

Inspection of Warrington local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 10 to 14 June 2024

Lead inspector: Lisa Walsh, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

The last inspection of Warrington local authority children's services in 2019 judged services to be good in all areas. Since that inspection, the experienced, stable senior leadership team, with strong corporate and political support, has continued to ensure effective support for vulnerable children in Warrington. Services for children in care, from a strong base, have improved further and these children now receive consistently excellent care. The few shortfalls identified at the previous inspection have been robustly addressed.

Children needing help and protection receive consistently good support, although safety planning for children before initial child protection conferences is not always clear. Children in care receive high-quality services which lead to sustained improvements in their lives. Care leavers are mostly well supported.

Leaders have a clear line of sight on the quality of practice, and they have used their insights to further strengthen service performance in a range of areas. Work to enable children to be safe and thrive, living within their family networks, has been further enhanced and effective use of the preferred practice model is now

firmly embedded. Leaders have increased capacity to remedy areas of workforce pressure, as well as increasing the sufficiency of children's homes and semi-independent accommodation.

What needs to improve?

- The clarity in recording of actions to ensure children's safety prior to initial child protection conferences.
- The timeliness of the progression of contacts from the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) for children who require support.
- The consistency of support for care leavers in youth custody.

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

1. Children in Warrington benefit from effective early help services. Since the last inspection, there has been continued investment in early help services. This includes, for example, the strengthening of the Restore project, which successfully supports parents who had children previously removed from their care. The thresholds in early help are appropriately applied to meet children's needs and intervention. Contacts are appropriately stepped up or stepped down to statutory services and, as a result, children receive the right support at the right time.
2. Early help assessments and plans are completed in timescales appropriate for children and their families and are mainly thorough. Plans help to direct effective coordinated support to families, with workers carefully considering how and when their involvement will end. Visits are purposeful and family support workers (FSW) have sensitive discussions with children to help to understand their wishes and feelings.
3. Most children in Warrington receive a timely service from the MASH. When children are at risk of immediate harm, the response is swift and effective. When children are identified as needing support, and they are not at risk of significant harm, some experience delay in having their needs assessed. The reasons for delays are not always clear. As a result, some children do not receive the support that they need at the earliest opportunity.
4. Contacts from partner agencies are detailed enough to enable appropriate initial decision-making in the MASH. When consent is dispensed with, the reason for this is not always recorded on the child's record. All contacts are reviewed by a manager and allocated for social worker screening or early help screening. Contacts which result in no further action are appropriately screened and decision-making is proportionate and sound.

5. Checks with partner agencies during screening are timely, with an emphasis on understanding the child's experiences. Social workers consider the cumulative impact of historical events and trauma for children. Thresholds in the MASH are appropriately applied. This means that children and families receive a proportionate response in relation to their circumstances and needs.
6. The response to domestic abuse in the MASH is timely and effective. Risks to children are appropriately considered and assessed during screening. Parents are well informed about professional concerns and the services available to provide support.
7. There are clear and effective pathways for information-sharing between day services and the out-of-hours service. The out-of-hours service responds promptly and appropriately to any serious or immediate risks to children. The work that the out-of-hours service completes, in situations of immediate risk to children, is clearly recorded and decision-making is well evidenced.
8. Children's assessments are mostly thorough. They consider each child individually and they are informed by a broad range of partnership information. Children's ethnicity, linguistic and religious identities are usually considered in assessments. This helps to ensure that children's cultural needs are understood and supported. Children's voices inform assessment findings. History is considered and used to understand children's experiences in the context of the current concern. Most assessments of children in need of help and protection are updated when needed.
9. Most child-in-need and child protection plans are appropriately focused on children's needs and risk. Some plans do not reflect the depth of work being completed, and plans do not consistently set timescales for progress to be made. This makes it difficult to measure progress for some children.
10. Plans are regularly reviewed through well-attended child-in-need or core group meetings. Contingency plans vary in quality, with some not sufficiently detailed to enable parents to understand what would happen should change not be secured.
11. Strategy meetings are appropriately convened when children are identified as being at risk of harm. Meetings are held promptly and are well attended. They consider family history and the impact it has on current circumstances. Children's voices are captured and used to help understand their experiences and the potential impact of harm. Thresholds are appropriately applied and decisions about the need for further enquiries are appropriate.
12. Child protection enquiries build on information shared at strategy discussions, with information from key partners and family members. These enquiries are timely and child-focused. Children are visited, seen alone, and their views are gathered to inform the assessment and get a sense of their experiences.

