Inspection of Wakefield local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 24 to 28 March 2025

Lead inspector: Christine Kennet, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection in 2021, services for children and families remain good overall. The early help offer is extensive, with an established approach, offering a partnership-led operating model delivered through the development of nine family and three youth hubs across Wakefield, supporting early intervention and prevention. Senior leaders have significantly improved the experiences of children in care, who now receive outstanding services. An innovative approach to sufficiency has resulted in increased placement stability, halving the number of children who are placed outside of Wakefield, and a joint-funded residential home with health for children with highly complex needs.

Improvements have also been achieved in many aspects of care leavers' experiences, although some vulnerable care leavers aged 21 to 25 and care leavers in custody are not supported well enough. Some care leavers aged 18 to 21 have been closed to the service without a named personal adviser.

Strong political support is enabling senior leaders to continue to drive positive change and improvement. Leaders have an accurate understanding of their challenges and their strengths in most areas of the service. Their collaborative approach with partners and staff encourages them to do their best to improve outcomes for children and families in Wakefield.

What needs to improve?[1]

- Keeping in touch with care leavers aged 18 to 21 who are closed to the service. (Outcome four, National Framework)
- Keeping in touch with and offering support to care leavers aged 21 to 25 who are closed to the service. (Outcome four, National Framework)
- Response and support to care leavers in custody. (Outcome four, National Framework)

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

1. Children in need of help and protection in Wakefield are receiving the right level of help and protection through robust and well-organised services.

2. The early help offer in Wakefield is a strength. A range of carefully targeted multi-agency services within 'Wakefield Families Together' offers easily accessible support to children and their families. Family/Youth Hubs are providing early interventions and targeted early help that provide children and families with help at the earliest opportunity.

3. Early help assessments are thorough, timely and address the identified needs of each child and their family. Assessments include children's voices and reflect their unique individual identities. Relational practice is strong and in evidence across the help and protection system. Early help practitioners take time building trusting relationships with children and their carers to ensure that they get a full understanding of risks, strengths and areas of need. Early help plans are comprehensive; they are agreed in consultation with children and their families, including them as active participants in the plan. Most plans are outcome focused, and families are clear about what they are doing and why. Many children's situations improve because of the support they receive.

4. The interface between early help and statutory social work is well understood by partner agencies. The inclusion of early help within the integrated front door (IFD) ensures a rapid response when the threshold for statutory services is not met, including the very positive use of visits to seek consent to identify children and families who may benefit from outreach support. These visits get alongside families and offer support and are having a good success rate, supporting families to prevent escalation to statutory services. The rationale for decision-making on step-up and step-down services is appropriate and well recorded in children's records.

[1] The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the Children's Social Care: National Framework. This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

5. Most contacts made to the IFD are appropriate and timely. Referrers complete multi-agency referral forms which indicate their understanding of children's social care thresholds. In addition, the IFD has a well-used consultation line to support partner agencies and give advice on next steps. Consent is sought from families and dispensed with only when necessary.

6. Effective systems are in place in the IFD to ensure that contacts are screened and prioritised by a manager. There is no delay between a contact being received, management oversight and social work triage taking place, which is supporting prompt responses for children. Social workers make effective use of family histories to understand risks and concerns. This is further enhanced by information gathered from relevant professionals and an emphasis on considering the child's and parent's voice in the triage and screening process.

7. Daily triage meetings are used well to consider referrals where there are concerns about domestic abuse. Partner agencies share information effectively, which is used to inform risk assessments and next steps, supporting earlier safety planning.

8. When children are at risk through going missing or being exploited, social workers in the IFD liaise with the specialist exploitation team. Workers in this team provide further information or intelligence, which enhances decisions and recommendations around safety planning. Children at risk of exploitation are supported through a range of resources. The child exploitation team provides direct interventions that are reducing risks for most children. Children who go missing from home or care are offered and take up return home interviews in a timely way, and the number of children going missing is reducing.

9. The emergency duty team (EDT) provides timely support to ensure that children are protected until the next working day with appropriate actions and safety planning. While strategy meetings out of hours are not always recorded, interventions do take place to ensure children's safety.

10. When risks to children escalate, these are quickly identified in the IFD, and children's cases are transferred immediately to the locality teams for assessment or strategy discussion. Strategy meetings are timely and include relevant partner agencies, and outcomes from these discussions are appropriate.

