

# Inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

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**Reporting inspector** Ralph Trevelyan-Butler

**Age group:** All

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# Contents

<b>About this inspection</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The inspection judgements and what they mean</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Service information</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Safeguarding services</b>	<b>6</b>
Overall effectiveness	6
Areas for improvement	8
<b>Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people</b>	<b>9</b>
Children and young people are safe and feel safe	9
Quality of provision	11
The contribution of health agencies to keeping children and young people safe	13
Ambition and prioritisation	15
Leadership and management	16
Performance management and quality assurance	17
Partnership working	18
<b>Services for looked after children</b>	<b>20</b>
Overall effectiveness	20
Capacity for improvement	20
<b>How good are outcomes for looked after children and care leavers?</b>	<b>22</b>
Being healthy	22
Staying safe	22
Enjoying and achieving	24
Making a positive contribution, including user engagement	26
Economic well-being	27
Quality of provision	28
Ambition and prioritisation	30
Leadership and management	31
Performance management and quality assurance	32
<b>Record of main findings:</b>	<b>33</b>

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## About this inspection

1. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services in the local area towards ensuring that children and young people are properly safeguarded and to determine the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. The inspection team consisted of three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), one HMI shadowing the inspection and one inspector from the Care Quality Commission. The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004.
2. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:
  - discussions with children and young people receiving services, front line managers, senior officers including the interim Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, elected members and a range of community representatives
  - analysing and evaluating reports from a variety of sources including a review of the Children and Young People's Plan, performance data, information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day care provision and the evaluation of a serious case review undertaken by Ofsted in accordance with '*Working Together To Safeguard Children*', 2010
  - a structured review of 20 case files for children and young people with a range of need and an analysis of key documents from a further 29 cases selected by inspectors. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision making undertaken
  - the outcomes of the most recent annual unannounced inspection of local authority contact, referral and assessment arrangements undertaken in July 2010
  - interviews and focus groups with front line health professionals, managers and senior staff from NHS Wirral and health provider trusts.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

3. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding (Grade 1)	A service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good (Grade 2)	A service that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate (Grade 3)	A service that only meets minimum requirements
Inadequate (Grade 4)	A service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Service information

4. Wirral is a very distinct area: a peninsula covering 60 square miles between the Mersey and Dee estuaries. Almost two-thirds of the population live within the urban area to the east of the M53 motorway, the largest towns within this being Birkenhead and Wallasey, with also several smaller dormitory towns situated in the countryside or along the coastline. It is well served by the motorway network, and is connected via Merseyrail to mainline rail routes leaving Liverpool and Chester. The birth rate had been falling for some time, although there has been a slight upturn since 2006. The proportion of residents from minority ethnic groups is small, and consists mainly of Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi, African-Caribbean and Polish populations with the Chinese and Bangladeshi communities the largest of these. The ruling political administration is formed from a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition, which delivers all the local authority services as a metropolitan borough.
5. The range of socio-economic circumstances in Wirral is huge. Some of the coastal areas on Liverpool Bay and the Dee are very prosperous. However, the Birkenhead conurbation, which was once a centre for the shipbuilding industry, contains some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England. This means that in Wirral the proportion of children living in low income households ranges from 1.2% in some areas to 86.4% in others. Overall, disadvantage predominates and the unemployment rate in Wirral is above the national average. The borough as a whole was ranked as the eighth worst out of the 354 English districts for employment-based deprivation in 2007.
6. Wirral Children's Trust Strategic Partnership is comprised of all organisations who work with children, young people and families in Wirral. It is led by the Wirral Children's Trust Board, which has representatives

from a range of agencies including the borough council, NHS Wirral, Wirral University Teaching Hospital Foundation Trust, Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Trust, Merseyside Police, Merseyside Fire and Rescue, a range of school representatives including governors, a further education representative, Merseyside Probation Service, Jobcentre Plus and representation from voluntary and community bodies. There are multi-agency service groupings such as the Drug and Alcohol Team and agencies focussed on youth offending.

7. There are three local authority children's homes and 303 foster homes. Residential and foster home placements are commissioned from registered and approved independent providers. At the time of the inspection there were 660 children and young people looked after by the council.
8. Community-based social care services are provided in four districts, each with assessment and care management teams. Services for children with additional needs are supported by 11 local area teams, each covering a political area forum. One area team has been co-located as part of a pilot and the remaining teams are due to be co-located later in 2011. There is a borough wide Central Advice and Duty Team and an out of hours child and adult duty team.
9. There are three maintained nursery schools, 91 maintained primary schools, 22 maintained secondary schools, 11 maintained special schools, one pupil referral unit and a hospital school. The arrangement of secondary schools and colleges is diverse. There are grammar schools and all-ability comprehensive schools. Four secondary schools are Catholic in ethos, two of which are single sex grammar schools. Within the maintained provision are an 11–16 academy and an all-age academy (3–18) for girls. Half of the secondary schools are single sex, and 17, including some high schools, have a sixth form. There is a sixth form college and a general further education college.
10. The Wirral 14–19 strategic partnership is the key forum for driving forward 14–19 reform and developments. Membership of the strategic partnership includes representation of third sector representation, Greater Merseyside Connexions partnership, training providers, further education colleges, sixth form colleges, schools, the local authority and the faith sector. Apprenticeships are delivered by a wide range of private training providers and Wirral Metropolitan College. Post-16 foundation learning in the borough is currently delivered by a core of five private training providers, including Scientiam Ltd, Morthyng Vocational College, The Vocational College, Shaw Trust and Rocket Training. Substantial foundation learning provision in the borough is also provided by Wirral Metropolitan College. Provision of Community and Adult Learning and wider family learning is provided by the local authority, schools and Wirral Metropolitan College.

11. Within Wirral, the commissioning and planning of national health services and primary care is undertaken by NHS Wirral. Universal children's services including health visiting are delivered by the provider arm of the trust. Wirral University Teaching Hospital Foundation Trust provides all acute services at Arrowe Park Hospital. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are provided by Cheshire and Wirral Partnership Foundation NHS Trust through commissioning contracts with NHS Wirral.

