

Inspection of Wigan local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 6 to 17 October 2025

Lead inspector: Jenny-ellen Scotland, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children and care leavers in Wigan have been considerably strengthened since the last Ofsted inspection in May 2022, when they were judged to require improvement overall. Senior and political leaders, including the leader of the council, chief executive and director of children's services (DCS), are committed to continually improving the quality of support for children, families and care leavers. This sustained focus on raising performance and practice standards has led to tangible progress across children's services.

Senior leaders are ambitious for children and have fostered a strong, family-focused and child-centred culture. The child's voice strongly influences service development, contributing to sustained improvements in the support for children in care and care leavers. Outstanding practice is making a positive difference to the lives of these children and young people. Services for children in need of help and protection have also been strengthened, with high-quality assessments, more timely strategy meetings, appropriate use of pre-proceedings and stronger management of allegations against professionals. However, the quality of front door services remains inconsistent and continues to require improvement.

Leaders have implemented an effective recruitment and retention programme that has resulted in a largely permanent workforce, providing a strong foundation for sustained improvement. Managers oversee social work caseloads effectively, ensuring they are well managed, and enabling practitioners to build and maintain meaningful relationships with children, care leavers and their families.

What needs to improve?¹

- The quality of management oversight regarding multi-agency screening decisions at the front door (outcome 3, national framework).
- The consistent identification of risk and effective, timely responses when there are concerns at the front door about children's safety (outcome 3, national framework).
- The quality of contingency and safety plans for children in need of help and protection (outcome 3, national framework).

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

1. Children benefit from highly effective early help, delivered by skilled professionals who identify and respond promptly to emerging concerns. The establishment of five multi-agency family hubs in the areas of greatest need is strengthening preventative responses to vulnerability and risk. The family hubs are further strengthened by strong professional and community connections, which enhance the level of parental engagement and ensure that children receive timely and appropriate support.
2. Children and families with more extensive needs receive timely support from early help practitioners, who build strong relationships with children and their parents or carers. Tailored interventions with families include direct work and draw on recognised tools and models of practice. These interventions have a significant impact in helping families address specific vulnerabilities and improve their parenting capacity, particularly in relation to neglect and domestic abuse. Step-up and step-down arrangements between early help and social care are generally effective and well coordinated.
3. When children need help and protection, referrals are made to the children first partnership hub (CFPH) which acts as a front door and single point of access for both targeted early help and statutory intervention. Partner referrals are generally of high quality and made at the right time. However, there have been some delays in the police referring incidents that require an immediate safeguarding

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.

response. Although senior leaders in the police and children's social care were aware of this issue, and had mechanisms in place to identify and address most delays, senior leaders reviewed this practice concern during the inspection. As a result, leaders took additional action to strengthen management oversight to ensure a more timely response.

4. The quality of initial screening in the CFPH is inconsistent. For most children, responses are appropriate and effective. Practitioners work collaboratively with parents and carers when sharing or seeking information, while remaining focused on the safeguarding needs of children. For a small but significant number of children, professional curiosity is not consistently applied by practitioners and managers when reviewing contacts or historical risk factors. Consequently, some children's cases are closed prematurely without sufficient information-sharing or consideration of the risks the child may be exposed to. During the inspection, senior leaders recognised this and took immediate action to understand and respond to these shortfalls.
5. When the CFPH identifies children at risk of harm, they are promptly transferred to the duty and assessment teams. Social workers in these teams respond effectively to risk and convene timely strategy meetings, which are well attended. Most decisions to progress to child protection enquiries and initial child protection conferences are appropriate and consider family history and the child's views. However, interim safety plans are not consistently child focused, clearly recorded or routinely shared with parents and wider family networks, which limits their effectiveness.
6. Social workers in the assessment and family safeguarding teams see children alone, and their records capture children's wishes and feelings. Workers use a range of tools to engage with children and reach a deeper understanding of their experiences. Non-resident parents' views are actively sought to inform assessments.
7. The assessments of children's need are thorough, timely and child centred. They generally lead to proportionate responses to risk and need. Practitioners engage sensitively with children and families, ensuring that assessments accurately reflect the child's day-to-day experiences. Interventions to provide appropriate support begin promptly, supported by clear management oversight and effective supervision.
8. For most children, child protection conferences are convened appropriately, resulting in protection plans designed to reduce risk and vulnerability. Safety plans are completed by social workers following conference and routinely include the family network. However, they are not always consistently detailed or completed and shared swiftly enough. This means that there is sometimes a delay in sharing safety plans with partner agencies and wider family networks. In addition, some contingency plans are under-developed, which means that alternative arrangements are sometimes unclear if a child's circumstances

