

# Inspection of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 7 to 11 October 2024

**Lead inspector:** Claire Beckingham, 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	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Good

Most children in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead continue to benefit from good services. Senior managers have a thorough understanding of the quality of practice and have maintained and improved services since the inspection in 2020, most notably for children in care and care leavers. Services for care leavers in particular have been transformed, with care leavers now receiving excellent support and making good progress. Senior managers know the organisation well; they had already identified the areas for improvement and were taking action prior to the inspection. Workforce turnover has reduced, although some children experience too many changes of social worker. A small number of disabled children do not have their needs reviewed regularly enough, and actions taken to strengthen the service are not embedded for all disabled children.

Since 2017, the local authority has delegated its statutory children's social care functions to Achieving for Children (AfC). Governance arrangements between the local authority and AfC, which has been commissioned by the local authority for a further five years, continue to be effective.

## What needs to improve?

- The stability of the workforce to minimise changes of social worker for children.
- The consistency of practice and management oversight for disabled children.

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

1. A wide range of high-quality community-based resources are available to support families in need of early help. Support is provided swiftly for most families, enabling children's circumstances to improve. While a small number of families experience a short waiting period for more bespoke services, those stepping down from statutory services receive swift support. Work in the early help service is relationship-based. Children are visited regularly, and clear plans help children and their families to make good progress. Children are stepped up to statutory services when appropriate and, for some families, early help support continues alongside statutory social work, meaning that children and families are able to benefit from ongoing relationships with early help workers.
2. Contacts and referrals receive an appropriate and timely response, including out of hours, with the emergency duty service providing an effective handover to the day service. Information-sharing between partner agencies in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and single point of access (SPA) is prompt and of high quality. Professionals from other agencies make suitable referrals to gain support for children and their families, and they are updated about the outcome. Thresholds for services and consent are carefully considered and balanced between need, risk and harm, taking the most proportionate approach. Management oversight and decision-making are regular, clear and well recorded in most cases. For a small minority of children, when work has been appropriately flagged as urgent, initial brief timescales for action are extended without a clear rationale recorded. The current case management system does not support management oversight of timescales in these cases. Leaders took immediate action during the inspection to strengthen the oversight of urgent work. A new case management system is due to go live in March 2025, and this is expected to provide a longer-term solution.
3. Records in the MASH, and throughout children's social care services, are written to children in child-friendly language. Interpreters are used as needed, and identity and diversity are thoroughly, curiously and meaningfully considered when analysing strengths and risks in families.
4. Decisions to hold a strategy meeting are appropriate and swiftly actioned by experienced managers. Decisions for children who need protection are timely and take into account information from a range of relevant agencies. Police and health are well represented at meetings, and the recording of decisions shows a collaborative approach to understanding and responding to risk.

5. Social workers undertake assessments which are mostly detailed and thorough. Assessments are based on information gained from meetings with the child and family, including absent parents, and from professionals and agencies who know the family. Support is provided to families during the assessment process and children do not need to wait to receive help. There is clear management oversight and direction throughout.
6. Disabled children benefit from a range of services, including a comprehensive short-breaks offer. Partner agencies' views are actively considered in assessments for disabled children, and assessments culminate in well-written child in need plans. Positive behaviour support packages are instrumental in helping to reduce risk, supporting children with complex needs to remain at home when it is in their best interests to do so. The management oversight of disabled children is variable, and not all children needing a lower level of support are visited regularly or have their needs reassessed in previously agreed timescales. Senior leaders identified weaknesses in the system before the inspection and have begun to address these.
7. Most children who experience domestic abuse receive a proactive and timely response. Managers provide clear guidance, including consideration of the safety of the victims of domestic abuse. Work to address domestic abuse across teams is supported by a specialist worker and includes work with perpetrators, consultation with staff and impactful work with survivors.
8. Neglect is recognised and its impact on children is well understood. Interventions are well planned and effective for many children.
9. Children's plans are easy to understand and provide clarity about what needs to change for a child to be safe and to improve their outcomes. Plans are thorough and reflective of the complexities that children are experiencing, and they result in actions that are owned by the family and professional network.
10. Multi-agency core groups and child in need reviews are regular and well attended and are effective in ensuring that actions are undertaken. Social workers complete thorough and detailed reports for child protection conferences. In most cases, conference chairs speak to children before the conference to gain their views, and some children attend their conferences. Conference review records provide a succinct and clear summary of concerns and decisions. Accompanying letters to children explain the outcome in appropriate language.
11. Social workers undertake creative direct work with children. Direct work is purposeful, planned and adds value, exploring children's wishes, views and concerns. Children are visited regularly and develop trusting relationships with their social workers, who know them well. Records, reports and outcomes are written to children and are consistently considerate of language, which helps children and their families to understand what professionals see as their strengths and what they are worried about. Parents are involved at all stages of