11. Most child protection enquiries are promptly undertaken and consider history, risks to the child and protective factors. Children are visited and seen alone by workers who use their skills to understand the child's experience. The voice of the child is captured well, reflecting their wishes and feelings and influencing planning. Outcomes, including to progress to initial child protection conferences, are in line with identified risk and need and are held within timescales. Social work reports are thorough and include children's views.

Meetings identify risks and strengths and are well attended by partner agencies, allowing shared decisions to inform plans for children.

12. Assessments for children, including disabled children, are comprehensive, detailed and address risks and needs well. They include information gathered from partner agencies with a clear focus on the family network. The child's experience and voice are clear in assessments and are used to inform planning. Families' views, including non-resident parents, are included in most assessments and they conclude with appropriate plans for the provision of support through early help services, child-in-need or child protection plans.

13. Children, including disabled children, have well-coordinated multi-agency plans that identify who is responsible for actions with suitable timeframes, helping families to be aware of what needs to change for their children's experiences to improve. Plans are regularly reviewed at child-in-need and core group meetings. There are robust mechanisms in place for tracking progress. Review child protection conferences are used to explore progress to plans and adjust plans according to children's evolving needs, including consideration of the Public Law Outline if needed.

14. Children are visited regularly by social workers who know them well and take time to establish relationships with them. Visits are purposeful, and children are seen alone when appropriate and helped to share their views through direct work, giving social workers an understanding of their wishes and feelings.

15. Leaders have placed a strong emphasis on holding family network meetings and/or family group conferences at the earliest opportunity. These are completed routinely by social workers, helping to identify resources within the wider family and safety planning that is keeping children protected and/or reducing the need for statutory interventions.

16. When situations for children do not improve, their needs are escalated through presentation at the legal gateway panel, to enter the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Letters before proceedings vary in quality, with some language that is difficult for parents to understand, but most set out what the concerns are for parents. When children are in pre-proceedings, social workers complete thorough, timely assessments and offer a range of services, helping parents to demonstrate they can care for their children and be diverted from proceedings. There is strong senior management oversight of children's progress in pre-proceedings, and if their situations do not improve, appropriate action is taken to safeguard them.

17. The response to vulnerable children who are at risk of homelessness is prompt. Children are made aware of their rights, and strong support is provided to parents and children to facilitate a return home when this is in children's best interests. There are plans in place to ensure that advocacy is routinely provided for this vulnerable group.

18. There is a small number of children living in private fostering arrangements. These children receive a timely and robust response. Detailed assessments support the arrangements to meet children's needs and help keep them safe.

19. The local authority designated officer responds promptly to referrals and provides a thorough response when there are allegations made against adults working with children. Tracking and oversight of this work is effective in monitoring progress and identifying themes.

20. Leaders are focused on ensuring that children assessed as in need are in school and receiving suitable education. When families opt for elective home education, welfare officers work actively with them to explain what this entails and have systems in place to monitor children's progress and well-being. Children missing education are carefully tracked through a range of measures to be assured of their whereabouts and to get them back into education wherever possible.

21. The 'Families achieving change' team offers specialist services to prevent children from coming into care. Family workers build positive and inclusive relationships with children, and a core offer of activities and interventions is available, with a positive outcome for many children and families.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

22. Children come into care at an appropriate time. These decisions are based on comprehensive assessments that are proportionate to children's needs. Work through the innovative sufficiency strategy has had a hugely positive impact on the outcomes for children who need to come into care in Wakefield. It has meant children can remain near their homes and schools or return to their local area if they were placed further away. This, coupled with the exceptionally strong emotional well-being and mental health offer, has supported placement stability and permanence for children in care.

23. If it is not possible for children to return home, suitable and timely plans for permanence are made. There is strong management oversight of permanence planning for children from the point of intervention. This includes panels whose mechanisms provide effective management oversight of the needs of individual children as well as identifying any barriers to progress.

24. Strong emphasis is placed on children living safely within their family networks, which are thoroughly considered before alternative permanence plans are made. This ensures that children have every opportunity to remain within their kinship networks, with a focus on siblings remaining together where possible.

25. When children require legal permanence, matters are presented to the family court in a timely way, and practice is strong. Social work assessments and evidence are comprehensive and consider the needs of the child, wider family networks and family history. When children's permanence plan is reunification

of children within their family, timely applications are made to discharge care orders. This ensures that children and families do not have statutory social work input for longer than is necessary.