## Safeguarding services

### Overall effectiveness

**Grade 2 (good)**

12. The overall effectiveness of safeguarding services is good. Statutory requirements in relation to safeguarding are met. The council and its partners are able to demonstrate improvements in service provision through good use of findings from inspections and audits and from user feedback. Good quality assurance processes are embedded and support continual improvement of services provided jointly and by individual agencies. Leadership at all levels across the partnership is active, visible and effective in improving services and is based on a strong commitment to safeguard the most vulnerable young people in Wirral. Strong political commitment across all parties ensures the prioritisation of services to protect children and provides stability in long term planning. Good change management is achieved through careful planning for continuity at a senior level. Risks including those posed by budget reduction are known and well managed.
13. Representation at a strategic level on the Wirral Children's Trust Board is a strength, as is the commitment from all partners to active participation. The extensive range of members includes very effective representation from the voluntary sector, community groups and commissioned services. Strong engagement of the education sector, including school governors, maintains continued involvement of schools and colleges as the control of the local authority is reduced through the creation of academies. The Wirral Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB) is effective and the lines of accountability between the WSCB and the trust board are clearly defined and understood. The outstanding multi-agency commitment to service development is the basis for the development of a programme to co-locate staff in area teams. Following a successful pilot scheme there are firm plans to establish the remaining 'virtual teams' in 2011. This development is supported well through the work of the children's centres, particularly in the most disadvantaged communities.
14. Workforce planning to develop managerial and professional expertise is outstanding. The strategy outlined in the children and young people's department plan ensures there is a healthy culture of investment in staff development. The extensive MBA programme promotes the skills of senior managers and there are excellent opportunities for all staff to develop their practice and managerial skills. Staff view this very positively and state that this, along with clear managerial support and direction, is why they applied to and have remained working for the council.
15. Clear thresholds established by the WSCB are understood by all agencies. Compliance is monitored through regular audits and workers in all agencies use the escalation process to challenge decisions they consider

inappropriate. As a result there are fewer and more appropriate referrals to children's services, improving the capacity of the borough wide central advice and duty team to deal with contacts. The integrated working guidance summary is clear and is of very good quality, and the guide to completing the common assessment framework (CAF) is excellent. This demonstrates strong leadership by the safeguarding board and embodies safeguarding as the responsibility of all workers and agencies.

16. The central advice and duty team is effective in providing a prompt and appropriate initial response to all contacts for social care. The work is actively reviewed by the team on a weekly basis to monitor and improve the service to children and families. Good links with the out of hours team ensure a prompt response and both teams make good use of the electronic recording system (ICS). However other teams report that the system does not support good practice and is slow to use, especially alongside the requirement to maintain duplicate paper files. There is evidence of improving practice in initial and core assessments, although these need to consistently reflect the child's views and wishes. Direct work with children and families is judged as adequate or better. There are effective arrangements in place to monitor performance in terms of the quality of work and timescales. The council accepts there is more to be done to ensure the needs of children and families from minority ethnic communities are fully taken account of and recorded in assessments, plans and reviews.
17. Users are involved and consulted in service review and design. The Wirral Children in Care Council is consulted on new plans and schemes through presentations at their meetings and through representation as a lay person on the WSCB. Parents have been actively engaged in decisions on how to use the 'Aiming High' funding to develop short breaks for young people with disabilities. The local authority engaged parents very well in the analysis of need and service planning to develop creative schemes to meet the needs of young people including those with more complex needs. Parental involvement included the drawing up of specifications and the tendering process.

## Capacity for improvement

## Grade 2 (good)

18. The capacity for improvement is good. The local authority and its partners have clearly identified their joint priorities to deliver and sustain improved outcomes for children. They have a clear and shared understanding of the needs of the most vulnerable children and families. The local authority demonstrates a strong commitment to service improvement. An additional investment of £690,000 to children's services was made in 2009 in recognition of the need to improve management and social work capacity.
19. Succession planning in children's services to support continual improvement is very good. An interim Director of Children's Services was

appointed in November 2010. The quality of leadership provided by the interim director is excellent, and the internal appointment has ensured a seamless transition. The strong commitment to funding children's services by politicians and senior managers has minimised the impact of current spending cuts on front line social care services. Where savings have been made, the challenging process of reducing staff required through budget savings has been handled sensitively by the interim Director of Children's Services and senior managers.

20. There is a good focus on action required following the unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements undertaken in July 2010. The action plan deals appropriately with all four areas for development, with clear timescales for completion and close monitoring of implementation. There is a very good cross agency focus on learning the lessons from serious case reviews, with good evidence of a track record of improving outcomes. There is evidence of progress and some good quality recording and direct work with children. However in some instances seen by inspectors the quality of recording and direct work is only of an adequate standard.

### **Areas for improvement**

21. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

#### **Within three months:**

- Ensure the records of assessments include the risk and protective factors.

#### **Within six months:**

- Keep under review the capacity of the current electronic recording arrangements to ensure that it is fit for purpose for social workers and managers as well as producing documents that are user friendly for children and their families.
- Ensure all records of assessments, plans and reviews reflect a focus on the child's views and wishes and the cultural and identity needs of children and their families.

## Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people

### Children and young people are safe and feel safe

**Grade 2 (good)**

22. The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe and feel safe is good. The scrutiny of children's social care files randomly selected for this inspection and the previous unannounced inspection provides evidence that appropriate action is taken to respond to risks by suitably qualified and experienced social workers. In cases analysed by inspectors children had been appropriately safeguarded. Managerial oversight of these cases is consistently well evidenced and ensures that effective and timely intervention is taking place. Ofsted inspections of schools, residential settings and colleges in the local authority show that arrangements for keeping children and young people safe are almost always good
23. The leadership and challenge to partners shown by the Children's Trust Board and the WSCB are strong, and contribute to the safeguarding of children. The local authority conducts an annual "Feel Safe" survey of all young people and the latest results show that the large majority feel safe. Any concerns raised such as fear of being alone or of bullies are taken seriously and followed through by staff in partnership with schools. A survey of the views of children and young people, conducted as part of this inspection, found that children felt safe and had been advised well about strategies for keeping safe. Very few children expressed concern about bullying. Generally children and young people were clear that anti-bullying strategies in schools are effective in reducing the incidence of bullying. They told the inspectors that they learn about a range of safety, health and wellbeing issues through the work of different agencies, such as the police and health. Internet and mobile phone safety are given a strong focus in schools and support young people's understanding of the potential dangers in social networking. Children and young people on school councils demonstrated excellent understanding of tolerance and equality issues.
24. The management of allegations is overseen by the local authority designated officer (LADO) and scrutinised by the safeguarding board to ensure high standards of safeguarding practice. The role of the LADO is clearly defined in accordance with statutory guidance and the post holder has established effective links with other agencies. The partnership has a clear understanding of the difference between the LADO function and disciplinary and criminal processes. Referrals in 2010 increased significantly on rates recorded in 2009, demonstrating that awareness has been raised. Allegations are managed appropriately, leading to improved levels of safety for children and young people. The management of

complaints made by children against staff is understood well by the council and its partners on the WSCB.

25. Early intervention services are very good and effectively identify and take account of the needs of families and children who require support. The model of practice developed in the co-located team is outstanding and integrated working is well embedded. The Aiming High programme has developed a wide range of services, with good quality safeguarding practice, to ensure children are safe. As a result, families have access to an increased number and range of short break services.
26. Arrangements in place for responding to children and young people missing from education, home and care are good. All children who go missing are debriefed through a service commissioned from Barnardo's. The police and other agencies have a good understanding of the needs of these children and intervene well in related issues that may need to be considered, for example, to support young people who are missing and at risk of being sexually exploited.
27. The contribution of multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) to keeping children safe is good with excellent attendance from a range of agencies. Commitment from the police is very good. They have a strong focus on early identification of offenders who present a potential threat to children and families and act to reduce the risk. There are regular meetings involving the police and senior managers to review information on missing children and families. The partnership has a specific framework in place to support young people who are missing and at risk of being sexually exploited.
28. The participation of children and parents in case conferences is good, as is the access to advocacy support. Managerial oversight of cases is consistently well evidenced, and ensures that effective and timely intervention takes place when children and young people are thought to be at risk of harm. The children and young people who met with inspectors reported that they were fully involved in reviews and planning meetings. However, the scrutiny of completed common assessment records shows that children's views are at times missing or too cursory. The equality and diversity needs of families were given consideration in most of the case files seen. However there were some instances in which issues of ethnic background and culture were not considered sufficiently. Overall parents and carers state that their diverse needs are recognised and taken into account.
29. Robust policies and processes ensure full compliance with safer recruitment guidance. The inspection of personnel records and feedback from front-line staff demonstrate that there is a rigorous tracking and reviewing system within children's social care services to ensure that staff who work with children and young people are appropriately vetted. Staff

files are adequate overall although information is not always easily accessible in one place to provide a clear audit trail. The shortfalls have been recognised and an electronic system is being introduced. Contracting arrangements by health partners to safeguard children are robust.