change or deteriorate. Leaders had identified this practice issue at the time of inspection and were taking appropriate action to address it.

9. Children in need, or in need of protection, receive effective support from social workers in the family safeguarding teams, who understand their experiences and daily lives, enabling interventions to be tailored to individual needs. Family networks are thoroughly explored and incorporated into plans, strengthening protective factors. The local authority's practice model supports timely interventions by adult mental health and domestic abuse specialists. The impact of these coordinated interventions is closely monitored through group and individual supervision, contributing to improved experiences for children.
10. Children's plans are reviewed regularly through multi-agency meetings with the professionals who are involved with them and their families. Family engagement is evident throughout the intervention period, and the views of children are clearly represented. Together, these perspectives help to give an accurate picture of the impact of the intervention.
11. Information shared at child protection review conferences is thorough and child focused, providing clear evidence of progress. Child protection chairs provide effective challenge and oversight, ensuring that children's plans progress appropriately, and critical decisions, including the ending of plans, are well informed. Chairs maintain involvement between review meetings, adding an additional safeguard.
12. For most children, case supervision and management oversight are thorough and child centred, prioritising children's experiences and needs and effectively promoting positive change. For a very small number of children, ongoing risks and concerns are not addressed sufficiently, resulting in repeated child protection plans that do not effectively reduce children's exposure to chronic neglect or domestic abuse. Leaders were aware of this issue at the time of inspection and had strategic and operational plans in place to address this.
13. When risks to children do not reduce, they are escalated to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Letters before proceedings clearly outline social workers' concerns, and pre-proceedings work is managed effectively through timely legal gateway and 'challenge to care' meetings. This approach results in fewer hearings, improved evidence-based applications and faster decisions for children, a trend recognised by Cafcass and the district judge.
14. Early help practitioners and social workers use an established tool effectively to manage neglect and take appropriate action when required. The tool is used collaboratively with parents to help them understand areas where change is needed. Practitioners are supported to recognise the impact of poverty, ensuring that financial hardship is not mistaken for neglect, and that neglect is correctly identified when present.

15. Children affected by domestic abuse benefit from a strong, coordinated multi-agency response. Social workers understand the impact of domestic abuse on children, and targeted work with parents helps to reduce risk.
16. Timely and effective assessment and planning ensure that risks for unborn children are well understood and managed appropriately. Pre-birth assessments are child focused, carefully balancing strengths, risks and vulnerabilities.
17. Family group conferences are routinely considered and used effectively to strengthen the support network around the child. Early involvement of family members helps identify the support families need to care safely for their children and highlights relatives who could provide care if parents are unable to do so.
18. Disabled children receive highly personalised support from social workers who know them well. Children at risk are visited regularly and seen alone, with non-verbal children supported to communicate using appropriate tools or advocates. Detailed observations inform dynamic assessments of need and ensure that children's voices remain central to planning and decision-making.
19. Children aged 16 and 17 at risk of homelessness receive timely and effective support. Their rights regarding becoming looked after are explained, and they are routinely offered independent advocates. Practitioners work proactively to help children rebuild relationships with their families and remain engaged in education, which contributes to increased stability. A joint housing protocol ensures rapid access to suitable emergency and longer-term accommodation, supporting stability and positive future outcomes.
20. Children at risk of exploitation receive timely and coordinated support through daily risk meetings in the contextual safeguarding hub. Practitioners in the specialist team build trusting relationships, enabling targeted interventions and safe disclosures. Proactive responses, including multi-agency disruption measures and support for children as victims, are consistently applied. Joint supervision with the child's social worker enhances understanding of children's experiences and risks, strengthening safeguarding practice and safety for both children and the wider community.
21. Children receive an effective response when they go missing. Independent workers provide timely, child-focused return home interviews that explore push and pull factors. Risks are consistently assessed, and strategy discussions are convened when required.
22. Children who are identified as young carers receive a comprehensive and tailored offer of support that reflects their individual needs.
23. The small number of privately fostered children are well supported. Agencies, including faith groups, are supported to understand private fostering and encouraged to report any children they identify. Assessments reflect children's

