse is recognised and responded to well. History is routinely collated, but for some children this does not inform decision-making or the assessment of risk.

3. Outside normal working hours, the emergency duty team (EDT) responds effectively to keep children safe. The recently developed sessional emergency response worker service supports this team. Timely handover arrangements are in place with daytime services.
4. When children are at risk of significant harm, this is recognised by social workers, and decisions to hold strategy discussions are appropriate. Strategy meetings are well attended by partner agencies, where good-quality information is shared to inform decision-making and next steps. A minority of strategy meetings are not held quickly enough. This means that social workers sometimes visit children before meetings happen, and then put safety plans in place which are not always informed by multi-agency information and coordination. Decisions to progress to S47 enquiries are appropriate. Internal procedures impact on the timeliness of initial child protection conferences.
5. Children's cases transfer from the IFD to the assessment service without delay. Child and family assessments begin promptly and include the views of partner agencies and family members. Children are seen alone during the assessment process and their views are captured. Most assessments contain balanced analysis and management oversight, although not all assessments are updated when situations change. This means that, for some children, their current circumstances may not be fully understood or responded to.
6. Social workers visit children regularly. Visits provide children with an opportunity to build trusting relationships with their workers. Direct work is sometimes, but not always, undertaken to help social workers understand children's needs, wishes and feelings.
7. For the majority of children, child in need (CIN) and child protection (CP) plans are detailed and specific, to ensure that progress is measurable. Social workers draw on targeted services that help children understand their circumstances and support parents in reducing risks. In most cases, child-in-need meetings and core groups are well attended by the right professionals and family members to review the plan. They set appropriate timescales, and for most children, they have a positive impact.
8. When children remain subject to CIN plans for longer periods, this is appropriate, and work is carried out to establish whether positive change has been sustained. When children become the subject of CP plans for a second or subsequent time, there is a process in place to ensure that previous planning is reviewed, to establish why it did not have a long-term impact. However, plans for some children are not always informed by previous interventions in response to historical risk factors.
9. When a child protection plan is not sufficient to protect the child, most are appropriately escalated into pre-proceedings in a timely way. For a small

number of children, decision-making is too adult-focused, which means that they remain at risk of ongoing harm. Once in pre-proceedings, managers have appropriate oversight of work to ensure that plans and actions are on track. A small number of children experience delay during this process. As a result, senior leaders have recently increased social work capacity to undertake parenting assessments in pre-proceedings in a timelier way.

10. When children are at risk of exploitation, this is recognised and responded to effectively. There is a strong multi-agency approach, and intelligence and information are shared in daily meetings to ensure that an appropriate service can be provided. Specialist workers undertake meaningful direct work with children, coordinate meetings and provide consultation to professionals, to reduce risks to vulnerable children. Risk is regularly reviewed to ensure that changes in circumstances are identified and responded to. Return home interviews are undertaken by specialist workers who engage children well, which helps to reduce future risk. There is strong management oversight and endorsement of actions in all work with children who are at high risk of exploitation.
11. Disabled children benefit from consistent social workers with whom they develop positive relationships. Social workers are strong advocates, proactively working on behalf of children to ensure that they, and their families, receive the services they need. Social workers in the disabled children's team use a variety of methods and a range of tools to communicate with children, gain their wishes and understand their feelings.
12. Private fostering arrangements are underdeveloped. There are only very small numbers of these arrangements and the response to them is inconsistent. As a result, the local authority cannot be assured that children are safe in these placements.
13. When children aged 16 and 17 present as homeless, they do not receive a consistent or timely response. Joint assessments with housing colleagues are not undertaken promptly. When a joint assessment does take place, children are not clearly made aware of their rights and entitlements.
14. There are effective processes for the recording and management of allegations against people who work with children. The local authority designated officer regularly provides training tailored to the needs of professionals and has established effective working relationships with key local agencies.
15. There are improving relationships with schools. This has led to more effective multi-agency working in relation to exploitation risks for pupils on part-time timetables. For a small number of children who are on the missing education register the risks are not known. Leaders do not analyse the information clearly in order to focus on service improvement, which means that there is a lack of accountability for the performance of this service.