30. Partnership arrangements work very well to safeguard children and identify needs at an early stage. The family intervention project is effective in supporting hard to reach families and promoting positive outcomes, including reducing the need for young people to become accommodated. The project is well regarded by service users, who find their contact with the team positive and helpful. Family centres are used well to inform child protection and care proceedings. They undertake parenting assessments, and supervise contact in a child-centred environment.

## Quality of provision

## Grade 2 (good)

31. The quality of provision is good. Early intervention services are very good. The model of practice adopted by the initial pilot to develop the co-location of all teams is outstanding. The Rockferry area team has established strong inter agency working at a local ward level. The model supports the team around the child and CAF activity very well, enhanced by the role of the dedicated area social worker. There is evidence of cases being appropriately escalated to and de-escalated from social care intervention. This ensures agencies are appropriately engaged to provide varying levels of support to children and families based on their individual needs.
32. The team around the child and the CAF processes are well embedded across Wirral. The lead professional role is assumed by a range of partners such as teachers and health professionals. The continuum of need approach to threshold management is well established and ensures that the appropriate level of response for children and young people is identified. Practitioners across all agencies share a common understanding of thresholds of need and eligibility for both preventative and protective services. Good examples were seen by inspectors where support for children and their families was timely and led to improved outcomes.
33. The Central Advice and Duty team within the children's social care service offers a good level of responsiveness to all initial contacts. These are dealt with effectively and in a timely manner, with a good standard of management oversight and decision making. A particular strength is the explicit rationale for decision making noted on all cases within the team. Services to support preventative work with young people are of good quality or better. There is a range of imaginatively commissioned services such as the early intervention project for children and young people at risk of offending. All key youth support services managed by the local

authority are co-located, ensuring greater opportunities for dialogue and targeted provision of services to those in most need.

34. The disabled children's team offers a comprehensive and responsive service to children and their families. The quality of response to crisis situations via their family support team is good. The response service provides bereavement counselling for children.
35. All child protection cases are allocated to social workers and the timeliness of completion of initial and core assessments is improving. Recent data shows 70% of initial assessments are completed within timescale and the council's own un-validated data records an improvement in the timeliness of core assessments in spite of a rise in volume. The out of hours emergency duty team has a range of systems, partnership arrangements and resources in place to deal with requests for out of hours services and intervention. The team has good 24 hour access to legal advice to support the quality of decision making.
36. Child protection investigations are comprehensive and of good quality. They are completed by suitably qualified and experienced social workers, within timescales that have the welfare of the child at the centre. The disabled children's team undertakes child protection investigations that are of good quality and consistent with practice in district teams. Assessments effectively safeguard children and young people and the quality of analysis is at least adequate and good in some cases. However risk and protective factors are not always made explicit within assessment reports.
37. The involvement of children and families in assessment processes is good and is promoted by a number of initiatives including family group conferences, advocacy services and interpreters. The use of the CAF is well embedded within education and health services. The multi-agency team around the child processes are well established and in cases inspected the quality of meetings and their recording was of good quality.
38. The timeliness of reviews and planning meetings is good and monitored by the WSCB. However the quality of planning for children is variable. Inspectors saw examples of very good practice in planning. However in some cases seen by inspectors of chronic neglect insufficient regard had been taken of significant historical factors, leading to a delay before appropriate planning and intervention. The council's own quality assurance systems had identified this concern prior to the inspection and subsequent actions on the cases ensured safeguarding concerns had been recognised and acted on.
39. Case recording is up to date and provides an adequate account of case activity. Management oversight is evident in case records and actions to be taken are appropriately recorded. Staff report they are well supported in case planning processes by the legal gate-keeping panel. It is a

strength that the local authority has acted to increase the capacity of the legal team to meet the growing demand.

40. Families report that they are aware of how they will be supported to achieve the aims of child protection plans and what they have to achieve to fulfil the plan. It is clear from case files and from service users that children in need and their families are informed and involved in the planning and provision of services to meet their needs.
41. Child protection reviews are held within statutory timescales and there is a robust quality assurance system that ensures high standards of practice and the progress of plans. Overall, case planning, reviews and recording are good. Children are visited regularly and in most cases the purpose and intended outcome of particular visits are clearly recorded. Child protection plans are sufficiently focussed and in most cases include achievable and measurable outcomes. Agency reports presented to initial child protection conferences are generally of good quality.

### **The contribution of health agencies to keeping children and young people safe** **Grade 1 (outstanding)**

42. The contribution of health agencies to joint commissioning is outstanding. There is a strong and effective joint commissioning framework in place for health, supported by a sustained and committed investment from both Wirral Primary Care Trust and the council. As a result there has been improved access to CAMHS across the borough. The commissioning lead for children and families maintains a strong focus on targeted service delivery. The well established joint funding arrangements with the council provide the framework to deliver the key priorities agreed in the Wirral Children and Young Peoples Plan, for example, to increase resources in the children's disability service.
43. Performance of service delivery by provider organisations is robustly monitored. This is against comprehensive service specifications, quality schedules and the priorities agreed within both the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and the Wirral Children and Young Peoples Plan. There is significant health representation at the WSCB and its sub groups from the primary care trust, the acute trust and the CAMHS provider trust. There is good strategic representation on the Wirral Children's Trust Board.
44. There is strong and effective leadership across the designated and named lead professionals. Particularly good progress has been achieved with training for GPs across all practices, supported by an enthusiastic named GP. A flagging code has been devised to alert staff on any child or young person with child protection or safeguarding issues. This has been implemented by a number of practices across the borough. There is a good focus on engaging dentists with increasing numbers attending

safeguarding training. Dentists interviewed demonstrated a good understanding of child protection and safeguarding issues.