26. Special guardianship orders are considered when appropriate, and through special guardian assessments, social workers consider the needs of the child in the immediate and longer term. Arrangements for family time are incorporated well into plans, which are explicit on the level of support available to special guardians, including annual review to ensure financial support is in place.

27. Care plans comprehensively identify and address children's needs. Plans are regularly monitored through statutory reviews, which children are supported to attend if they want to. When children are not present, their views are captured and highlighted in their plans. Excellent social worker practice was seen in the creation of personalised child-centred care plans with pictures of family and carers and key details that children need to know about the decisions being made about their lives. These plans are shared with children following their reviews.

28. Care plans are diligently reviewed by children's independent reviewing officers (IROs), who reflect the child's voice in their reports and review minutes. Most children are seen by their IRO before their review meetings to ensure their views are central to discussions and decision-making. Midway reviews give oversight from IROs, which is clear on children's records, and this additional oversight helps to ensure that progress is being made in line with agreed plans.

29. Children spoken to during the inspection told inspectors they live in homes where they feel safe and secure, and for some, the safest they have ever felt. They feel cared for by foster carers and residential staff who they have trusting and valued relationships with.

30. Disabled children are supported by skilled social workers who understand and address children's individual needs. Plans are regularly monitored through reviews and detail where advocates have been sought to support children. The views of non-verbal children are creatively captured in plans. Reviews for disabled children are well attended by the child's multi-disciplinary team.

31. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children live in homes that meet their needs. Where these children are living out of area, these placements are made in children's best interests in appropriate communities that can meet their needs. They are provided with the same levels of support as children living locally. Children are supported to access voluntary organisations to support them to reach out to their families abroad and to access legal advice to progress their legal rights to remain. When children have family members living in this country, they are supported to develop these relationships, giving them the opportunity to maintain a sense of identity and belonging.

32. Visits to children take place regularly. Social workers visit their children in line with their individual needs and as a minimum in line with statutory timeframes. This enables social workers to develop positive relationships with children who are then able to talk about their needs and concerns. A great emphasis is placed on ensuring that children's voices are clearly recorded in the records of these visits. Children's records are skilfully written to the child, giving them a clear understanding should they wish to review their care records in the future.

33. Life-story work is seen as being integral for children in care, and practitioners are delivering exceptionally well-crafted and thoughtful work. Life-story work and parallel story books, updated as children's circumstances evolve, provide engaging and age-appropriate information to children to understand their early lives and journey into care. Social workers have real insight into the needs of their children. Highly creative and skilled direct work is regularly completed, and this child-centred practice fully explores children's wishes, feelings and future aspirations.

34. Children are supported to keep in touch with important people in their lives. Family time arrangements are in line with children's needs and safety. Social workers are proactive in supporting children's views when they do not wish to see parents.

35. Children in care who live outside of Wakefield live in homes that meet their needs, and they are considered just as any other cared for child living in the area, with appropriate permanence secured in a timely way. Children are visited regularly in line with their needs.

36. Senior leaders have good oversight of the arrangements for the very small number of children living in unregistered children's homes. These placements are made only in crisis situations and only when all placement searches have been exhausted. Senior leaders are actively working with providers in these circumstances to encourage and support providers to become registered with Ofsted. Social workers and managers carefully put together packages of care, often with known providers, to meet children's needs. There is robust planning and support to find alternative registered provision quickly or to encourage providers to register or to find alternative registered provision.

37. Children in care who are at risk of exploitation are well supported with a range of resources and committed practitioners. Their complex and challenging set of circumstances are well understood by practitioners, and this is reflected in timebound plans and reflective discussions in supervision. Return home interviews following missing episodes are used effectively to gain additional information about children's missing episodes.

38. The virtual school is working effectively with a range of professionals to ensure that children in care get the most appropriate care and support to help them succeed. Aspirations for children in care are high, and children typically make good progress. When concerns are raised linked to achievement, attendance or

suspensions, the virtual school is working effectively with other stakeholders to improve outcomes for children in care. The virtual school carefully monitors children's personal education plans, but leaders know that the use of high-quality target setting in such plans is not yet consistent. The virtual school plans transitions for children effectively, which helps children to succeed in education, employment or training.

39. Planning, assessments and oversight of plans leading to children being placed at home with their parents are robust. Comprehensive assessments evaluate the capacity of parents to meet the needs of their children. All appropriate multi-agency checks are completed before children can return home. When children return home, 'placed with parents' agreements guide social workers to undertake regular visits to provide oversight of and support for these new arrangements.

