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Dear Elizabeth

### **Focused visit to Wirral children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wirral children's services on 21 and 22 January 2026. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Parveen Hussain and Lisa Summers.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the front door including contacts, referrals and assessments. Inspectors also considered decisions in relation to homeless 16–17-year-olds, and children living in private fostering arrangements.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

### **Headline findings**

The integrated front door (IFD) continues to respond swiftly and effectively to contacts regarding vulnerable children. Detailed multi-agency checks, daily management meetings, and timely managerial oversight of contacts and referrals support clear and proportionate decision-making.

Strategy discussions are well attended with effective information-sharing, which contributes to proportionate decisions and leads to actions that enhance children's safety. However, for some children, there are delays in convening strategy discussions and initial child protection conferences. These delays, coupled with gaps in safety planning, mean that children remain in situations of unassessed risk for longer than necessary.

The quality and timeliness of assessments and associated manager oversight is inconsistent. While some assessments are child-centred, analytical and grounded in relational practice, others are over-optimistic, relying too heavily on parental self-reporting.

Since the last inspection in 2023, senior leaders have responded to previous shortfalls by raising the profile and practice for children living in private fostering arrangements and have strengthened joint processes for 16–17-year-olds who present as homeless. Workforce stability has strengthened.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?<sup>1</sup>**

- The timeliness of strategy discussions and initial child protection conferences and associated safety planning. (enabler 2, national framework)
- The quality and timeliness of children’s assessments including manager oversight. (enabler 3, national framework)
- The quality of auditing practice within the quality assurance framework. (enabler 2, national framework)

### **Main findings**

Children in Wirral receive a swift and effective response when concerns are raised at the IFD. Managers review all contacts promptly and offer clear, directive guidance that informs next steps. Detailed contacts consistently identify the level of support that families require. Social workers engage parents appropriately to secure their consent, supporting transparency and partnership working from the outset.

Multi-agency checks are thorough enabling well-informed decisions. If delays in completing checks occur, managers record a clear rationale, demonstrating oversight and decision-making. Recommendations for next steps are grounded in children’s daily lived experiences and support proportionate and child-focused responses.

Social workers in the IFD make effective use of children’s histories and chronologies to understand their experiences and apply thresholds consistently. Daily management meetings provide a robust and well-established forum for sharing multi-agency information and agreeing threshold decisions. There is a clear management rationale indicating next steps, supported by a strong understanding of risk, which strengthens decision-making. Timely and coordinated responses further contribute to the overall effectiveness of front-door practice.

The emergency duty team provides a swift and robust response when children require support and protection outside of normal working hours. Timely strategy discussions and the effective utilisation of partner agencies to share information ensure that children’s immediate safety is prioritised and secured.

Significant variability in the timeliness of strategy discussions results in avoidable delays for some children when risk is not judged to be imminent. This means that risks remain unassessed and unaddressed for longer than necessary. Despite this,

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

strategy discussions do lead to strong partner contributions, enabling a shared understanding and ownership of risk. Decisions to progress to section 47 enquiries are appropriate and informed by multi-agency contributions.

The quality and timeliness of children's assessments are variable. Stronger assessments are timely and sensitively written using caring, child-friendly language. In these assessments, relational social work practice is supported by effective use of family group conferences and other social work tools, helping practitioners to facilitate meaningful discussions with partners and families. This leads to effective contributions from relevant partners, and more holistic assessments. Assessments demonstrate thoughtful analysis with clear next steps and strong managerial oversight.

In weaker assessments, children's needs are not always identified or met at the earliest opportunity. Children's histories are not used consistently to build a full understanding of their lived experiences, and the views of wider family members, including fathers, are not always explored. There is a heavy reliance on parental self-reporting, sometimes leading to over-optimism and missed opportunities to engage families and use services at an earlier stage. This results in repeated referrals due to recurrent concerns and cycles of assessment, which can sometimes create delay and uncertainty for children.

Management oversight is similarly inconsistent. While some assessments benefit from clear, detailed managerial rationale that strengthens decision-making, others contain only brief repetitions of the social worker's analysis, adding little value. Managers' built-in reviews are not used consistently to prevent drift, and some children experience delays progressing to initial child protection conference.

Although children are seen promptly by their social workers, safety planning is not consistently recorded or shared with families, leaving it unclear how risk is managed during ongoing enquiries. In stronger examples, safety planning is implemented through a shared multi-agency approach, with police, schools and other partners contributing to clear, practical actions that help to keep children safe.

Increased awareness-raising across the partnership and earlier and more proactive identification of children living in private fostering arrangements have strengthened practice. This has led to improved and focused assessments based on children's individual experiences. Regular monitoring and oversight from a dedicated lead has raised the profile of private fostering and is contributing to more consistent practice. Leaders have implemented plans to strengthen the completion of police checks and to support the continued improvement in safeguarding these children.

Leaders have taken appropriate action to strengthen the response to children aged 16–17 who present as homeless. Children now receive a timelier and more coordinated response through joint assessments, completed alongside dedicated housing colleagues. These assessments explore children's vulnerabilities and their need for accommodation and support. Children are informed about their rights and

entitlements, including the option of becoming looked after, supporting them to make decisions about their care. Improved scrutiny around decision-making is helping leaders to ensure that practice and consideration of children's needs remain consistent.

Workforce stability is strong. Social workers feel well supported by their managers and within their teams, contributing to a stable and positive working environment. Caseloads are variable, with some being too high, although most workers describe their workloads as manageable.

Wirral is a pathfinder local authority as part of the Families First for Children programme. As part of this, the children's social care teams have recently been reorganised with the aim of reducing changes of social worker and transition points for children. These social work teams now align more closely with co-located family help teams, reinforcing the Wirral relational model of practice with families.

The local authority has refreshed its quality assurance framework and is committed to completing a high level of audits via their practice improvement team. However, many audits lack sufficient evaluation or analysis to draw meaningful conclusions about practice quality, limiting their impact. Stronger audits are collaborative, targeted and accurately identify deficits, providing a clearer basis for learning and improvement. Nonetheless, the variable and inconsistent quality of auditing practice does not support leaders to have a clear and accurate line of sight into practice.

Senior leaders are appropriately sighted on the progress needed and are committed and dedicated to improving outcomes for children. They recognise that further work is needed to strengthen practice at the front door and have undertaken to refresh their current improvement plan to cover all areas of practice requiring improvement. Where capacity issues are affecting police attendance at strategy discussions, senior leaders are taking appropriate steps to address this with partners to improve timeliness and strengthen multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Parveen Hussain  
**His Majesty's Inspector**