needs, although the assessment of carers' capacity to provide appropriate support is less thorough and does not receive consistent management oversight.

24. The out-of-hours service responds appropriately to calls from professionals, members of the public, families and carers. Experienced practitioners respond effectively to the range of children's needs, supported in their decision-making by accessible leaders.
25. The local authority designated officer provides an effective and responsive service, ensuring that concerns about adults working with children are managed promptly. Improved data management and oversight support timely action, while allegation management meetings prioritise children's safety and well-being.
26. There is a strong and appropriate level of strategic and operational oversight and accountability for children who are electively home educated and for those who are missing from education. Tracking by a dedicated team is persistent and tenacious.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

27. Children in care in Wigan receive an outstanding service that significantly enhances their daily experiences and life opportunities. Since the last inspection, the service has been strengthened by enhancing children's opportunities to form meaningful relationships with their social workers, consistent management oversight and a strong focus on permanence planning, ensuring children benefit from stability and continuity of care. Emotional support from Our Safe Space has improved the quality and stability of foster care, while access to diverse activities, creative life-story work and support to maintain contacts and identity further enrich children's experiences. Together, these approaches result in sustained, high-quality practice, enabling children to thrive, develop resilience and achieve their potential across all aspects of their lives.
28. When children cannot remain safely at home, they enter care in a timely and well-planned way. The edge-of-care service works effectively with families to help children remain with parents or within their wider family networks whenever it is safe to do so. Family group conferences are used proactively to identify carers early, keeping children connected to those who matter most to them.
29. Permanence planning is prioritised from the outset and remains a consistent focus for social workers, independent reviewing officers (IROs), managers and leaders. Managers use robust tracking systems to ensure that plans progress without delay, preventing drift and securing timely, stable and lasting arrangements. As a result, children experience greater stability, continuity and a strong sense of security, supporting their overall well-being and development.
30. When children cannot live with their birth families or wider family networks, adoption is considered promptly and appropriately as a positive permanence

option, including early permanence (foster to adopt) for very young children. Children benefit from the support of a skilled and experienced specialist team, who ensure well-planned, sensitive transitions to their new permanent families.

31. Most children live in stable and nurturing homes where they feel safe and happy, and make good progress. They consistently describe feeling settled and well cared for by their carers. When a move is necessary and in a child's best interests, careful consideration is given to identifying a placement that best meets their individual needs. Whenever possible, children are actively involved in the decisions about their future homes, supported by their social workers, who know them well, in choosing their new placement and planning introductions. When children do move, arrangements are made to support continuity in their education and to help them maintain important links with their families, friends, communities and professional networks.
32. Brothers and sisters are able to live together whenever possible. When this is not achievable, family time is purposeful, well planned and centred on maintaining positive relationships.
33. An increasing number of children live in or near Wigan, enabling them to stay connected to their communities, schools and networks. Leaders prioritise children's identity and belonging, recognising the importance of 'being from Wigan'. Effective family time and the lifelong links service help sustain enduring relationships with family, friends and former carers or professionals.
34. Children benefit from stable and trusting relationships with social workers who know them well. Many have been supported by the same worker for several years, providing continuity, emotional security, a connection to their history and a strong sense of belonging. Social workers communicate with honesty and empathy, ensuring that children feel respected and valued. High-quality direct work helps children understand their histories and celebrate their achievements. Records are child centred and reflect pride in children's progress, reinforcing identity and self-worth. Life-story work is carried out with care and sensitivity, enabling children to make sense of their journeys. Regularly updated, these records provide meaningful tools for reflection, understanding and emotional growth.
35. Children enjoy strong relationships with their IROs, who know them well, visit them between reviews and maintain rigorous oversight of their care plans. Care plans are current, personalised and focused on connection, recovery and well-being. Coordinated multi-agency support promotes consistency, stability and positive progress in all areas of children's lives.
36. When children return to live with their parents, arrangements are subject to thorough assessment and are robustly supported, with clear oversight from senior leaders. This ensures that transitions are safe and well planned, and focused on achieving positive and sustainable outcomes for children.