40. When children return home in a planned way, children and families receive additional time-limited intervention from the 'Families achieving change' team to support this time of transition. Those children leaving care, subject to supervision or child arrangement orders, continue to receive support through child-in-need plans.

41. There is an exceptionally strong emotional and well-being offer for children in care through the in-house 'emotional well-being team', and where needed, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health 'Enhanced Outreach Team'. These services are new initiatives since the last inspection and provide high-quality and effective services with skilled practitioners for children and carers to ensure the right help and support. This targeted support contributes to the high level of placement stability for children in care. Children's physical health needs are very well met, and there is effective oversight of this through reviews and care planning.

42. The recruitment, assessment, training and support to foster carers are highly effective. Work on placement sufficiency and choices has been very successful and continues at pace. This includes the introduction of a fostering hub home and support programme (structured support for foster carers around an experienced hub home foster carer) and a new residential provision, all helping to improve placement stability.

43. Adoption is considered when it is appropriate for children, and planning for permanence is timely. The local authority ensures that the regional adoption agency (One Adoption West Yorkshire) delivers an appropriate service for children. Comprehensive assessments of prospective adopters are completed. Adoption panel members ensure the scrutiny of suitability, and matching is effective so that children are placed with adopters who can meet their long-term needs. Adopters are provided with relevant preparation and training and are well supported.

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

44. Despite strengths and improvements since the last inspection across the care leavers' service, there remain areas of weaker practice, leaving a small number of care leavers vulnerable.

45. There are effective transitions from the children-in-care teams to the pathway team and then into the care leavers' service. The co-location of these teams has improved transitions, and children are allocated a personal adviser (PA) early enough to enable them to develop a positive relationship. PAs work alongside children's social workers to build relationships, prior to the important transition into adulthood. PAs visit children regularly and attend important meetings, such as looked after reviews prior to their transition.

46. PAs develop caring and trusting relationships with care leavers, have a good understanding of their needs and are creative in how they engage them. Most care leavers are enabled to access a range of support services via the 'Connect Cafe', where they have opportunities to meet peers and receive bespoke support from their PAs and partner agencies who attend, for example to support with finances, job applications and advice, independent living skills, emotional well-being and use of the computer suite.

47. PAs ensure that they regularly keep in touch with those care leavers allocated to them, with increased visiting when necessary to provide practical and emotional support, develop independence skills and recognise any risks or needs. PAs understand the significance of care leavers' relationships with their family, carers and friends, and actively support them to maintain these important links.

48. There is a strong focus on care leavers' health needs. PAs ensure that care leavers are registered with doctors and dentists in their local area and support most care leavers to access their health histories. Effective links with adult services are supporting care leavers with complex and continuing health needs. Care leavers can access specialist workers for emotional health and well-being support through the emotional and well-being team and do not have to wait to have their needs assessed and supported.

49. Most care leavers have detailed pathway plans that accurately reflect their needs and any risks and capture their views. Plans are mostly co-produced with care leavers, include multi-agency contributions and are regularly reviewed by PAs, mostly alongside care leavers. Plans are individualised and reflect young people's identity, cultural and support needs. Pathway plans bring young people's voices to life, and they identify goals and actions to support care leavers' aspirations.

50. The assessment of and response to risk for vulnerable care leavers was identified as an area for improvement at the last inspection and was the subject

of a subsequent focused visit. While many improvements have been made, this is not yet the case for all care leavers, particularly those care leavers aged 21 years plus and care leavers in custody.

51. PAs are proactive in creating opportunities to engage with care leavers and stay connected with them, but not all care leavers have experienced this level of support. Some care leavers over 21 years who remain open to the service receive well-coordinated ongoing help, support and contact. This is not the case for all care leavers in the 21 to 25 years age group who have closed to the service but who continue to have ongoing needs and vulnerabilities. Some records of care leavers who are approaching this age range reflect that the plan is to work towards case closure at the age of 21, although care leavers can opt to remain open to the service if they wish.

52. A large number of younger care leavers aged 18 to 21 years have been closed to the service without an allocated PA. Inspectors sampled several care leavers' records in this age group who had been closed to the service and found that this was in line with theirs or their adult carers' wishes. For these care leavers, arrangements for reconnection with the duty system, or with a PA if there was an existing relationship for ongoing support, are in place. However, the lack of proactive contact does not enable the local authority to step in promptly if care leavers' vulnerability increases.