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

16. When children need to come into care because of immediate risks, this is responded to quickly. Thresholds for children to be removed from their parents' care are usually applied correctly to ensure their safety and well-being. A small number of children remain at risk of ongoing harm for too long before appropriate decisions are made to bring them into care.
17. Planning for children subject to section 20 arrangements is not as robust as for those in formal care proceedings, which has led to delays in securing permanence for some children. Legal gateway meetings are held appropriately when care proceedings are considered. Some decisions for children are too adult-focused and this leaves children at risk of ongoing harm or uncertainty. When decisions are made to enter the Public Law Outline, parents are engaged fully in this process and letters clearly outline expectations and concerns.
18. There have been improvements in the timeliness of initial court applications and the quality of court work for children. Both the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the designated family judge recognise this. Some children experience delay in the discharge of care orders and the securing of special guardianship orders.
19. When children cannot return to their parents' care, early permanence plans are identified promptly. Children are placed with family members when this is appropriate, and early consideration and support are offered to carers to become special guardians, when it is in children's best interests.
20. Most decisions for children to leave care and return home are appropriate. Thorough assessments are completed, which identify ongoing needs and balance any potential risks. Decisions are overseen and approved by senior managers and IROs, although for a very small number of children, the quality of management decision making is not sufficiently robust.
21. Children's plans are timely, capture their views effectively and are regularly reviewed. IROs do not always robustly challenge the appropriateness of care plans for children, and not all children benefit from seeing their IRO before their review meetings.
22. Most children in care are visited regularly by social workers who know them well. Social workers develop positive relationships with children. A range of direct work tools are used to explore children's wishes and feelings and to carry out life-story work. Most records are skilfully written to the child, giving them a clear understanding of why they are in care.

23. Risks to children in care are usually promptly recognised and assessed. For most children, robust multi-agency safety plans are put in place to support them to stay safe.
24. There are a range of emotional support services available for children in care, although waiting lists for these services result in some delay. Not all initial and review health assessments are completed within appropriate timescales for the child. For children with less obvious health issues, their needs remain unassessed and unmet for too long.
25. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by social workers who are sensitive to their cultural needs and experiences. Their placements mostly meet their needs well. They are encouraged to attend education, and resources are made available to support their cultural and social needs. A very small number wait too long to access emotional support and counselling services.
26. The virtual school has ensured that the quality and timeliness of personal education plans for children in care has improved. However, targets lack ambition or clear measurable outcomes. This means that the educational achievements of children in care have not demonstrably improved, and the absence rate for children is still too high.
27. Children in care have a variety of hobbies and activities. They are supported by their carers to stay connected with important people in their lives. Family-time arrangements are made in line with children's needs and wishes.
28. Most children in care live in settled and stable arrangements with carers who understand and meet their needs well. When it is appropriate, they are placed with extended family members. A small number of children experience multiple placement moves, which has a detrimental impact on them.
29. A small number of children are placed at a distance from home when it is in their best interests. These children are visited regularly by social workers who find out their views to inform their care plans. They live in appropriate placements that meet their needs.
30. For older children planning is not always effective or timely. This means that they sometimes feel anxious and ill-prepared to leave care. For those living in supported accommodation, health assessments are not always completed in a timely way. Decisions are not always informed by updated assessments of need. Most children in such provision have their needs met, but a minority struggle to manage their responsibilities, and some feel lonely.
31. There are delays in progressing long-term permanence plans for some children. A small number of children live in unapproved kinship placements with family members or friends because timely assessments have not been completed. Oversight of these placements is not robust enough.