37. Disabled children live in stable, nurturing homes where carers meet their complex health and emotional needs exceptionally well, with many continuing to support them into adulthood through shared lives arrangements. Children benefit from trusting and enduring relationships with their social workers, which enhances their sense of security and well-being. Transition planning is effective for most children, with clear actions in place to address any delays in adulthood assessments.
38. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (referred to as 'separated children' in Wigan) receive highly tailored support. Workers demonstrate a strong understanding of immigration processes and children's rights, with access to interpreters and advocates ensuring that their voices are heard.
39. When children in care go missing or are at risk of exploitation, they receive a prompt, well-coordinated response from workers who know them and their vulnerabilities well. Practitioners demonstrate a clear understanding of each child's circumstances, enabling early identification of escalating risks and timely intervention. Multi-agency partners, including parents and family networks, work effectively together to divert children from harm and reduce ongoing risks. Return home interviews are completed promptly and are of good quality, ensuring that learning from each incident informs robust, child-centred risk management and strengthens overall safety planning.
40. Children's physical and mental health needs are well understood and supported. Dedicated nurses, advocates and the Our Safe Space service provide targeted and impactful interventions that strengthen well-being and stability.
41. Children are encouraged and supported to take part in a wide range of activities that promote enjoyment, confidence and personal development. In Wigan, children benefit from opportunities to participate in local sporting and community events, including football and rugby, and are sometimes invited as special guests at major fixtures and participatory events. When children take part in competitions or performances, social workers attend to offer encouragement and celebrate their achievements, reinforcing strong, trusting relationships and a sense of pride and belonging. Whenever possible, birth families are also supported to attend, enabling them to share in their children's successes.
42. Children in care have a strong and influential voice, actively contributing through forums such as the children in care A Million Voices group, which is regularly represented at corporate parenting panels and leadership meetings. Children are routinely involved in decisions about service planning, staff recruitment and the training of foster carers and social workers, which ensures that their perspectives shape practice and service development.

43. The virtual school is highly effective. Improved personal education planning enables leaders to monitor progress closely and promotes children achieving well in education.
44. The placement sufficiency strategy continues to strengthen the availability of safe, high-quality homes for children in care. Wigan operates five children's homes, all judged to be good or outstanding, and has effective commissioning arrangements with providers to secure high-quality placements in both children's homes and local independent fostering agencies. Sustained investment in fostering, the development of support hubs and the dedicated support offered through Our Safe Space have enhanced the experience of foster carers, who report feeling well supported in their roles. These elements have contributed to improved placement stability for children. On the rare occasions when the local authority uses unregistered settings, there is clear management oversight and robust scrutiny. Leaders proactively seek a registered provision as soon as possible and social workers increase visits to ensure the child's safety and well-being.
45. The regional adoption agency is well led and ensures timely, well-matched placements for most children. Ongoing recruitment and improvement activity continue to strengthen adoption outcomes.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