the work, including in developing an understanding of family difficulties and strengths and creating workable plans. Work with families is strong around cultural difference and identity and what this means for children and their families.

12. Pre-proceedings activity as part of the Public Law Outline is effective in appropriately diverting many families from court proceedings. Court work is a strength. Leaders and managers understand well the complexities and nuances of children's lives. Management oversight is well recorded on children's records. Comprehensive 'together and apart' assessments underpin living arrangements for brothers and sisters. Social workers' reports to court are of high quality; they are detailed, forensic about harm and also demonstrate compassion.
13. Local authority designated officer arrangements are effective. The service shares findings and trends with partner agencies, the local safeguarding partnership and senior leaders.
14. The arrangements for children who are privately fostered are appropriately considered, and the children are well supported.
15. Children who are young carers are appropriately identified, with regular awareness raising across the partnership and across social work teams. Young carers receive bespoke support via a commissioned service.
16. Specialist workers provide a flexible and responsive service to children at risk of exploitation. Well-planned pieces of work are undertaken, which include the family's view on what they need and think will work. Targeted and skilled interventions support families to make progress and help children to keep themselves safe. Children who go missing receive a timely response. A 'grab bag' is prepared for children who go missing regularly, so that professionals have the best information available about how to help the child. Return home interviews (RHIs) are offered to all children, although take-up is relatively low. Persistent efforts to engage children in RHIs are not well evidenced on their electronic records. When they do take place, RHIs are comprehensive and workers seek to understand children's experiences so that they can be helped.
17. Direct work undertaken with children at risk of entering care is carefully planned with families. The work is delivered with skill by empathetic practitioners who build strong relationships and use these to provide help and support. This activity improves the circumstances for many children and diverts them from care when it is safe to do so. Although the recording of direct work does not always capture the richness of the work that takes place, the progress that children make is clear.
18. The local authority ensures that there is effective identification of vulnerable children who are electively home educated, with appropriate follow-up and support offered to families when there is increased risk. Strong, proactive inter-

agency work and data analysis ensure that children who are missing education are identified, reviewed and followed up appropriately.

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

19. The majority of children in care live in stable, secure and caring homes in which they feel safe and thrive, enabling them to make progress in their lives. Children enter care at the right time and when it is in their best interests.
20. There is timely and thorough consideration of family members as potential kinship carers for children who cannot remain living with their parents. Social workers ensure that parents are engaged at all stages so that they are involved in and well informed about important decisions.
21. Care plans are detailed and thorough. They provide clarity about why children enter care and what is required to meet goals and needs. The right people attend children's reviews. An increasing number of children also attend and chair their reviews. Letters are written to children about key decisions, although some lack clarity and may not be easily understood by children. In a minority of cases, the management oversight or supervision is insufficiently detailed regarding key decisions made and the underpinning rationale. This is compensated for by purposeful intervention by independent reviewing officers, providing appropriate challenge of longer-term care plans for children.
22. Children see their social workers regularly. Visits to children are meaningful and enable social workers to have a good understanding about children's views, hopes and aspirations. Most children form positive relationships with their social workers, although some have experienced several changes of worker, which is unsettling for them.
23. Children of all ages have opportunities to explore their journeys into care and to have this information captured for the future. This takes place through a wide variety of activities, including direct work, life-story work, videos of important moments, later life letters and books, all of which help children to make sense of their experiences. Social workers understand the importance of life-story work as a continuous activity.
24. Children are supported to maintain and resume safe relationships with their family and friends whenever possible.
25. Children's views are regularly gained via a variety of groups and forums. The Children in Care Council, Kickback, is a particular favourite with children, as they have opportunities to socialise and have fun with friends, while exploring what they would like to improve and how they can influence change for children in care in the local authority.
26. Children are supported well by their carers to address their physical and mental health needs, with appropriate referrals to specialist services and children's emotional well-being and therapeutic services when needed.