13. For children whose circumstances are assessed as requiring an initial child protection conference (ICPC), safety planning before this meeting is not consistently set out in children's records. Some plans also lack clarity, leaving families and professionals sometimes unclear as to what actions they need to take to keep children safe. For a minority of these children, there are also delays in holding the ICPC.
14. Initial child protection conferences are an effective information-sharing forum and appropriate decisions are made. Meetings are well attended by a strong multi-agency network who know families well. Children's views are well represented through advocacy.
15. Social workers understand the individual needs of disabled children consistently well. Disabled children who are subject to child-in-need and child protection planning have their needs met in a timely way. They benefit from consistent relationships with social workers who know them well. Children are regularly seen alone, and social workers spend time capturing their views, wishes and feelings. Some children also benefit from advocacy to support them to have their voices heard at meetings.
16. Pre-proceedings in the Public Law Outline are appropriately initiated for most children when concerns about children do not reduce. There are a very small number of children who were the subject of child protection plans for too long before alternative actions, including escalation into pre-proceedings, were considered.
17. During pre-proceedings, appropriate work with families is completed. This has led to an increasing number of children being able to step out of pre-proceedings successfully and safely. Legal gateway meetings make appropriate decisions to initiate, step out of or step up from pre-proceedings into issuing care proceedings. Letters before proceedings are clear and easy to understand. Pre-proceedings plans are clear about what needs to happen and who needs to do what. The actions agreed are appropriate to effect change for children.
18. Social work visits to children are regular, and meaningful direct work with children and their families is completed. This helps social workers to better understand the impact that concerns have on children and their well-being. They use reflective sessions through the systemic hub, which provides social workers with a practice toolkit and consultation to help them think through next steps when they encounter difficulties in progressing children's plans.
19. Social workers demonstrate a clear understanding of the complexities of domestic abuse and persist in engaging parents who show initial reluctance. Many children, victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse benefit from a range of impactful domestic abuse services that improve children's experiences.

20. When children experience high levels of neglect, the Families First team provides intensive, tailored support. A neglect toolkit provides a strengths-based approach to understanding the impact of neglect on each child and reviews demonstrate the progress being made following discrete support provided.
21. A commissioned service works effectively to support young carers, alongside social workers and other professionals who may be involved with the family. Youth support services also offer young carers support with their emotional health and well-being and peer groups are well attended. Young carers are invited to contribute to the early help strategy on a regular basis. This ensures young carers have their voices heard and are supported with their individual needs.
22. Children who present as homeless receive a timely and effective response. They are supported to initially return to their family when safe to do so or alternatively they are provided with suitable alternative accommodation, including becoming looked after. Children have the offer of access to an independent advocate to help them decide whether they would choose to become a child in care. Recording of discussions with children about their rights and entitlements is clear.
23. Children on the edge of care are successfully supported to remain with their families when it is safe for them to do so. An effective short-break service, provided for children on the edge of care, offers support at times of crisis. The level of support offered to children and families by the edge of care service is intensive, supporting them to rebuild relationships and improve children's experiences.
24. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service offers a wide variety of training to different professionals and has seen an ongoing increase in referrals to the service. The LADO response to concerns or allegations about professionals is strong. Appropriate advice and guidance are offered when concerns do not reach the threshold for LADO involvement.
25. For children who are at risk of exploitation, or from going missing from home, the response is coordinated effectively. Professionals show real curiosity about triggers and persist in trying to get alongside children and build relationships. Regular meetings helpfully analyse data and information to give very detailed and sound oversight of children at risk. Professionals use these processes to analyse mapping information to enable links to be identified and acted upon. Return home interviews are consistently offered to all children and there is persistence in trying to help them to accept this offer and to understand why they went missing.
26. Detailed and sensitive safety planning is completed with children at risk of exploitation to try and help them understand risks and to be safer. Social

workers are equipped with tools and expert guidance to help them navigate this work, and the work completed by the Families First team around exploitation is impressive. As a result of this tracking, oversight, and direct work, the risks to children from exploitation and going missing reduce.

