

Inspection of Westmorland and Furness local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 22 April to 3 May 2024

Lead inspector: Kathryn Grindrod, His 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Good

This was the first inspection of Westmorland and Furness local authority children's services. Westmorland and Furness and Cumberland unitary authorities came into being on 1 April 2023. Children's services in the predecessor local authority, Cumbria County Council, were judged requires improvement to be good in November 2022.

Senior leaders have responded effectively and positively to local government reorganisation and the newly formed council has firmly established a unique identity. Senior leaders took swift action to recruit to, and stabilise, the workforce. They have embedded a shared vision across the workforce and with partner agencies that is supporting service improvements. As a result, the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, and for children in care, are good.

A robust and wide-ranging programme of quality assurance and development activity, which includes external scrutiny and review, is ensuring that leaders are largely aware of, and have credible plans to improve, the areas for development. This includes the quality of plans. It also includes the response to care leavers, which requires improvement to be good. A performance culture is embedding, although it is

too soon to see the full impact of focused training to develop further frontline managers' oversight.

What needs to improve?

- The quality of written records about child protection enquiries.
- The quality of child in need, child protection, personal education and pathway plans.
- The completion of life-story work for children in care.
- The quality of assessment and support for care leavers' health, including ensuring that care leavers understand their health histories.
- The understanding and delivery of the local offer for care leavers, including for those aged 21 and over who need ongoing support.

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

1. Children and families in Westmorland and Furness receive timely and effective support from a broad range of universal and early help services. Detailed and thorough early help assessments lead to child-focused plans and sustainable change for children and families.
2. The interface between early help and statutory work is clear and understood by partner agencies. The transfer between levels of support is mostly well managed and made at the right time for families.
3. Contacts from partner agencies into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (the Hub), part of the local authority's 'front door' arrangements, are usually sufficiently detailed to inform appropriate decision-making. Parental consent is sought by referring agencies, and when decisions are made to dispense with consent, the rationale is appropriate and clearly recorded.
4. Timely and effective partnership work takes place in the Hub. The co-located domestic abuse team brings expertise to screening activity, ensuring that any risks to children from domestic abuse are quickly recognised and responded to appropriately. Children's wishes are well captured during the multi-agency screening process and their experiences inform decision-making. Screening activity is thorough and workers carefully consider how children are affected by adult behaviour. Appropriate decisions are made to ensure children's ongoing well-being and safety.
5. Thresholds are clearly understood and appropriately applied in the Hub. Risks are recognised and responded to appropriately. This ensures that children and families have their needs met by the right people at the right time. The out-of-hours service responds promptly to urgent issues about children and ensures that

daytime services are well sighted about issues to inform ongoing action if necessary.

6. The initial response to children at risk of significant harm is swift. Strategy meetings take place promptly and they are usually well attended by relevant professionals. Concerns and risks are carefully considered, and immediate actions are agreed to safeguard children. Child protection enquiries are timely.
7. The outcomes of strategy discussions and child protection enquiries, including decisions to progress to initial child protection conference, are appropriate. While practice is strong, the records about strategy discussions and child protection enquiries are not consistently detailed, which means that the rationale for decision-making is not always clear in records.
8. Children's cases transfer from the Hub to the support and protect teams without delay, and assessments of children's needs commence promptly. Timely support is provided to children and families during the assessment process. Social workers take time to get to know individual children and they capture what they see, hear and feel about what is going on in children's lives. Children's experiences are clearly evaluated in assessments and they inform decision-making. Most assessments are thorough and provide an understanding of need and risk, leading to appropriate recommendations.
9. The thresholds for working with children in need of help and protection are appropriately applied and children and families are not subjected to unnecessary statutory processes. The network of family and friends around children is involved at an early stage, which helps to build resilience in families to safeguard children.
10. Initial child protection conferences are held in a timely way. Child protection chairs take time to get to know the children with whom they work. Children are encouraged to attend their meetings. When they do not attend, their views are obtained and represented, which ensures that decisions are child-centred.
11. Most written child in need and child protection plans lack clarity about who is going to do what, when and why. Despite this, effective verbal communication between agencies and families means that impactful work with children makes a difference to their lives and reduces risks to them.
12. Decisions to end child protection plans are appropriate, and the rationale for these decisions is clearly recorded. When risks to children do not reduce, they are considered at legal placement panel within a time frame that is right for the child. When a decision is made to initiate pre-proceedings work, there is no delay in progressing to the first formal pre-proceedings meeting.
13. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the local judiciary report improved relationships with the local authority, alongside an improvement in the quality of pre-proceedings work. For many children, the support offered during this process leads to their circumstances improving. This