46. Care leavers in Wigan receive exceptional support from personal advisers (PAs) who demonstrate genuine care, commitment and pride in the young people they work with. This is evident in case records, which show workers' consistent encouragement, recognition of achievements and determined advocacy on behalf of young people. There is a strong, council-wide commitment to recognising care experience as a protected characteristic, firmly embedded in both strategic and operational decision-making. This ensures that the needs of care leavers are actively considered in all relevant council plans and policies. For example, when new housing developments are approved, specific attention is given to ensuring suitable accommodation is available for care leavers. As a result of these approaches, care-experienced young people benefit from enhanced stability, support and opportunities to build independence and confidence as they transition to adulthood.
47. Care leavers have the opportunity to build meaningful, lasting relationships with their PAs before transferring to the care leavers service. These trusted relationships provide consistent guidance, support and reassurance, reducing anxieties, fostering confidence and promoting independence, which contributes significantly to positive experiences.
48. PAs demonstrate persistence, genuine care and effective advocacy, reflecting a strong commitment to both personal and corporate parenting responsibilities. They speak with pride and ambition for the care leavers they support, providing

consistent guidance and protection. PAs work with care and kindness to help care leavers understand their histories, and persistently encourage them to be aspirational for their futures, positively influencing their well-being and life experiences.

49. Care leavers in Wigan benefit from a flexible and responsive service that remains available for as long as they require support. The local authority actively maintains contact with care leavers to ensure they remain aware of their entitlements and are encouraged to seek support if they require it.
50. Care leavers play an active and influential role in shaping services, including contributing to the design of the care leavers hub, the local offer and the current pathway plan. This strong focus on participation fosters a sense of ownership and pride. Wigan Council and children's services leaders meaningfully involve care leavers in service development, demonstrating a genuine commitment to listening and responding to their views. Their voices are represented through the Connected Families, the Care Leavers Forum, Progress with Unity group and the Youth Inspectors programme, as well as in training events, directly informing service delivery. This strong culture of participation promotes children's empowerment and confidence and helps ensure that services remain responsive and effective.
51. The care leavers hub provides a welcoming and inclusive space where young people regularly meet, attend groups or simply drop in to talk and maintain contact. The hub is bright and filled with photos of young people, creating a warm and inviting space. Care leavers talked about how they value the support in the hub and how it makes them feel safe. The co-location of PAs means that they can always access support when needed. This nurturing environment reflects the trust and belonging that underpin Wigan's approach to care leavers.
52. Care leavers' physical and emotional health needs are carefully considered. PAs support them to understand their health histories and respond sensitively to mental health needs. Care leavers are well supported to maintain good health. They are registered with GPs and dentists, and many take advantage of free gym memberships to support their physical well-being. Specialist nurses are regularly based in the care leavers hub, providing a drop-in service for a wide range of health needs.
53. PAs work sensitively to help care leavers understand their early childhood trauma, ensuring timely access to support through the Our Safe Space service. This service also provides valuable workshops for staff, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to support care leavers effectively.
54. Care leavers are well informed about the local offer and supported by knowledgeable PAs to access their full entitlements up to the age of 25. These benefits are widely promoted and effectively used, helping care leavers develop independence and stability. The local offer is also accessible to eligible care leavers when appropriate.

55. Care leavers, including those outside Wigan, report feeling safe and secure in their living arrangements. Most care leavers live in accommodation they consider safe and suitable and somewhere they like, helping to promote their stability, well-being and confidence. They benefit from a comprehensive housing offer that provides accommodation tailored to their needs and is, where possible, in their preferred area. Dedicated tenancy support workers help care leavers manage tenancies, pay bills and budget effectively during their first year of independent living, after which they are offered a secure tenancy agreement, enabling them to live independently with confidence and stability.
56. Most pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers and reflect their health, well-being and individual needs. Plans highlight strengths and are written in accessible, personalised language. Dedicated reviewing officers ensure pathway plan actions are purposeful, progress is monitored and support remains aligned to individual priorities.
57. Care leavers who are parents receive well-coordinated, thoughtful support from their PAs, balancing empathy with a clear focus on the welfare of their children. The care leavers hub provides practical assistance, emotional support and opportunities to build confidence and strengthen parenting capacity. PAs remain committed to supporting young parents to be ambitious for their own futures, contributing to positive experiences for both parent and child.
58. PAs recognise when care leavers are at risk of harm and respond promptly and effectively. Management oversight of the most vulnerable care leavers, alongside detailed risk assessments and plans supported by workers from the contextual safeguarding hub, is highly effective at reducing risks.
59. When a care leaver is in custody, PAs maintain regular communication and work closely with probation, prison and housing colleagues to plan ahead and support rehabilitation arrangements.
60. Former separated children are supported by experienced PAs who guide them through immigration processes and help them settle in Wigan, enabling them to make it their home.
61. Care leavers are supported to access and sustain employment, apprenticeships or higher education. PAs take a persistent approach with those not in education, employment or training, although leaders recognise that this remains an area for further development.
62. Care leavers are supported to maintain meaningful relationships with their families and other significant people, including previous carers and social workers, through the lifelong links service.