45. Partnership work with other key agencies is outstanding. All healthcare professionals interviewed referred to excellent partnership working in place by all health agencies, as well as schools and colleges, social care and housing and voluntary agencies. The team around the child framework is used very successfully to bring all partner agencies together to deliver earlier interventions and targeted work with children and their families.
46. Health professionals contribute well to child protection conferences and core group meetings either by attending or submitting reports. There is improved access and attendance at safeguarding training, with more robust monitoring of implemented training. Staff from across the health agencies are attending the NSPCC safeguarding supervision training. They are now able to act as supervisors to facilitate increased access to supervision.
47. There is outstanding targeted work in children's centres with the most vulnerable children and families. Excellent multi-agency programmes have been implemented involving health visitors, speech and language therapy, social care, education and housing, which have seen increased engagement with families and improving outcomes. Parents interviewed expressed a high level of satisfaction with services across health. Some had experienced a delay in accessing services initially, reported to be due to lack of communication and inconsistency of social workers, but once receiving services, they were very satisfied.
48. A recent reconfiguration of health visitors into geographic locations has been implemented. This enabling improved targeting of resources on early intervention with most vulnerable families. The universal health programme is being delivered with a risk based, skill mix approach. Packages of care, once agreed, are faxed through to the relevant GP and social workers, so that if any family miss appointments the GP is fully aware of the agreed care pathway and the family is contacted sooner. There is very good liaison with the social workers in area teams, which has improved communication; health visitors attend regular meetings. Family nurse partnership midwives are well established and effective prioritisation ensures they have a manageable case load of between 20 and 25 of the most vulnerable families. This enables more targeted interventions, particularly for young mothers.
49. School nurses report much improved multi-agency working, particularly with CAMHS. There is much better communication with social care and school nurses feel better informed about thresholds when making referrals. Team around the child is seen as key to expedite interventions with children and young people from all key agencies.

50. The post of primary mental health worker has recently been introduced to deliver earlier interventions to more vulnerable children and young people, and create a more comprehensive CAMHS across the borough. This is already having a positive effect in improving both the appropriateness of referrals into the service and the timeliness of response. There is a well established Tier 3 service across the borough. Waiting times for the service reflect the national average of around six to eight weeks. Fast track access to CAMHS is available for looked after children, of around one week and other urgent referrals are assessed according to individual need.
51. Emergency and unplanned care is delivered in a dedicated children's emergency department within the Acute Trust. There is an excellent system in place for tracking children and young people, overseen by the paediatric liaison manager who screens all attendances within the department and the adjacent out of hour's emergency centre. Health visitors, social workers and school nurses are alerted to all safeguarding issues including repeat attendees and those who do not attend follow up children's out patient's clinics.

## **Ambition and prioritisation**

## **Grade 1 (outstanding)**

52. Ambition and prioritisation is outstanding. There is an outstanding level of commitment to improving services for children and young people in Wirral shared by the leader, Lead Member, Interim Chief Executive and the interim Director of Children's Services. The commitment is shared by partner agencies at a very senior level. There is a political consensus that services to children, young people and their families are a priority that must be appropriately resourced.
53. Partners on the well established Wirral Children's Trust Board have a clear vision set out in the Children and Young People's Plan. There is a good track record of target setting and delivering improvements to safeguarding services for children. This is demonstrated in the remodelling of the workforce and co-location of staff to provide good quality early intervention services. The commitment of all agencies is exemplified in the decision to retain the Wirral Children's Trust Board, even though this is no longer a statutory requirement.
54. Wirral Council's commitment to developing its children's workforce management group is outstanding. The consequence is that service development is planned and implemented with contemporary expertise at its core, positively effecting outcomes in the safeguarding of children and young people. The workforce is motivated and committed to improving safeguarding outcomes for children and young people.
55. Senior managers in children's social care offer outstanding support and share a clear vision with front line managers who in turn consider they are professionally valued and well engaged. Social workers consider that their views are appreciated and welcomed, and that there is a strong learning

culture. The investment in management capacity has enabled social workers to feel more confident and better supported in the challenging decisions that they make.

56. Issues local to Wirral, such as high levels of domestic abuse in particular areas, are identified and prioritised leading to very effective multi-agency working to improve safeguarding outcomes.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 1 (outstanding)**

57. Leadership and management are outstanding. The interim Director of Children's Services and senior managers know their services well. Areas requiring improvement are known, the risk is assessed, and appropriate action is taken. The excellent commitment to workforce development is not only reflected by the head of social care's work with the National Social Work Reform Board, but by the recent Director of Children's Services work with the Association of Directors of Children's Services as lead on workforce development. His appointment as Director of Adult Services in Wirral ensures continuity and has already improved cooperation with adult services with joint representation on the two safeguarding boards. Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council fully supports senior managers to complete the MBA programme with Chester University. Change in the council is driven by managers using the most contemporary methods and underpinned by an advanced level knowledge base. There are clear pathways for management training and development across all tiers of managers.
58. The good workforce development plan ensures that there are sufficient numbers of qualified and experienced staff. There is ongoing recruitment of social workers to minimise risks posed by staff turnover. There is a strong commitment to ensuring sufficient social work and management capacity through the use of experienced and committed agency workers who receive good support and incur no additional charge for participation in training. There is a good focus on tackling staff whose performance is not of an acceptable standard. Good systems are in place for managers to tackle poor performance and unjustified absences in a sensitive and yet effective manner.
59. Joint commissioning arrangements are effective and demonstrate good leadership that has resulted in a range of imaginative services that support the safeguarding of children and young people. There is good user engagement in the groups that determine how the Aiming High funding for children with disabilities is spent. Parents are represented on all groups and gave examples to inspectors of how services have been developed to meet the individual needs of children and young people and which ensure good value for money. They consider that their contribution is valued and listened to and 'you are treated as an equal'.

60. Financial resources are used effectively. The recent investment in children's social care has been used well to strengthen management capacity and oversight. This has led to improvements in the quality of assessment and decision making and the promotion of joint working. The good family group conferencing service has supported the return home of children placed outside of the borough, and made significant savings as a result. Resources have been used effectively to commission the young carers project. Good pre-commissioning activity and tendering processes ensured value for money and the project worked with 84 children and young people in 2010.
61. The views of children and young people have a direct impact on service development. The Children in Care Council is routinely involved in the review and planning of wider services other than those directly related to looked after children. The Lead Member and interim Director of Children's Services attend meetings when invited. A representative of the Children in Care Council is a member of the WSCB. Young people on the edge of care told inspectors that they are respected and fully included in the planning, implementation and evaluation of their programmes. There is a well established complaints and representation process that is valued and used by young people.
62. There has been excellent work to engage headteachers in multi-agency working to improve safeguarding and outcomes for all children and young people including the most vulnerable. The interim Director of Children's Services worked very closely with schools to re-model the service in his former role. All headteachers spoken to state that they have shaped and influenced the development of area teams, and there is very good communication with the representatives on the WSCB. They consider that the management of change has been led very well, and have confidence in the leadership of the Department.

## **Performance management and quality assurance**

### **Grade 2 (good)**

63. Performance management and quality assurance are good. There are rigorous audit systems in place that are having a direct impact on improving the quality of work. There are regular monthly audits by the quality assurance team, which consist of a detailed and clear analysis of casework. The summary reports for managers and staff incorporate the independent reviewing officers' quarterly returns on the quality of reviews and case conferences. Ownership by staff is gained through periodic audits led by the Head of Branch that include representation of managers and practitioners from a range of teams. The robustness of the local authority auditing of the case files randomly selected by the inspectors was good. The clear analysis includes criticism of the historic slowness to recognise the increasing risks to the children and shortfalls in assessments. Management information is contemporary, accessible and

relevant to the role of the service and there is a positive culture of challenge by peer managers. Managers' rationale for decision making is discussed and case planning amended where it is considered to be inappropriate. The council recognises that the quality and recording of supervision is an area for development identified at the unannounced inspection and have a robust action plan in place to deliver improvements.