means that many children step out of pre-proceedings processes as the risks that they face reduce.

14. For a small number of children, the tracking, process and structure around pre-proceedings work has not resulted in timely decision-making when their circumstances do not improve quickly enough. Leaders have recognised this and they have recently implemented more robust tracking processes. It is too soon to see the full impact of these changes for all children currently subject to ongoing pre-proceedings work.
15. Disabled children have their needs met at an appropriate level by skilled and experienced social workers who see them regularly and know them well. When disabled children are at risk of significant harm, appropriate multi-agency activity reduces those risks for most children. Escalation into pre-proceedings is timely should the risks not reduce quickly enough for children.
16. The risks that some children face from exploitation or through going missing from home or care are quickly recognised and responded to appropriately. Creative and persistent work is carried out by committed staff to engage these highly vulnerable children. This is reducing the risk of them suffering further serious harm.
17. The local authority designated officer responds promptly to allegations about adults who work with children. This response appropriately involves relevant agencies and leads to decision-making that reduces potential future risks to children.
18. A very small number of children are in private fostering arrangements in Westmorland and Furness. The suitability of their arrangements is assessed, and children are regularly visited to confirm the ongoing suitability of the arrangements, and to ensure that they can raise any concerns that they may have. The local authority has appropriate plans to raise awareness about private fostering across the community given the low number of recognised arrangements.
19. Children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless receive a strong and effective response. Joint protocols between children's social care and housing are routinely followed. This response ensures that these children have a safe and appropriate place to live.
20. A significant number of children receive support from young carers services in the local authority area. The local authority has limited oversight of the delivery of these commissioned services. As a result, the impact that this support has on children's lives is not well understood.
21. Children who are electively home educated, along with the small number of children who are missing education, benefit from robust local authority oversight. This ensures that any concerns about these children are quickly identified and addressed.

22. Children who may be at risk of coming into local authority care benefit from support provided by the specialist resilience team. This involvement has a positive impact on progressing plans and improving outcomes for children and families, preventing some children from having to come into local authority care and supporting others to return home from care.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

23. Most children who come into care do so in a planned and timely way with robust management oversight. Decisions to make applications to the courts for children to come into care are appropriate. These decisions are informed by comprehensive and largely timely assessments.

24. The prompt and effective use of family networks and kinship carers ensures that, whenever possible, children are placed with family members or people known to them. Brothers and sisters are placed together when this is appropriate to meet their individual needs.

25. Children's care plans are reviewed regularly, and independent reviewing officers (IROs) have strong oversight of the progress of plans between formal review meetings. Their proactive involvement prevents delays in the progression of most children's plans.

26. Children in care have regular health reviews and dental appointments, and any necessary specialist intervention is quickly secured. Should they need it, children have prompt access to the emotional well-being team for individual support.

27. Needs arising out of children's culture, faith and individual characteristics are sensitively considered by workers. The use of appropriate translation services further supports children's understanding about the reasons for coming into care, what will happen next, and their legal rights.

28. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are appropriately supported in different areas of their lives. They are offered good levels of emotional and practical support, including help to access appropriate legal advice and progress their asylum claims.