63. Care leavers are provided with key documents such as passports and health histories, as relevant, to take responsibility for their lives as young adults.

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

64. Senior leaders in Wigan provide ambitious and effective leadership that has progressed improvement across children's services. However, challenges remain in ensuring the consistency and quality of front-door screening decisions. Since the previous inspection, leaders have responded with pace and determination to address most identified areas for development. Political and corporate commitment to children remains strong, with continued investment despite financial pressures. This has created a stable, skilled and motivated workforce underpinned by kindness, accountability and high aspiration.
65. Leadership across Wigan Council is stable, visible and ambitious. The chief executive demonstrates openness and accountability, while the DCS and senior leaders maintain a strong focus on quality, ensuring that high standards are consistently prioritised across services. Robust governance and mature partnerships, characterised by constructive challenge and mutual accountability, combined with a committed workforce, reinforce the council's shared vision for children and families.
66. Leaders have a comprehensive understanding of performance. The self-evaluation is open, reflective and closely aligned with inspection findings. When inspectors identified some weaknesses in threshold application at the front door, leaders and managers were not initially sighted on the issue. However, senior leaders acted swiftly to review decisions and put in measures to strengthen oversight to ensure more robust and effective safeguarding practice.
67. Corporate parenting is a significant strength. There is a genuine sense that 'these are our children', shared across the council and its partners. Care experience is recognised as a protected characteristic. The corporate parenting board provides effective oversight, with children's voices central to its work. The ambitious corporate parenting strategy reflects a strong understanding of children's experiences and drives improvement.
68. Children's voices are central to decision-making and they have influenced key decisions and service design. Their participation is a hallmark of practice in Wigan.
69. The council is committed to continuous improvement and has embedded a strong learning culture. Staff benefit from accessible, high-quality training aligned with Wigan's practice model, and the impact is evident in the quality of practice.
70. The performance framework is well established, providing leaders with detailed oversight of practice, capacity and outcomes. Mostly, managers use live

dashboards effectively to monitor performance, ensure compliance and support improvement. Leaders use data strategically to provide insight and identify emerging trends, understand local needs and allocate resources to where they will have the greatest impact.

71. Quality assurance is comprehensive and well embedded. Reflective audits, moderation and feedback from children and families inform learning and development. Findings from peer reviews, thematic audits and external scrutiny are used constructively to improve practice.
72. The workforce development strategy is comprehensive, including 'grow your own' initiatives, apprenticeships, ASYE and second-year programmes, and leadership development. Most frontline posts are filled by permanent social workers, with long-standing agency staff providing stability where needed. Staff recognition, including awards from children and families, supports retention, while early help staff and practitioners other than social workers are well supported, enhancing capacity and responsiveness.
73. Social workers are supported through strong management oversight and receive reflective supervision which helps them to identify and address risk. Supervision is clearly evidenced in case records, ensuring child-focused and well-informed decision-making.
74. Social workers are highly positive about working in Wigan and value being part of the 'Wigan way'. Leaders have established a culture that combines high expectations with kindness and inclusion. Staff feel valued and supported, and high-quality personal supervision promotes reflection and professional growth.

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