32. Recruitment and retention of foster carers in Wirral are strong. Foster carers receive training to meet the needs of children placed in their care, and they benefit from professional and supportive relationships with social workers.
33. Children are placed for adoption in a timely way and are placed with their siblings when this is appropriate. Introductions are undertaken in a structured and sensitive way. Life-story books and later-life letters are sensitively written. The local authority is part of a regional adoption agency, Adoption in Merseyside (AiM). Adopters spoke positively about the social workers from AiM and felt well supported, although they were less positive about their experience of some children's social workers.

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

34. Personal advisers (PAs) are strong advocates for the young people they work with. They are allocated in a timely way to allow for relationships to develop before the young people leave care. PAs know their young people well and are dedicated to improving their lives. For the majority of care leavers, consideration is given to individual needs and any impact family history or experiences may have on them. PAs are alert to issues of domestic abuse, criminal exploitation and risks associated with poor mental health. Risks are quickly identified, assessed and reviewed by PAs, who take effective action to promote young people's safety.
35. Care leavers in Wirral trust their PAs and feel listened to. However, most were critical of their social workers as they did not always feel listened to and were anxious about where they would live and how they would be supported after leaving care.
36. Most PAs visit young people regularly, at a frequency that meets their needs, and use a variety of communication methods to stay connected to them. Care leavers aged over 21 continue to receive support from their PAs when they still have a need and want the support to continue.
37. Most young people have detailed pathway plans that capture their views once they turn 18. Plans identify risks appropriately and are written to support young people to understand their progress. Most plans are drawn up collaboratively with young people and routinely include the input of other agencies. Pathway plans are mostly updated to reflect changes, and this supports young people to know what help is available to them and who is going to do what. Pathway plans for children moving to the leaving care service at 16 or 17 are of variable quality, and do not always support them to understand what help and support is available.

38. Care leavers have a warm and welcoming safe space where they can meet, socialise, attend groups, celebrate successes, and access support from their PAs, who are based there. The provision of a social supermarket also supports the young people in their daily lives to buy essentials at prices they can afford.
39. Care leavers are supported to access funding to purchase the essential things they may need in life. Not all care leavers are aware of their entitlements, and some do not receive sufficient training on budgeting, finances, claiming benefits or cooking to help them manage independently. Care leavers know how to make a complaint, although some said they do not feel that anything would change if they complained.
40. Most care leavers are in good physical health and have their health needs met, but not all understand or have access to their full health history. This means that some care leavers do not know their immunisation history or whether they have undergone treatment.
41. Disabled care leavers are supported effectively, to ensure their health needs are well understood and met, and this support continues with thorough pathway planning beyond the age of 21. Careful consideration is given to supporting positive relationships with family and friends.
42. Some care leavers are not aware of the local offer, which is not yet consistently accessible or sufficiently specific about their entitlements. Care leavers receive different levels of support and guidance in relation to their rights and entitlements, and this means that not all are receiving their full entitlements. The local offer does provide council tax exemption for those living in Wirral but does not ensure that care leavers have access to Wi-Fi. For vulnerable care leavers, this potentially increases their social isolation or limits their opportunities to seek employment and engage with education. There is more work to do to ensure that the local offer is sufficiently ambitious and fully understood by all care leavers, staff and corporate parents.
43. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who become care leavers receive a good level of support, including practical and emotional well-being support. Careful consideration is given to ensuring that they can access local amenities to support their cultural and identity needs.
44. There is a dedicated employability team, and effective arrangements are in place to ensure that care leavers are supported to pursue employment, education or training opportunities. PAs emphasise this and are ambitious for young people.
45. Most care leavers live in accommodation that is safe and supports their needs. Despite this, there is a lack of accommodation choice for care leavers in Wirral and, for some, this leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness, as they live too far away from friendship groups and college. Senior leaders recognise this, they

are taking steps to make the necessary improvements with local partners, and work is underway to embed the staying close approach.