29. When children require significant restrictions or supervision to keep them safe, deprivation of liberty orders are sought, obtained, and their use is appropriately monitored. Their permissive use is reduced in line with children's needs, which ensures that children do not have their liberty deprived for longer than is necessary.

30. Children in care told inspectors that they are encouraged to keep in touch with family and friends. Family time is routinely explored in assessments and carefully reviewed over time. This ensures that family time is, and continues to be, meaningful and of benefit to children.

31. Social workers build strong and caring relationships with children. Workers know their children well and speak about them with pride, compassion and warmth. Social workers visit most children in care regularly and do so with purpose. Sensitive, creative and individualised direct work with some children is carried out by social workers.
32. When life-story work is carried out with children, and later life letters are written, they are of high quality and are meaningful to children. Planned life-story work is routinely considered for children in care whose plan for permanence is that they live away from their families. For other children in care, who may return home or live with kinship carers, life-story work is reactive rather than planned. This means that some children in care are not routinely helped to understand why they live where they do unless they ask.
33. Most children who are placed out of the local area receive an appropriate level of support and quality of service. Long-term plans for children placed out of area are led by the views of children and young people. This includes supporting them to remain in the area in which they have built their social networks.
34. The Children in Care Council (CiCC) continues to contribute to the development of services, and children are rightly proud of their work in this area. Leaders are aware that the impact the CiCC currently has is limited and they have plans to develop the reach of the CiCC's work.
35. When risks to children in care are recognised, they are managed well. The swift response to concerns, including disclosures about historical abuse, ensures that plans are quickly implemented to reduce risks to children.
36. Children in care are actively encouraged to engage in new hobbies and activities. This provides them with opportunities to make new friends and acquire new skills and build self-confidence. Children in care also have access to advocates, which ensures that they feel listened to and have their wishes heard.
37. The virtual school has high ambitions for children in care. However, these children's educational attendance and attainment are not always strong. Personal education plans (PEPs) do not consistently capture social issues, emotional issues, strengths or struggles. This is especially true for PEPs for children of post-secondary school age. A newly appointed headteacher of the virtual school has a clear understanding of these issues and work is under way to try and address them.
38. Decisions for children to exit care are usually timely. When reunification to home from care is the agreed plan, this is carefully assessed with robust management oversight. Any concerns about the stability of these placements are responded to with increased support, drawing on the support of family networks whenever possible. Revocation of legal orders is routinely considered, which ensures that children do not remain in care for longer than is necessary.

39. When there is a plan for a special guardianship order (SGO), the progress of these plans is tracked through formal panels. As a result, most children do not experience drift or delay in these orders being granted. Most SGO assessments and plans are thorough and detailed. These plans provide clear information to carers in respect of children's needs in the short and longer term.
40. The number of foster carers in Westmorland and Furness has decreased over the last year as recruitment has not kept pace with foster carer resignations. Appropriate plans are now in place to increase enquiries about fostering, and, when appropriate, to progress fostering assessments without delay. Foster carers appreciate the quality of support that is available to them and the training that they are offered. This has a positive impact for the children for whom they care.
41. No children are living in unregistered children's homes. A very small number of children live in residential placements when the plan for them is long-term fostering. For these children, there is a persistent search for the right placement for them. While their day-to-day needs are being met, their need to live in a family is delayed due to a lack of foster placements that can meet their complex needs.
42. Children living in supported accommodation receive the right level of support to meet their needs. The local authority only uses providers that have registered or applied to register with Ofsted. Children living in these arrangements are visited regularly by their social workers and IROs, ensuring strong oversight of their needs and an appropriate response to those needs.
43. Children's permanence reports are appropriately detailed and thorough. Agency decision-maker and panel decisions are clearly recorded, which means that most children benefit from swift progress through the adoption process. Consideration is given to brothers and sisters being placed for adoption together, whenever appropriate and possible.
44. Assessments of prospective adopters are consistently analytical and evaluate strengths and vulnerabilities of the applicants. Adopters say that the assessment process and training prepare them well for adoption. There are not enough adopters for all the children in Westmorland and Furness whose plan is one of adoption. This is particularly the case for those children who need to be placed with their brothers and sisters, older children, or those with more complex needs. The local authority has invested in the recruitment of adopters, but it is too soon to see this reflected in the number of available approved adopters.