64. The WSCB is robust in auditing the work of agencies and their compliance with action plans arising from serious case reviews. There is a good system in place for multi-agency auditing of CAFs and team around the child work. The group is chaired by the CAF coordinator with health, education, and the third sector as well as social care. It meets monthly to audit 30 cases. Impact is evidenced by the improved feedback from parents and children on the forms. The MAPPA board ensures performance is maintained in line with national guidelines and Key Performance Indicators and provides good quality accountability and transparency.
65. The information team in the local authority provide team managers with an accurate weekly analysis of activity ensuring managers know their business very well. The contact duty and assessment team has a weekly team meeting where data and thresholds are appraised, future activity is planned and thresholds are constantly reassessed. Health partners have strong and effective performance and quality frameworks in place. Monthly meetings are held with commissioners to monitor performance against clear contractual arrangements for safeguarding.

## **Partnership working**

## **Grade 1 (outstanding)**

66. Partnership working in Wirral is outstanding. Partner agencies work very closely together at a strategic level through the Wirral Children's Trust Board, which provides strong leadership at a high level to deliver the priorities in the Children and Young People's Plan. The engagement of the third sector at a strategic, operational and commissioning level is outstanding. This high level of cooperation is supporting the establishment of co-located teams to develop strong partnership working in service delivery and particularly early intervention and support to children and families.
67. There is highly effective partnership working in the WSCB to safeguard children and deliver high quality and accessible multi-agency training opportunities underpinned by a good workforce strategy. Attendance from different agencies is monitored and action taken to increase the participation of target groups. A high priority is given to learning the lessons from serious case reviews and includes regular reporting from all agencies and multi agency audits of whether there have been improvements to practice. Good partnership working was promoted through piloting a review of a serious incident using the Social Care

Institute for Excellence model. Staff were engaged well and found it to be a positive learning experience.

68. The frameworks developed to promote partnership working in service delivery are very good. The integrated working guidance is very well written and is a user friendly tool for frontline practitioners. The guide to completing the CAF is excellent. It demonstrates strong leadership by the safeguarding board and embodies safeguarding as the responsibility of all agencies. Information sharing protocols are in place and include the third sector.
69. There is a very good focus on reducing incidents of domestic violence. This is given a very high priority across the safeguarding partnership. The multi-agency risk assessment conference arrangements are strong. Prompt interventions facilitated by a specifically developed electronic information sharing database give all professionals instant information about activity and interventions undertaken across the partnership. The police make a very active contribution and engage schools through the confidential sharing of information about domestic violence.

## Services for looked after children

### Overall effectiveness

**Grade 2 (good)**

70. The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children is good. Statutory requirements are well met by the council and its partners and the majority of outcomes are good. There is strong leadership in the Corporate Parenting Group that promotes good outcomes and acts as an advocacy and challenge process. There is a shared commitment from key politicians and all political parties as well as key partners to improve outcomes for looked after children. The highly articulate representatives on the Children in Care Council are strongly engaged in service reviews, development and design. However the survey conducted for the inspection found that the Children in Care Council is not sufficiently known to all looked after children. Case files inspected were at least of a satisfactory quality with evidence of some good direct work. However the identity needs of children and young people were not consistently identified or met, and did not sufficiently tell the child's story
71. Good outcomes are achieved in looked after children's education through good prioritisation and strong partnership working. This is evidenced in the council's key strategic plans and in the high level of commitment and aspirations of managers and front-line staff in schools, the pupil referral unit and other alternative provision. However personal education plans are not of a consistently good quality. The engagement of health agencies to promote the health and well being of looked after children is good with prompt access to services such as CAMHS. The reducing number of children in out-of-borough placements is well managed and monitored. The local authority recognises that the engagement of looked after children in education, employment or training is low and has taken steps to improve performance in this area.

### Capacity for improvement

**Grade 2 (good)**

72. The capacity for improvement is good. The council has a consistent track record of sustained improvement in outcomes for looked after children and young people. The council and its partners have an accurate understanding of the strengths of the service, and the shortfalls are identified and acted upon. Partners have a clear vision and ambition, with agreed priorities to sustain improvement. There is a good strategy in place to develop both the quality and the capacity of foster carers including the jointly funded therapeutic fostering scheme. The local authority and its partners have invested in a good range of interventions to reduce the need for children to become looked after. However this has yet to be reflected in the numbers looked after.

73. Workforce planning to develop managerial and professional expertise is outstanding. The strategy outlined in the children and young people's department plan ensures there is a healthy culture of investment in staff. This contributes to improving the quality of direct work and planning as well as providing greater stability reducing the number of changes in social workers for young people. The excellent engagement of young people through the Children in Care Council ensures the review and planning of services takes account of young people's views and wishes. The involvement of Children in Care Council representatives in the training and interviewing of social care staff ensures practice is sensitive to their views and experiences.

## **Areas for improvement**

74. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Wirral, the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

### **Within three months:**

- Promote awareness among all looked after children of the opportunities presented by the Children in Care Council to get their views across.
- Ensure that children's files give a clear picture of their life story and the reasons that decisions were made as well as reflecting their individual identity.
- Improve further the effectiveness of strategies used to ensure that more young people complete their chosen course of study or training successfully post-16.
- Improve the consistency of the quality of personal education plans for the youngest children in care and the pathway plans for care leavers.

## How good are outcomes for looked after children and care leavers?

### Being healthy

**Grade 2 (good)**

75. Health outcomes for looked after children and care leavers are good. Direct work with looked after children and young people is accessible and of good quality. There is fast track access to services across health including joint funded CAMHS workers, speech and language therapy and sexual health services. Training has been provided to help foster carers support young people when discussing sexual health and wellbeing issues and to help signpost to appropriate services. A weekly health clinic, including well being and mental health, is provided in the care leaving team for young people.
76. The quality of health records examined is good. All records contained health care plans and there is good evidence of tracking young people who do not attend for health assessments and appointments. All files examined contained a good chronology of health events. Sharing of information across agencies is good, with looked after children review summaries included in health files.
77. The number of completed initial and review health assessments is reported to be 89%, and 87% of looked after children and young people have received the recommended immunisations, which is good compared to similar authorities. However there is no comprehensive performance management tracking system to verify these figures. A spreadsheet has been implemented to track the flow of looked after children both in and out of the borough. There is good communication from children's social care services with notifications, such as change of placement address, being received within two working days.
78. A high number of looked after children are placed by other councils in independent placements in Wirral. The commissioners plan to improve funding for the provision of healthcare for these children through a recharging mechanism. Monies will then be redirected into the looked after children health team to support safeguarding activities.

### Staying safe

**Grade 2 (good)**

79. Safeguarding arrangements for looked after children are good. The young people spoken to by the inspectors said they felt safe. Of the looked after children and young people who responded to the survey undertaken as part of the inspection, 94% reported that they feel very safe or fairly safe and 91% said that there was at least one person they could talk to if they felt unsafe. In total 77% found the advice that they got from adults about keeping safe was useful.