27. Children's diversity and uniqueness are celebrated and understood. Children are supported well to express their individual preferences and to explore and learn about their individual cultures, identities and characteristics.
28. Most children are in appropriate education, employment or training. The virtual school and partner agencies work well together. Many of the initiatives in place have had a measurable positive impact on aspects such as progress and attainment, attendance and emotional support. Most children make strong academic progress from their starting points.
29. Children who are vulnerable to exploitation receive a prompt and robust response that supports them to stay safe. A range of strategies are used to engage children in positive activities and help to reduce risk.
30. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported by skilled and experienced social workers. Children live in suitable, bespoke accommodation that meets their needs.
31. Most children live in permanent homes at the earliest opportunity. There is thorough consideration of children's circumstances, needs and views when decisions are being made about their prospective long-term plans. Children make progress in their foster homes and benefit greatly from the positive relationships with their foster carers, who are highly committed and skilled.
32. The fostering service is provided by Achieving for Children, an independent fostering agency that is registered and inspected separately. Most foster carers receive regular visits and supervision and have positive relationships with their supervising social workers. Choice of placements for children in care is a challenge for the local authority, which results in the majority of children living outside of the local authority area, but within 20 miles of their home. Leaders are implementing a strategy to increase local provision. A very small number of children live in unregistered children's homes. The arrangements are closely monitored while more suitable arrangements in registered settings are sought.
33. The local authority is a member of a regional adoption agency (Adoption Thames Valley). Children who have a plan of adoption receive an effective service. Children's introductions to their adoptive placements are well considered and at the child's pace. Adopters are well prepared to meet the child's needs, resulting in children settling well into their new homes.

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

34. Care leavers are introduced to their personal advisers (PAs) in good time to enable them to develop trusting relationships with them before transitioning to adulthood. Many care leavers experience sustained relationships with their PAs over a long period of time, and they readily access support when they need it. PAs are ambitious for their care leavers; they believe in their potential and are powerful advocates in ensuring that care leavers can make the most of every

opportunity available to them. PAs are tenacious, and care leavers are making exceptional progress as a result.

35. Care leavers have a voice and an influence that have resulted in substantial changes to services. This includes council tax exemption in and out of the borough being extended until care leavers are 25 years old. Care leavers are benefiting from a strong local offer, which they helped to develop. They are made aware of the current offer through discussions with their PAs, information in their pathway plans and access to the online published offer. This means that care leavers can access the most up-to-date information about their entitlements and financial eligibility. The local authority acts as a good parent when helping care leavers to navigate the pathways to adulthood, funding driving lessons, ensuring that care leavers avoid digital poverty and providing gym membership as standard components of the offer, alongside bespoke funding to address specific needs and ensure care leavers' success.
36. Care leavers are well supported with their independence skills; they are provided with the key documents that they need to begin their lives as young adults, and most care leavers make good progress into adulthood.
37. Pathway plans are mostly co-produced with care leavers and, when they are, the quality and impact are significantly strengthened. Most pathway plans are clear about care leavers' current needs and aspirations and how they will be met.
38. Care leavers are provided with information about their health histories, and PAs support care leavers effectively to access support through health services. Care leavers highly value the psychology and well-being service that provides accessible support for their emotional health.
39. Care leavers who are parents are supported by PAs who arrange groups and bespoke sessions for them. PAs support them with meetings in relation to their children and advocate for them to access appropriate housing and financial entitlements so that care leavers can become successful parents.
40. Care leavers are aware of their protected characteristic status in the local authority and have challenged leaders by asking 'So what?' This resulted in the pledge to care leavers, a clear and tangible document that explains the meaning of the protected characteristic in real terms.
41. PAs maintain contact with care leavers who are in custody, making persistent efforts to keep in touch throughout the duration of custodial sentences and ensuring that appropriate plans are in place on release.
42. The package of support to care leavers is improving education, employment and training opportunities and is increasing the number of care leavers who access them. Leaders are determined to ensure that this upward trajectory continues, and they are relentlessly ambitious for care leavers' success. The local authority and the virtual college support care leavers to attend college,