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

45. Services for care leavers are not consistently good. Pathway planning does not always thoroughly consider young people's needs, especially their health needs. Personal advisers (PAs) do not always visit young people as frequently as they

need. As young people approach 21, their ongoing need for support is not always fully explored. This means that some care leavers do not receive a good service.

46. Young people are offered the opportunity to stay with their foster carers when they reach 18 years of age, if it is right for them to do so, and if the planning for this commences early. Should young people need the support of adult services, this is also pursued and organised in a timely way. This early planning ensures that children have confidence about their future living and support arrangements as they approach adulthood.
47. Most care leavers meet, and develop relationships with, their allocated PA well before their PA becomes their lead allocated worker. This means that young people have existing relationships with their PA before a period of significant change for them as they reach adulthood.
48. Most PAs know their young people well and advocate for them effectively in securing the support and assistance that they may need. This includes support to build and maintain family and community networks. Some young people are not seen regularly enough by their PAs and they are not receiving the timely support and guidance that they need.
49. Pathway plans are not consistently comprehensive. While some pathway plans are completed alongside care leavers, and are based on their individual needs, too many are insufficiently detailed to address all the issues young people may need support with. Pathway plans are difficult to understand and are not easily accessible to young people. This means that they do not have access to information about who is helping them and why.
50. Care leavers' health needs are not always fully considered in their pathway plans. While care leavers are registered with GPs and dentists, and most are encouraged to seek support in meeting their health needs, some care leavers are not given the opportunity to discuss their health. Care leavers are not routinely provided with their health histories when they reach adulthood. This lack of knowledge about their childhood does not prepare them well for adulthood.
51. Most care leavers have access to education, employment or training. There is a strong and well-developed educational offer post-16. Care leavers are offered apprenticeships through the council, traineeships and other opportunities, including work experience and employment. When care leavers are not in education, employment or training, the support they receive to access opportunities is not always robust enough to ensure that they make timely progress towards their ambitions.
52. The care leavers who met with inspectors said they feel safe where they live. Care leavers have a range of good-quality accommodation options. Should they need to move, they are supported practically as required. A small number of care leavers are not in suitable accommodation. For example, they are staying on an ad hoc basis with family and friends. Efforts to help them to secure suitable

accommodation are not always sufficiently robust to ensure that this happens quickly enough.

53. Support for care leavers when they leave custody has not been sufficient. Planning for their accommodation, health needs and employment has fallen to other agencies. The local authority recognised this before the inspection and revised processes are now in place to support care leavers when they are in custody and when they are approaching release. These processes have not been used to date as no care leavers have entered or left custody since their implementation.
54. When care leavers approach the age of 21, they are offered ongoing support from a PA, or the opportunity to return and ask for support in the future should they decline this support. These discussions do not always demonstrate that care leavers are actively encouraged to continue to access support if it is felt to be in their best interests. This has the potential to leave vulnerable care leavers without the ongoing support that they may need.
55. The local offer is not discussed regularly with care leavers and there is a lack of shared understanding by professionals about the offer. This means that some care leavers do not know what they are entitled to and do not ask for it. The offer has recently been reviewed and updated and there are publicity plans to accompany the launch and disseminate an understanding of what the offer means. Care leavers are supported to secure appropriate identity documents, including birth certificates, passports and driving licences.