80. The council recognises that the relatively high number of looked after children placed with parents represents a potential risk. These placements are effectively scrutinised by senior managers to regularly review progress of the plans. This, together with accessible legal advice, ensures cases are promptly returned to the court where orders can be safely discharged or for action where placements are considered unsafe. The judgement for protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them to stay safe was good in the inspection of the local authority fostering service in 2008, and satisfactory in the inspection of the local authority adoption service in the same year. In the most recent inspections of the three local authority children's homes the judgement for protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them to stay safe was good or better. The development of a good range of multi-agency early support initiatives and improved screening by the central advice and duty team reduce the risk of children becoming looked after.
81. The stability of placements is improving both in terms of long term stability and a reduction in the number of changes of placement, resulting in young people feeling safer and more secure. Foster carers consider they have good access to training to improve their ability to meet young people's needs and reduce the risk of placement disruption. Foster carers report that there is better matching of placements and fewer requests for them to take placements which fall outside of their approved registration.
82. Good commissioning and monitoring arrangements promote the safeguarding of looked after children placed out of the borough. Almost 90% of placements are within 20 miles of the young person's family. Effective strategies and planning are in place to identify which looked after children can return home, with good use made of family support. Missing from care arrangements are effective and promote the safety of children and young people. Looked after children and foster carers receive training from the Wirral Looked After Children Education Service via the internet on bullying issues.
83. A sound and well established complaints procedure is supported by good links with the independent advocacy service and children's involvement officer, enabling young people to raise their concerns. The complaints service provides good support to children and young people who make complaints. This includes following up with them to ensure that they are satisfied with the outcome. Only half of the young people surveyed as part of the inspection knew how to make a complaint. The Children in Care Council has identified raising awareness about how to complain as one of its priority actions in 2011-12.
84. The advocates participate in the monthly young people's meetings in the children's homes. The availability of independent visitors is good, with no delays in appointments; this provides access to independent adults to share concerns or issues over safety.

**Enjoying and achieving****Grade 2 (good)**

85. The impact of local services on helping looked after children and young people enjoy their learning and achieve well in their education is good. High priority is given to improving educational outcomes for all looked after children. This is well articulated in the council's key strategic plans and reflected in the high level of commitment and aspirations of managers and front-line staff in schools, the pupil referral unit and other alternative provision. In the survey conducted as part of this inspection 96% of looked after children say they go to school at present, 87% feel that they are getting a good education and 73% feel that they always or usually get help with their education.
86. The virtual school, through its committed headteacher and staff, provides effective leadership across Wirral for the education of looked after children. The training for designated teachers has been successful and there is improved identification of gaps in learning. Support to improve literacy and numeracy has had a positive impact on outcomes. One to one tuition, tailored resources, mentoring and the good use of personal educational allowances to provide enrichment and other activities contribute to good learning in school.
87. The virtual school headteacher and the Wirral Looked After Children Education Service support schools well. They have in place robust systems to monitor the attainment and progress of looked after children from the Early Years Foundation Stage through to the final year of compulsory schooling. Senior officers have recognised the need to challenge outcomes beyond the statutory age of 16 so that young people are better prepared for further education or training.
88. Personal education plans (PEPs) are completed for most pupils and the completion rate stands at 85% at the time of this inspection. The virtual headteacher has identified the need to improve the completion of PEPs for the youngest children and to formally feedback to staff on their quality as this is currently inconsistent. The Children and Young People's Plan clearly identifies that more needs to be done to close the gap in attainment between looked after children and all other children in Wirral. In order to achieve this high numbers of looked after children are placed within Wirral, and they do not move schools if at all possible especially when studying for their GCSEs. Those educated out of borough usually have the highest levels of needs. Their progress and attendance at school are rigorously monitored. The headteachers of out of borough schools contacted during this inspection said that communication with Wirral officers and front line staff was 'superb'.
89. Over the past three years the proportion of looked after children with special educational needs has remained stable and in line with the national figure. Twenty five looked after children participated in the test of 11-

year-olds in 2010. Thirteen achieved Level 4 and above in English, (52%) and, in mathematics, fourteen children reached that level (56%). The target set for 2010 was met in mathematics and almost met in English. These results matched those of similar authorities and were above the national average for looked after children. Of the fifty looked after young people who took their GCSE in 2010, thirty-one were in mainstream schools, twenty were in special schools and three were in alternative provision. The proportion of young people who sat at least one GCSE exam was well above the England average, at 83% in 2009 and 84% in 2010. Results overall are above average for looked after children with 78% achieving at least one GCSE at grades A\* to G (nationally 72%), 55% achieving at least five GCSE at grades A\* to G (nationally 51%) and 29% achieving at least five GCSE A\* to C (nationally 26%). However, the proportion of looked after young people gaining five or more good GCSEs, including English and mathematics is low. Ten young people were placed out of borough at the time of the 2010 GCSE examination. Almost all had severe special educational needs and 60% got at least one GCSE. Overall, results for looked after children compare well with results for the same children nationally but they are still well below all children in Wirral. The local authority confirms that more work needs to be done close this gap.

90. No looked after child was permanently excluded between 2008 and 2010. A recent permanent exclusion took place of a young person who entered care in December 2010. Alternative educational arrangements are now in place. The number of looked after children who are excluded on a fixed-term basis is reducing and is close to the national average. The local authority and schools work very well together to avoid exclusion. Robust challenge and support to schools is helping them find effective solutions, for example the outstanding outreach work and provision at one of the primary special school offers tailored behaviour support packages.
91. School attendance is closely monitored and a range of well-planned strategies is in place to reduce persistent absenteeism. The gap between the attendance of looked after children and of all children in Wirral is closing. Latest data show that authorised absence rate for looked after children was 4.3%, similar to the national figure of 4.5%. Unauthorised absence was only 1%, better than the national figure of 1.7%. Overall absence was 5.3%, which is well below the national figure of 6.2%. The proportion of persistent absentees was only 3% against a national figure of 4.9%. The local authority conducts a thorough analysis of attendance by year group and phase. Looked after young people in Year 11 have improved their overall attendance from 86% in June 2009 to 90.6% in June 2010. There is a wide range of actions to promote good attendance including rewards, certificates, and monthly meetings of key personnel including the head of the education welfare service, clear guidance to children's homes staff and ensuring that the issue of attendance is highlighted in the training of foster carers.

92. Looked after children and care leavers have free access to a wide range of facilities through sport, leisure, drama programmes and other cultural activities. They have good access to the Duke of Edinburgh and Playing for Success programmes. The personal education allowance of £500 per person is used effectively to ensure that young people take part in exciting activities. Tranmere Rovers football club provided activities for ninety looked after young people between February 2010 and October 2010. Foster carers are very positive about the programme. A good range of after school activities is provided through extended schools and the virtual school. The "Step into Leisure" programme for eight to sixteen year olds is successful in ensuring that young people develop key skills. Officers are aware of some shortages of activities for children with a disability. They continue to improve access to activities through the Aiming High funding, such as better facilities in Barnstondale activity centre. Officers are currently developing ways of receiving feedback from foster carers and from looked after children who have a disability to maximise access to free leisure.