university and apprenticeships, enabling many care leavers to fulfil their potential. Through relationship building with local community businesses and a commitment to employing care leavers within the council, senior leaders are ensuring that care leavers are being offered increasing opportunities to achieve in education and work.

43. Care leavers live in suitable accommodation, often of their choice, and benefit from priority banding in the local authority to enable access to their own accommodation at a time that is right for them.

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

44. Children in the borough benefit from a stable senior leadership team with a shared and ambitious vision for children's services. Areas for improvement that were identified at the last full inspection in 2020 have been converted into areas of strength. There are strong relationships between health and the local authority, with good representation not only in strategy meetings but across decision-making forums and reviews for children. Care leavers now receive highly effective support. The quality and consistency of electronic recording are largely strong, and writing to the child in child-friendly language has become embedded across all levels of the service. Despite competition from other local authorities, strategies for workforce sufficiency in the local authority mean that the proportion of permanent staff has improved since the last inspection. While this continues to improve, some children in care spoke vividly to inspectors about the negative impact of experiencing changes of social worker.
45. Governance arrangements and lines of responsibility and accountability are clear and effective. There is frequent and open communication between the council's chief executive and the director of children's services. The chief executive is well sighted on practice through a range of sources. The lead member is a committed advocate for children, and children's services benefit from strong political support, with corporate parenting high on the agenda for elected members. Children in care and care leavers are helping to shape and design services and can confidently explain the impact that their voice has had. Local authority leaders listen to them; children and care leavers know the leaders and have faith in them.
46. Senior leaders know their service well. The self-evaluation accurately lays out the areas for improvement and strengths in the service, and managers, leaders and partners are well informed about progress. However, producing this information often relies on manual processes, which are effective but time-consuming. Since 2018, focused visits and inspections have identified that there are significant limitations to the children's services' database, including how this impacts on the provision of accurate performance data. A new system is due for implementation in March 2025, having been prioritised by the current leadership team, but overall, this has taken too long.



47. Some aspects of children's services' performance management and quality assurance activity are not consistently resulting in the swift identification and targeting of areas where practice needs strengthening. Auditing activity accurately identifies areas of strength and development, but learning is limited as audits do not currently include feedback from children and families and do not benefit from the voice of practitioners. When leaders have identified weaknesses in services, they have taken robust action to ensure that children's experiences improve. When this inspection highlighted a very small number of areas of weaker practice, leaders were decisive and swift in implementing fixes and solutions.
48. Senior leaders have mature relationships with key partners, who describe open conversations without defensiveness and an ethos of finding shared solutions to local challenges. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary hold the local authority in high regard due to the quality of the work, the relationship social workers have with children and the openness of senior managers to learning. Health, education and police involvement in planning for children is a strength across services.
49. Leaders invest in services that support children and their families to do well. Early help services have been prioritised and provide a responsive and bespoke package for families in need of support. Leaders have developed a systemic therapy service that primarily supports children in care and care leavers, through a model of consultation and direct work. The service is all-age and supports care leavers up to the age of 25.
50. Social workers and PAs feel well supported by team managers. There is predominantly good management oversight on most children's electronic records, although evidence of regular, reflective supervision to help practitioners to understand children's experiences and to improve their outcomes is less strong.
51. Staff are encouraged to develop and progress their skills, and there is a wide variety of training available to support this. Across the service, staff view caseloads as manageable, with youth workers, family hubs and family support workers enabling wraparound bespoke support to children and families. Workers describe a highly visible and responsive senior leadership team and being part of an organisation in which they feel appreciated.

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