27. Staff from children's services and education maintain regular contact with children who are electively home educated. Staff give careful consideration to the specific vulnerabilities of children in the frequency of visits or checks, including those subject to child-in-need and child protection plans. Leaders have strong oversight of children who are missing from education, through regular reviews of children's circumstances.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

28. The decisions for children to enter care are made in a timely manner and when it is in their interests to do so. When necessary, care proceedings are initiated, and work is progressed without delay. Feedback from the local judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) is exceptionally positive. Social workers in Warrington produce high-quality evidence and assessments for court, which are supporting the timely progression of legal proceedings. This results in swift and highly effective plans being secured for children's future care.
29. Children benefit from early planning for permanence. When it is not possible for children to live with their birth parents, social workers work diligently to explore all alternative options, including foster to adopt and special guardianship orders. There is a strong emphasis on keeping children within their kinship network. Family group conferences are used to great effect to identify potential carers for children, which enables assessments to start sooner.
30. When children live with kinship carers, their assessments are comprehensive and support children to remain within the family, maintaining their identity and a sense of belonging. Children are visited regularly to ensure that their needs are being met. For a small number of children, the senior management endorsement of these arrangements is not consistently timely, leading to delays in assuring the appropriateness of these placements.
31. Permanence through adoption is achieved for children when it is in their best interests. Early consideration is given to planning for children who are unable to live with their birth families. Adoption workers attend legal gateway meetings to identify children at the earliest opportunity whose plan may be for adoption. Once the decision is made to pursue adoption, actions to find families are timely and purposeful. Child permanence reports are appropriately detailed, sensitively written and identify children's current and future needs. This level of detail precisely assists the matching process.

32. Detailed assessments support decisions to enable children in care to return home under placement with parent regulations. Assessments include the views of independent reviewing officers (IROs) and other professionals where appropriate.
33. Many children in care in Warrington live in stable foster placements where they are thriving, and where they have a sense of belonging and permanence. When the plan for children is long-term foster care, matching takes place through permanence meetings, without delay.
34. When children are at risk of placement disruption, they are supported effectively with a range of intensive interventions to prevent the child's move. Children and their carers receive well-coordinated support, including involvement from the systemic hub in reflective conversations. This helps carers to reset their approach and develop new strategies to manage family challenges and reduce the risk of disruption for children.
35. Assessments of children's needs are regularly updated. They include the child's voice, information from other professionals and the child's carers. Most care plans meet children's needs effectively. However, for a minority of children the quality of written care plans is inconsistent. Some care plans do not fully reflect the amount of work that is being undertaken to improve children's experiences.
36. IROs know children extremely well and regularly see them outside of their reviews to help children participate and express their views. Recommendations from reviews are clear and measurable and are carefully monitored at subsequent reviews. Review reports are sensitively written to the child, supporting them to better understand how and why decisions have been made.
37. Children in care are supported and visited regularly by social workers who know them well. Workers are persistent in their efforts to build and sustain relationships with children who have previously displayed high levels of resistance towards professionals. Social workers undertake purposeful, sensitive direct and life-story work with children on a range of topics, including relationships, safety, health and understanding emotions. This helps children to comprehend, at their own pace, their life experiences and plans for their futures.
38. Family time for children is carefully and sensitively considered, based on children's views and a clear risk analysis. Children live with their brothers and sisters when this is appropriate, and children's friendships are encouraged.
39. Children's health needs are a priority when they come into care. Leaders know that there is more to do to ensure that all children have access to routine dental appointments.

40. The virtual school has highly effective relationships with schools and sets high expectations for children in care. Targets and interventions are appropriate and personal education plans typically include all the required information about children in care. A small number of children are accessing wraparound support from an unregistered alternative provision to prevent permanent exclusion from education. Senior leaders have strong oversight of these children and actively seek for children to return to their permanent education provisions as soon as this is feasible.
41. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported by workers who are alert and sensitive to their experiences and the trauma that they have suffered. Children are supported in their aspirations and the local authority secures legal services to progress their applications to remain.
42. There are a small number of children with high levels of complex needs living in unregistered children's homes. When children are placed in these unsuitable settings, social workers increase their visits to ensure more frequent oversight of these arrangements. Where possible, children only stay in unregistered settings on an emergency basis. There is strong senior management oversight of these unsuitable arrangements, while the local authority actively seeks more suitable registered arrangements or supports providers to become registered with Ofsted.
43. Children who live with foster carers are looked after by well-supported carers who are equipped with the skills they need. The preparation and training of prospective foster carers is thorough and enables them to have an insightful understanding of the complexities surrounding the fostering role. Foster carer hubs provide valued additional support to children and their foster carers.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

44. Care leavers in Warrington benefit from support from a highly committed and enthusiastic workforce. The leaving care team becomes actively involved with children in care at a time that is right for them. When personal advisers (PAs) are allocated to young people in care, they use written profiles of themselves that enable young people to get to know who they are. Early allocation supports young people with relationship-building and information-sharing to ensure an effective transition to the leaving care service at 18 years old.
45. PAs prioritise young people and they take great care and attention to provide purposeful visits that engage young people. PAs use a nurturing approach and sensitive language that results in young people developing trusting relationships with their PAs that endure into adulthood. This helps to promote a culture of keeping in touch, enabling young people to reach for support when needed.