### **Making a positive contribution, including user engagement**

#### **Grade 2 (good)**

93. Arrangements to support children in making a positive contribution are good. The Children in Care Council and young people and care leavers who met with inspectors were very able to express their views confidently. Their views and experiences are being used to inform training for social workers and carers. Looked after young people are involved in leading training sessions for social workers at local universities to raise awareness of the lives of children in care.
94. The Children in Care Council influences the recruitment of staff through membership of selection panels. They have produced DVDs which are used in training for staff and carers and feel that this has had a positive impact in reducing the number of changes in social worker. Young people seen by inspectors said that they felt well supported by their social workers and carers and were able to express their views.
95. Looked after children are involved very well in influencing council policy and practice through membership of the Wirral Corporate Parenting Group, the WSCB and the fostering panel. Members of the Children in Care Council have been involved in the 'Be a pushy corporate parent' conference, raising awareness of what makes a difference for them. This has had a positive impact on practice such as how learning mentors for looked after children are deployed in schools.
96. The Children in Care Council has been effective through its consultation with young people over developing the pledge and achieving a change in the name to the Wirral promise, which is more meaningful to the young people. The Children in Care Council recently received over 200 responses

to a questionnaire and has used this information to identify key areas for future work. In an Ofsted survey as part of this inspection, 60% of looked after children and young people reported that they had not heard of the Children in Care Council.

97. Good engagement of the Youth Offending Service with looked after children, supported by greater integration, has led to improving outcomes. This is demonstrated in the use of the Restorative Justice Protocol framework to reduce the incidence of arrests, cautions and convictions. This has been reinforced by the training for all local children's home staff. There is good joint working between social care, housing, Connexions and the Youth Offending Service through the integrated resettlement team for children looked after returning from custody. As a result there has been a reduction in the number of recalls to custody and remands and an improvement in successful resettlements into the community.

### **Economic well-being**

### **Grade 3 (adequate)**

98. The contribution of local services to supporting looked after young people in achieving economic well-being and in preparation for adulthood is adequate. The Wirral Leaving Care Team, renamed the Pathways Team by the young people, is moving to new premises. Staff intend to use this opportunity to integrate their approach even more closely and develop a seamless provision of services for young people. Senior managers and front-line staff know the young people leaving care very well. A number of strategies and procedures are now in place to improve performance, but are yet to have a positive impact on outcomes. There are plans to improve the robustness of the virtual school in driving up the post-16 outcomes.
99. The care leavers who met with inspectors were very satisfied with the support they receive. They value having a personal advisor they know well and appreciate the help and advice available, for example to help them find a place to live or apply for a course to study. All said that they were optimistic about the future and had clear plans they were pursuing, for example completing their study in a sixth form or going on work experience. They knew where to go to get advice about matters such as health and financial support.
100. Local data show that fewer care leavers are in education, training or employment compared with other Merseyside authorities and nationally. At age 19, there are currently only nineteen out of sixty two care leavers who are in employment, education or training. Too many young people drop out of their chosen courses and there is more to do to pick up early signs of disengagement. Young people contribute to their pathway plans but overall plans are inconsistent in quality. Work is also hard to find and the low wages are often not sufficient for young people to live on. These issues are recognised and are being addressed. Action has been taken to broaden the range of opportunities through projects such as "Stay Wise"

and "Work Wise", specially targeted at 16 to 18 year old care leavers. The Wirral Apprentice scheme aims to stimulate additional apprenticeship opportunities by offering employers a wage subsidy. Connexions Personal Advisers provide good links with learning providers and support young people effectively. However the level and appropriateness of courses available is an issue. For example, foundation learning is needed as well as multi-entry points so that young people can start the course when relevant to them. The effectiveness of strategies used by schools as part of their careers guidance and by Connexions requires consolidation so that more young people successfully complete their chosen courses of study or training.

101. The numbers of care leavers whose education and training circumstances are unknown is small. Care leavers do well in the schools' sixth forms. In 2010, eight care leavers started in Year 12 and all completed the study year and achieved their qualification. Six started in Year 13 and four completed the study year and achieved their qualification. There is good support for care leavers returning from custodial placements, with reduced numbers of recalls and remands back to custody. Support for those who have learning difficulties or disabilities starts early and is also good, although transition to adult services is a worry for some young people. The Aim Higher programme and work with local universities have had a positive impact over a number of years in encouraging care leavers to apply for university places. At the time of this inspection, four care leavers were successfully pursuing degree courses. A "Superstars Aim High Residential" at the Liverpool Hope University was held in August 2010. The project targets GCSE students in care who have the potential to achieve highly. This programme is in its seventh year and has been successful in removing emotional and study skills barriers to encourage young people to continue to further education.
102. The local authority has worked effectively with partners to extend the range and number of housing options for care leavers. In 2010, over 90% of care leavers had a suitable place to live. There are between 180 and 200 units in Wirral meeting the good quality standards. A strategic review of all provision is currently being started. Bed and breakfast accommodation is not used. The "Stop Gap" project has been very successful in providing emergency accommodation. There is no reported shortage of specialist small units for children with a disability. Transition arrangements into independent living are good and the young people who met inspectors were positive about the quality of support they receive. The placement of unaccompanied asylum-seekers with families as they arrive is sensitive and enables them to adjust to their new lives.

## Quality of provision

**Grade 2 (good)**

103. The quality of provision is good. The council has a thorough understanding and awareness of the needs of Wirral's looked after

children. They have undertaken a thorough analysis as the basis of their detailed plan to ensure that a good range of placements is available. There is a good level of robust scrutiny by the independent placement panel and senior managers, which has resulted in a reduction in unplanned and emergency placements.

104. There is a clear and well researched strategy to develop services for looked after children. A clear focus on reducing agency and out of borough placements has resulted in positive outcomes, with 49 children and young people now in these placements, down from 85. The number of looked after children was 660 as at 2 February 2011. Of these, 478 are placed with foster carers, of which 303 are foster carers with the council's own service. There are 45 young people placed in residential schools, 17 in the borough and 28 outside. There is very good support available to looked after children based on the recognition of individual needs, and contributing to the improvement in stability in placements.
105. The jointly funded therapeutic fostering scheme together with direct access to a child psychotherapist and to a clinical psychologist provides a good service for young people with more complex needs. The commissioning strategy takes account of quality and all the independent children's homes in Wirral used by the council are judged good or outstanding in Ofsted inspection reports. Good commissioning and contract monitoring arrangements are in place, which increase choice in placement using established regional resources and contracting arrangements.
106. The fostering service was judged as good overall in July 2008. An ambitious recruitment strategy is in place to support the plans to increase numbers and choice of in-house foster carers and reduce the use of independent fostering agencies. Two of Wirral's three in-house children's homes were judged good and the third was adequate overall at the most recent Ofsted inspections. The council has acted promptly after consultation with users and there are radical plans to close the adequate respite home and invest in the remaining facility to develop a higher quality more user friendly short break environment.
107. The local authority has responded well to the inspection report on the adoption service which was judged satisfactory by Ofsted in 2008. The action plan has addressed the recommendations, and additional resourcing of the team ensures there is post adoption and special guardianship order support. Good preparation by social workers and carers of children for adoption and changes to their care plans is contributing to improving placement stability.
108. Case files inspected were at least of a satisfactory quality with some good examples of direct work in preparation for adoption or permanence, changes in placement and transition to adult services. Further good

practice included clear recording of when a child was seen alone. Good examples were seen of direct work with parents of looked after children placed at home. In some case files seen by inspectors the identity needs of children and young people were not consistently identified or met, and did not sufficiently tell the child's story. All children and young people's care plans are reassessed when a decision is made to consider permanency, placement with parents or discharge care orders which is good practice.