53. Despite the local authority duty to assess and meet the needs of 21- to 25-year-old care leavers, this is not what was found in practice for some care leavers. The culture within the service, and described by PAs as a blanket policy, is to close care leavers' involvements by the age of 21 years rather than base this on a needs-led decision agreed collaboratively with care leavers. For a small but significant number of care leavers, their involvements were closed despite ongoing vulnerability, and given the practice of closing at 21 years, care leavers may not feel able to reach out for help if needed.

54. During the inspection, senior leaders fully accepted these shortfalls and commissioned an immediate review of contact with all care leavers aged 21 years and over who have been closed to the service. In addition, they commissioned a review of all care leavers aged 18 to 21 years closed to the service, and intended to allocate a named PA as well as rolling out training for PAs and reviewing frontline management arrangements.

55. Care leavers who are in custody are not all visited in a timely way. They do not all receive additional monies from the local authority to buy things they may need while in prison. Pathway plans for care leavers in custody are not always completed with them or shared with them. There is limited planning for accommodation when care leavers are released from custody and a lack of proactive partnership work to meet their needs. They have to present as homeless to the housing department on the day of their release. Senior leaders took immediate action during the inspection to respond to these findings.

56. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are well supported to achieve independence and their educational/employment aspirations. They are supported to have their cultural and religious needs identified and met, creating networks within the community. The intensive support team provides specifically tailored support to meet the needs of unaccompanied care leavers, and when needed, they are supported with their leave to remain applications.

57. Most care leavers who are parents receive support proportionate to their level of need. PAs recognise additional vulnerabilities that care-leaving young parents may face and respond appropriately to needs and risks. Young parents are able to access a monthly parent group regardless of whether they are closed to the service, and this is a valuable source of support to them.

58. Care leavers with disabilities have PAs that are understanding of their unique physical and emotional needs and how these can impact on their journey into adulthood. PAs are supported by a specialist care navigator, who provides consultations and clinical supervision where needed.

59. The virtual school ensures that there is close contact with care leavers and joined-up work with additional providers for post-16 years, so that young people are helped to succeed. When care leavers have aspirations for university, there is a range of support to ensure that they can apply successfully. The leaving care service places a positive emphasis on supporting care leavers into education, training or employment, and as a result, the figures are above the national average. PAs work with young people at a pace that is right for them, and care leavers are well supported to think about transitions that lead to successful adulthood. Care leavers are supported to be prepared for independence, including financial planning. There is ongoing work within the local authority to develop apprenticeships, to 'grow their own'. This is in the early stages of development, and it is too soon to see any impact.

60. Most care-experienced young people live in suitable accommodation and have had a choice in where they live. Most PAs working with partner agencies are tenacious in their pursuit of suitable accommodation support for care leavers who need it. Care leavers who need holiday accommodation from education or training can return to their foster placements when on home leave.

61. The local offer has been co-produced with care leavers, is recently updated and is available through the 'Care4us' website, supporting young people to know their rights and entitlements. The local offer includes priority housing status for care leavers up to 21 years, council tax exemption up to 25 years (both within and outside of the borough) and wider discretionary payments, such as driving lessons/test, provided this is agreed in the pathway plan and the care leaver is in employment, education and training. Regular activities are offered for care leavers, which include parent and baby groups, gaming nights and winter warmers. PAs are not all clear about care leaver entitlements through the local offer, and although PAs stated that care leavers receive information, this was not always routinely recorded in pathway plans.

62. Care leavers are supported to have appropriate documentation that they need so they can establish themselves independently, such as national insurance numbers, bank accounts and passports. Care leavers are supported to access funding for help with purchasing the essential things they may need in life. Young people are offered appropriate and sensitive advice and support when accessing their care records.

63. Care leavers are supported to participate and engage in a range of opportunities to help improve services. This includes active involvement in council recruitment at all levels, co-chairing of the corporate parenting board and contributing to the development of the children in care and care leavers strategy. Annual celebration events are held for care leavers to shine a light on their achievements.

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

64. The leadership of Wakefield Metropolitan District Council actively recognises and prioritises the needs of children, families and many care leavers. The current senior leadership team has brought increased rigour and pace to improvement in many areas of the service since the last inspection. The Chief Executive and Corporate Director of Children's Services have a clear understanding and grip of the main challenges faced across the area in improving the lives of their most vulnerable children. Political leaders are highly supportive of the children's agenda. Despite the financial pressures the council faces, investment in strengthening services in response to increased demand is a continuing commitment, and the council has a clear vision and strategy, ensuring that children and young people are at the heart of the council's future plans.