46. The strength in these relationships supports young people to understand and access their rights and entitlements. The local offer is wide-ranging. It includes elements such as funds for setting up home, access to the internet, travel passes and financial help for driving lessons. Although young people access the offer well, this is not always reflected in their plans.
47. Care leavers' views are valued by leaders and are used to inform service design. There is a variety of accessible platforms that leaders use to consult care leavers, strengthened by the recent appointment of a care-experienced participation worker.
48. Young people are supported to register with a doctor and dentist local to where they live. They are enabled to obtain their health histories through the health passport. Where needs arise, PAs actively encourage and support care leavers to access both universal and specialist services in support of their health needs. Young people have access to emotional well-being services through a local authority-commissioned service. Support is personalised and provided at the young person's pace. When young people are harder to reach, workers are persistent and offers of support remain open. This enables young people to access help when they need it and to improve their well-being.
49. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who are care leavers are well supported. A dedicated PA understands young people's experiences and provides structure and guidance, supporting young people through to adulthood. Workers are sensitive to young people's cultural needs and the trauma that they have endured. Swift psychological support is provided when young people need it. Legal advice is secured, and young people are supported in their applications to remain in the UK.
50. Care leavers who are parents receive tailored support to strengthen their parenting. PAs work alongside other professionals to provide a network of support to the child and parents. A dedicated baby and parent worker helps young people to develop the skills needed as parents. When higher levels of wraparound support are required, this is provided. This helps to reduce risks to vulnerable parents and their children.
51. Not all care leavers in custody benefit from regular visits and support from PAs. When they reach 21 years, the decision to end PA involvement is not informed by an updated assessment or the young person's wishes. Senior leaders have been responsive during the inspection. They have accepted the shortfall in practice and have initiated immediate changes to seek to ensure that these young people in future receive a better service.
52. PAs, managers and senior leaders demonstrate insight into the risks and vulnerabilities of young people. Risks are closely monitored and when they escalate young people receive a swift and effective response.

53. PAs are proactive in supporting care leavers to access employment, education and training. When barriers emerge, their needs are well understood, resulting in effective advice and intensive support. Leaders are ambitious to increase this further. For example, they have embedded services, such as the care leaver academy, to help care leavers access more employment, education and training opportunities and to improve their outcomes.
54. Most care leavers have effective pathway plans which are co-produced. Plans are created early and updated on a timely basis to reflect care leavers' needs. Plans are effective in providing an understanding of what the barriers to progress are when young people experience challenges. Plans are written in a manner that is accessible and highlight young people's aspirations, wishes and concerns.
55. The majority of young people live in suitable accommodation. Care leavers told inspectors that most of them like their homes and feel safe. Leaders know that housing options for care leavers are sometimes too limited, and they are working with partners to strengthen further this offer. Some young people have the opportunity to remain living with their former foster carers. For some, this provides continuity of support while they are in higher education or at university, and while they are developing their independence skills.
56. When young people are approaching 21 years, there is appropriate consideration of their future support needs. PAs maintain contact with young people who are over 21 years, through letters and newsletters that are sent with reminders about entitlements and how to get in touch. PAs are persistent in trying to maintain contact with young people who have additional vulnerabilities. When young people do request a service, timely support is provided.
57. Until recently, many PA caseloads were too high, meaning good support to care leavers could only be provided through excessive working hours. Leaders have addressed this by securing additional investment in the PA workforce, leading to a reduction in workloads.

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

58. Since the last inspection in 2019, leaders have remained determined and ambitious. They have continued to ensure that services provide high-quality support for vulnerable children, and they have successfully and systematically addressed all the areas of practice identified as needing improvement. A systemic-based model of practice is firmly established, and practice strengthened with the introduction of the systemic hub, which supports social workers with reflective consultation.