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

56. Senior leaders across the council have responded effectively and positively to local government reorganisation, and the newly formed council has firmly established a unique identity. When Westmorland and Furness came into being in April 2023, there were several social worker and manager vacancies. Leaders took prompt action to recruit to these posts. The senior management team is now permanently staffed.
57. Much progress has been made to disaggregate provision from the neighbouring local authority, reducing the number of shared services across the directorate from 34 to just four in the last year. There are four remaining shared services and these are out of hours, fostering, adoption and residential services. These services are effective and appropriately monitored by Westmorland and Furness.
58. The shared electronic recording system has created problems in the quality of some recording due to electronic forms not fully aligning with the way of working in the local authority. This has exacerbated issues in the quality of written plans and the clarity of recorded decision-making during child protection enquiries. Leaders refined the temporary workarounds in response to feedback about this

during the inspection, ahead of the planned system disaggregation later in the year.

59. Equality of opportunity for children features in high-level plans across the council. There is strong financial and meaningful commitment to ambitious service development from members and senior leaders across the council. This commitment includes investment in specialist provision, such as the domestic abuse team, the exploitation team and the resilience team. These services, while relatively new, are already contributing to improving outcomes for children who are especially vulnerable. Likewise, the developing family hub offer, launched in December 2023, is starting to have a positive impact on the effectiveness of early help. There are strengthened arrangements at the front door and there is a robust response to concerns about children.
60. Well-planned engagement of local partners at a strategic level, in response to local government reorganisation, has ensured a robust multi-agency response to children and families. Partners meet regularly and scrutinise the effectiveness of multi-agency practice, addressing any emerging challenges or specific areas of concern in a timely way. Cafcass, the judiciary and schools speak highly of the improvements they have experienced in social work practice and leadership response over the last year.
61. Relatively new elected members have received appropriate training and mentoring to ensure a shared understanding about their role as corporate parents. The corporate parenting board fulfils its functions, and care experience has been made a protected characteristic in the council. A recently appointed care-experienced ambassador has embarked on their role with enthusiasm and quickly built links with leaders.
62. There is a shared sense of responsibility among leaders to promote the rights, entitlements and opportunities for children in care and care leavers. The quality of services for care leavers is a recognised area for development and leaders have engaged the support of the local government association and a sector-led improvement partner.
63. The local authority is developing a refreshed and appropriately targeted sufficiency strategy. This is supporting the recruitment of additional foster carers and adopters to meet the needs of children, along with further strengthening the role of family networks to build resilience in families.
64. Regular and rigorous reporting of performance ensures that leaders are alert to most developing issues, and they respond proactively to these. They are clear about the importance and significance of service improvement and have sufficiently resourced this area of work. Collaborative quality assurance activity, performance management meetings and practice weeks are providing leaders with a largely accurate view about the quality of social work practice. The actions identified in audits to improve services to individual children are tracked to

completion. There are plans to further develop an understanding of the impact that auditing is having and to increase the influence of managers.

65. Managers at all levels have routine and regular oversight of social work practice. Management oversight in the hub is especially effective in ensuring that children's needs are promptly recognised and responded to. Social worker supervision usually takes place regularly. When social work recording is not strong enough, managers do not consistently have a positive influence in supporting and improving it. In response to this known area for improvement, all managers are undertaking a leadership development programme. This work is starting to improve the overall quality of supervision and management oversight.
66. Well-resourced recruitment plans are successfully increasing staffing levels. This includes 'grow your own' social workers, building links with universities and a review of induction packages. Workers value the training offered and feel that it is responsive to their development needs. They can see the difference that it makes to their practice and therefore to the children with whom they work. Caseloads are generally manageable, and any changes are carefully monitored.
67. Leaders have been proactive in ensuring that the workforce understands the vision through impactful engagement sessions. Leaders and managers have wanted to create a positive culture of high expectation and support, and they are modelling this. As a result, staff feel extremely positive about working in Westmorland and Furness and recognise the positive developments to support social work practice over the last year. They have felt a growing cohesiveness and shared identity across the service. They feel cared for, listened to and valued by all levels of leadership and management.

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