46. Care leavers receive advice and support from PAs about accessing their care records, to help them understand their histories and experiences. They have access to key documents, including their passports, birth certificates and national insurance numbers, enabling them to access leisure, employment, housing and education opportunities.
47. A small number of care leavers experience difficulties and delays when transitioning to adult social care. This means that some young people do not have access to the right services at the right time to meet their ongoing complex needs.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

48. The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families was judged to be good at the time of the last inspection, in 2019. Since then, senior and corporate leaders have continued to focus on raising the standards of social work practice, and they have overseen some improvements, although practice remains too variable. This is acknowledged by senior leaders in their self-evaluation, although there is still more work to do to achieve greater consistency and to address practice shortfalls.
49. There have been improvements in the quality of analysis in social work assessments, the provision of direct work and life-story work, and the identification of potential carers within family networks when children cannot remain in the care of their parents. There have also been improvements in the delivery of the EDT service through the creation of the emergency response team.
50. There is corporate and political support for children's services. The needs of children are acknowledged in the council's strategic plan and the budget has been protected, in a challenging financial environment. Despite this, the needs of some children are not sufficiently prioritised. Delays in securing sufficient legal capacity, for example, have directly impacted on children achieving permanence. In addition, the previous inspection identified that there were weaknesses in the local authority's response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds, planning and achieving permanence, and children living in private fostering arrangements. These remain areas for improvement.
51. The local authority is aware of its corporate parenting duties and there is a commitment to children in care and care leavers. This requires further development to ensure that it is fully embedded across the council. There is a children in care and care leavers council and some discrete examples of co-production. Care leavers have been involved in the development of services and

the local offer. However, young people are not routinely involved in practice and policy development. Most young people in care are not engaged in wider opportunities to participate.

52. The joint strategy for children in care and care leavers does not go far enough in clarifying entitlements for children and young people and too much is left to individual discretion. While a small number of children benefit from apprenticeships with the council, these are insufficient to meet demand.
53. Senior leaders have continued to focus on strengthening relationships with partners, and this is particularly evident in the implementation of the early help strategy and the early help alliance. This creative work has resulted in many families receiving effective help at the right time. Relationships with Cafcass and the family court are positive, and the improvements in the quality of work which comes into the court arena are recognised by them.
54. Learning from good practice is important to leaders in Wirral. Leaders and managers use learning from practice and feedback to improve the experiences and care of children. This includes learning from child safeguarding practice reviews and audits of social work practice.
55. Detailed and relevant knowledge of local communities has been used to shape services to better meet need, such as the development of the 'cradle to career' team. Children at risk of exploitation are recognised and responded to very effectively in Wirral.
56. The sufficiency strategy is based on the projected continuation of the fall in the number of children in care, linked to ongoing improvements in early help support and the anticipated reduction in demand. The work undertaken with partners and neighbouring local authorities is helping to ensure that gaps in provision are filled, and most children are placed locally with carers who are meeting their needs. A small number of children continue to experience placement moves or live in accommodation that does not meet their needs, due to a lack of placement choice.
57. A new quality assurance framework has been developed this year to build on existing practice and augment individual, team and service learning. This is not fully embedded and more needs to be done to understand the impact on individual children.
58. An extensive suite of reports and performance data is now available to identify issues and trends in practice at a service, team and individual level. This data needs further refinement so it can be used to monitor and drive forward improvement more effectively.
59. Strengthening and stabilising the workforce is a challenge for leaders in Wirral. Leaders recognise this and launched a workforce development strategy in 2022

focused on improving the recruitment and retention of permanent social workers. It is too soon to see the full impact of this, although the number of social workers has increased.

60. Supervision and management oversight are generally in place, but the quality is variable and there are gaps in the frequency of recorded supervision. Workers are positive about their experience of supervision, but it does not consistently lead to good-quality decisions and the provision of help to children and young people.
61. Caseloads are monitored effectively to ensure that staff can build meaningful relationships with children. Workers were consistently positive about working in Wirral and reported that they are well supported by visible, available and approachable managers.

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