65. Senior leaders' self-evaluation is comprehensive and self-challenging, and mostly an overall reflection of what inspectors have found. However, within the care leavers' service, leaders were not sufficiently sighted on some shortfalls. Senior leaders responded to inspectors' findings while inspectors were still on site, and provided a verbal response and action plan immediately. Inspectors were reassured that further review and changes to the service would take place to protect this vulnerable group of young people. Senior leaders remain ambitious to continue to build on existing strengths and practice developments.

66. Positive progress has been achieved in the quality and impact of partnership working between the council and key strategic partners. This is particularly evident in the development of a nationally recognised joint-funded residential resource meeting the needs of the most vulnerable children subject to deprivation of liberty or tier 4 mental health intervention. Furthermore, the development of an effective emotional and mental well-being pathway means that children do not have to wait for vital support. The wider review and transformation of residential provision has halved the number of children living at a distance from Wakefield since the last inspection, meaning they are able to

build and maintain important relationships with family and friends in their community.

67. Further strengths are evident in some of the new joint working initiatives, for example the 'Person posing a risk panel', a private proceedings clinic for social workers, police powers focus group, joint protocol with the children and family court advisory support service for timely care proceedings and an 'On bail and remand protocol' with youth justice. The partnership has been undertaking multi-agency audits since 2022 and joint audit activity with the regional adoption agency (One Adoption West Yorkshire).

68. The corporate parenting board is co-chaired by an elected member and a care-experienced young person. The voice and influence of most children and young people is well developed and is informing the co-produced local offer. Young people are actively encouraged to engage in the work of the board and wider strategic developments through the 'Build Our Futures' and 'Sparkles' network of participation groups and summits. Leaders and managers have prioritised the need to ensure that the quality and impact of the child's voice is well embedded in assessments, plans and reviews. Participation and mentoring arrangements for children are well promoted across the service.

69. The innovative sufficiency strategy has transformed the availability of local provision for children who need care in Wakefield. Since the last inspection, the number of children living at a distance from home has halved, through the development of in-house fostering and residential provision tailored to meet local need. The investment in accommodation for post-16 and the increasing cohort of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people has further enabled young people to stay close and maintain important relationships, providing significant stability for these young people, with no placement breakdowns since establishment. Work is nearing completion in developing a foster hub home, a supportive model, to smooth the pathway for children to return from residential to fostering with a comprehensive, wraparound team around the placement approach. Leaders are ambitious for all children to achieve the right permanence outcome to meet their needs, and this permeates through the workforce.

70. The council is committed to continuous improvement and has developed a strong learning culture. The Learning Academy has been highly successful in supporting the growth of a permanent, stable and experienced workforce, with a range of initiatives, including social work apprenticeships, with over 100 practice educators enabling student placements, leading to newly qualified social workers joining the effective assessed and supported year in employment. This is supplemented in Wakefield with an innovative second and third supported year, helping to achieve a high retention rate, meaning that children are benefiting from stable relationships with well-trained, experienced and highly motivated workers.

71. A detailed and well-embedded performance framework provides leaders with a regular and detailed analysis and commentary of a wide range of measures, helping to identify most emerging issues. Leaders accept they do not routinely audit the records of children closed to the service, but following feedback are considering the value of this. Scrutiny panel and assurance processes have a continued focus on raising performance and seeking to deliver the best outcomes for children and young people.

72. Quality assurance arrangements are mostly effective. A learning approach to quality assurance is well established. Regular, thorough and reflective case file auditing takes place with social workers, often enhanced by feedback from children and families with routine moderation, helping to ensure consistency and improving outcomes for children. Thematic practice learning weeks are valued by workers in helping to improve their practice and learning.

73. Social workers are very positive about working for Wakefield. Senior leaders have established a supportive and caring organisational culture that is evident across the workforce, and workers feel respected and valued by leaders. Workers described throughout the inspection the good opportunities they have for career progression as well as access to training, including for agency staff. Workers are positive about their experience of management and peer support and feel that Wakefield provides a learning environment. Management oversight and supervision are routinely happening, supporting practice improvement and helping to ensure that plans for children are appropriate to their needs and progressed effectively.

74. Strengthening and stabilising the workforce is a priority for leaders in Wakefield, with many of the social work staff having more than five years' experience. This means that most children are now benefiting from stable relationships with their workers. Early help and non-social-work-qualified staff are deployed effectively to support families at an earlier stage of need.

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