109. Good inter-agency working ensures there is good support in place if a looked after young person becomes pregnant. Health support includes the teenage pregnancy midwife, the domestic abuse advisor, the substance misuse midwife and the perinatal mental health midwife.
110. Reviews for looked after children are attended well by relevant partner agencies. Independent reviewing officers were able to demonstrate strategies to organise attendance in a way that supports young people to engage and participate fully in the process. Reviews are effective in monitoring and evaluating plans, although the views and wishes of young people are not always sufficiently recorded. The timeliness of reviews is satisfactory, with 94% being completed within timescales. This has fallen from 96% but still compares favourably with the national average. The council is aware of the delays in producing review minutes although recommendations are circulated promptly. The council has acted to increase the capacity in the reviewing team.
111. Parents and carers are actively involved in case planning and their views are taken into account. Care plans are satisfactory and some are good, detailed and comprehensive. However the format and templates on the computer system do not support ease of recording or accessibility to the reader. Case recording is generally up to date and all statutory visits are recorded with sufficient details and meet required time scales. However the case recording using ICS templates is difficult to follow and does not provide an easily accessible record for young people viewing their records.
112. Foster carers and parents seen by inspectors were aware of who their independent reviewing officer was. They valued the consistency they had experienced and the role of the independent reviewing officer in overseeing and maintaining the plan, especially around difficult contact issues. Most young people seen were aware of the purpose of their reviews but some did not feel involved in the choice of the venue such as at school, which they felt compromised their confidentiality.

## **Ambition and prioritisation**

## **Grade 1 (outstanding)**

113. There is exceptionally strong commitment politically to improving outcomes for looked after children as is reflected in services to safeguard children. The clear ambitions set out in the Children and Young People's Plan are implemented and monitored by the Children's Trust Board and

the Corporate Parenting Group. The Lead Member is particularly active in challenging services for instance the educational attainment of looked after children. Although this is better than the national average, she is still disappointed at the gap with other children. The Lead Member is a committed advocate for young people, familiarising herself with the range of services and challenging outcomes and practice. There is outstanding engagement of the looked after young people who are involved in the Children in Care Council. Strong partnership working with all agencies is improving all outcomes for looked after children. Weaknesses such as outcomes for those leaving care are recognised and responded to although this has yet to have sufficient impact. All looked after children are placed in the highest performing schools with good support which contributes to improving outcomes.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 1 (outstanding)**

114. Leadership and management of services for looked after children are outstanding. Services are well led by very capable senior managers. The managers are described by staff to be accessible and willing to hear views and ideas to improve practice and services. The strategic workforce plan supports improvements to quality, for example through requiring senior managers to undertake an MBA. This has resulted in robust reviews of services and imaginative and cost effective plans. The investment in staff development and very good access to training for all workers is developing a competent workforce committed to improving outcomes for young people. This is aiding improvement in the retention of staff, thereby providing greater continuity for young people and their families.
115. Partnerships with stakeholders, including the voluntary, community and faith sectors and providers of commissioned services, have led to significant improvements in service design and delivery outcomes. Multi-agency planning at the Children's Trust Board and the Corporate Parenting Group are delivering very well integrated services. Commissioning including joint commissioning is continually improving the quality of services for looked after children, such as the development of the therapeutic fostering scheme. Managers seen were very positive about in-house training opportunities for newer managers. There is a very good focus on value for money for example in the review and redesign of short break services for young people with a disability. There is good cooperation on a regional basis through Placements North West where participating local authorities share information about the quality of independent residential and foster care placements.
116. There is an excellent focus on user engagement and the council has demonstrated a strong commitment to facilitate and develop the Children in Care Council. The active involvement in Wirral Children's Trust particularly through the Positive Contribution Strategy Group and at a strategic level through the Corporate Parenting Group ensures that looked

after children and young people influence service design. The membership of children and young people on the fostering panel raises the profile of the user in approvals. Participation in interviews for social workers and other staff ensures workers are sensitive to the needs of vulnerable young people. Young people spoken to are positive that their views are listened to and acted upon, for example in relation to school trips and activities where their carers can now give their permission avoiding the previous bureaucratic delay.

## **Performance management and quality assurance**

### **Grade 2 (good)**

117. Performance management and evaluation arrangements are good and are leading to improved outcomes. Performance management and tracking of educational outcomes are very good and are having a demonstrable impact on outcomes. The independent reviewing officers provide a good level of challenge to plans for looked after children and provide feedback to the WSCB on the quality of reports. The improved planning has contributed to the reduction in disruption to placements.
118. There is effective management oversight of areas where risks are identified. There is senior management oversight of all proposed placements with parents. Detailed reports are presented to the strategic service manager and there is good evidence of close scrutiny. Management information is used to identify young people whose future plan should consider discharge from care through special guardianship orders, adoption or return to parents. Good legal gate keeping meetings inform decision making and the quality of legal reports is overseen by a legal adviser who reports on their quality.
119. An effective joint commissioning strategy with robust monitoring arrangements is in place. There are clear procedures for accessing out of borough placements and an effective independent placement panel which thoroughly scrutinises all requests for out of borough placements. Regular contract monitoring visits take place to measure compliance and quality of provision, including appropriate measures around safeguarding.
120. Good and robust management oversight ensures that plans for young people are appropriate and are progressed in a timely manner. All staff seen were aware of the council's priorities for looked after children and young people and were contributing through reviewing placements and updating assessments and care plans.

## Record of main findings:

<b>Safeguarding services</b>	
Overall effectiveness	Good
Capacity for improvement	Good
<b>Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people</b>	
Children and young people are safe and feel safe	Good
Quality of provision	Good
The contribution of health agencies to keeping children and young people safe	Outstanding
<b>Leadership and management</b>	
Ambition and prioritisation	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Outstanding
Performance management and quality assurance	Good
Partnership working	Outstanding
Equality and diversity	Adequate
<b>Services for looked after children</b>	
Overall effectiveness	Good
Capacity for improvement	Good
<b>How good are outcomes for looked after children and care leavers?</b>	
Being healthy	Good
Staying safe	Good
Enjoying and achieving	Good
Making a positive contribution, including user engagement	Good
Economic well-being	Adequate
Quality of provision	Good
<b>Leadership and management</b>	
Ambition and prioritisation	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Outstanding
Performance management and quality assurance	Good
Equality and diversity	Adequate