59. Children's services benefit from strong political support and a commitment that is evident in the council's financial investment in services for vulnerable children. There has been a strong emphasis on multi-agency early help and preventative services to meet the needs of children at the earliest opportunity. Children's experiences and life chances improve considerably through accessing quality services within their own communities. This has been particularly evident in the strengthening of the Restore project, supporting more families to receive effective help at exactly the right time.
60. Leaders have introduced a range of creative and successful initiatives that are having a demonstrably positive impact for children and their families. Through strengthening support for children on the edge of care more children are being enabled to remain in the care of their families. A further example is the work of the systemic hub. This input is supporting carers and workers to develop a deeper understanding of children's needs, contributing to stronger placement stability.
61. Senior leaders have developed strong and effective relationships with safeguarding partners at strategic and operational levels. Children and families who experience domestic abuse benefit from a breadth of multi-agency services that respond effectively to needs. The family courts and Cafcass have provided highly positive feedback on the relationship with senior leaders and the quality of practice.
62. Senior leaders have embraced the ethos of the new children's social care reforms, with a strong focus on developing services that promote children remaining within family networks and kinship care arrangements. The local authority has secured pathfinder status in wave 2 of the Families First for Children programme. Local models for delivery have been agreed ahead of implementation later this year.
63. During the inspection, a comprehensive self-assessment showed that leaders have a clear line of sight on nearly all areas of practice. Leaders are highly knowledgeable about the strengths and challenges within children's services. For example, in response to high caseloads in the leaving care service, leaders have successfully made a business case for increased capacity. This is now enabling PA workloads to reduce so that they can work even more effectively with young people.
64. Quality assurance arrangements are very effective. This includes regular thematic auditing of children's experiences, observation of practice and the scrutiny of performance data. This provides leaders with a comprehensive and detailed oversight of the quality and impact of practice and informs training and service development. This results in continually improving practice and services to children and families.

65. Senior leaders embrace scrutiny and challenge from external partners. Learning is shared through individual supervision and quarterly performance assurance reports. There is clear evidence of quality assurance activity impacting directly on children's experiences. For example, through auditing it was established that fathers and absent parents were not consistently engaged in assessments. In response, senior leaders took effective action in providing the workforce with pertinent training and practice guidance. Children's records now demonstrate that social workers increasingly consider this area of practice as part of their interventions.
66. The director of children's services is passionate about improving children's experiences in Warrington and beyond. The local authority is an active sector-led improvement partner. Recruitment and retention of qualified social work staff has continued to be prioritised through the effective strategy of 'everything, all the time', which has included enhanced salaries, developing newly qualified social workers and successfully converting agency staff to permanent social work posts.
67. The sufficiency strategy provides clear analysis, which enables the service to plan successfully for future demands and is aligned with other strategies to support children and families. There has been a significant expansion of children's homes and semi-independent accommodation to meet sufficiency need and maintain children close to home. In addition, the local authority is the host for the innovative Foster4 project, prioritising the recruitment of foster carers across Cheshire and Merseyside. There has been significant investment in developing networks to support foster carers, which is supporting placement stability for children.
68. Corporate parenting responsibilities are given the highest priority across the council. Lifelong links have been firmly embedded to support children to maintain relationships with the people who are important to them throughout their lives. Local authority leaders work closely with partner agencies to promote corporate parenting, leading to positive experiences for many children. Local authority leaders are proactive in promoting children in care and care leavers' access to services. They recognise there is more to do with partners to ensure that children in care have timely dental checks and that all care leavers have access to good-quality accommodation.
69. Care leavers benefit from an enhanced local offer and the launch of the care leavers academy, promoting education and training opportunities. The Living Well Hub is enhancing young people's experiences and provides opportunities for them to shape future services. A care leavers' week brought young people together to share their experiences through activities and identified areas for practice improvement.
70. Highly committed leaders have continued to improve services, working closely with partners, and supporting more children in care, and care leavers, to have

their voices heard and influence the delivery of services. Leaders are ambitious for the future and are continually expanding opportunities for participation. For example, they have recently strengthened their approach to listening to the voice and experience of adults who have received services, through dedicated paid roles to provide continuing challenge around co-production.

71. Social workers told inspectors that they enjoy working in Warrington. They feel valued and benefit from a culture of openness and learning. Workers feel well supported by managers, with supervision taking place regularly, which is mostly reflective and focuses on children. Senior leaders are extremely visible and approachable, listening to staff views.

72. There is a strong focus on and a commitment to workforce development. Warrington has a practice framework and culture which is based on shared values. Social workers are supported to access a wide range of appropriate training opportunities, reinforcing and embedding the learning culture. These opportunities support social workers to develop new skills, enabling them to work very effectively with children and families, along with supporting their professional development.

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