

# Warrington Borough Council

## Inspection of children’s social care services

**Inspection dates: 08 July 2019 to 19 July 2019**

**Lead inspector: Nick Stacey**  
**Her Majesty’s Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Leaders and senior managers ensure that children and their families receive good-quality services that help to protect children and improve their day-to-day experiences of family life. Prioritising support to its vulnerable citizens is a core council priority. It achieves this through its energetic and ambitious senior leadership team, which uses this strong corporate support to concentrate on making continuous improvements at a lively pace. The operational director for children’s social care (who also holds the role of deputy director of children’s services) is highly focused on ensuring that frontline staff and managers understand what makes good practice, and is determined in her role as practice leader to see this exemplified in all interventions with children and families.

The effectiveness of help and support for care leavers is improving following the recent appointment of an experienced, permanent manager. Senior managers are actively considering adding further management capacity to services for care leavers to ensure that improvements to the areas identified are made at the required pace.

The director of children's services (DCS) is instrumental in promoting strong strategic partnerships. This results in widespread multi-agency involvement in effective and extensive early help and edge of care services. Consistently strong multi-agency engagement is also evident in the commitment to children who are the subjects of child protection and child in need plans.

A bedrock of good practice has been established. This encompasses assessments and plans and involves increasingly imaginative and intensive direct work that benefits many children and families.

## **What needs to improve**

- The effectiveness of the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) screening of repeat contacts for children living in circumstances in which they are neglected.
- Decisive and early protective measures for children on child protection plans who experience neglectful parenting for extended periods.
- The pace of reviews and decisions for children who live at home and who are subject to care orders.

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

1. Children and their families are very well supported through an extensive range of early help services, provided by skilled and well-trained frontline workers. Consequently, the circumstances of many children substantially improve, and this avoids the need to step cases up to a higher level of statutory intervention. Early help and edge of care workers remain allocated to families when they 'step in and out' of thresholds of need. This provides children and their families with a continuous model of help. Assessments and plans are thorough, so parents understand what changes are needed and they engage with the interventions provided. Early help workers use evidence-based approaches, measuring the extent and impact of neglect and the progress towards reducing damaging effects on children. The demand for these services is high and a waiting list is managed well to ensure that children in greater need receive a quicker response.
2. The MASH includes many co-located partners. The multi-agency environment facilitates swift information-sharing, and largely prompt and appropriate decisions are made concerning contacts and referrals. Most screening decisions and timeframes for gathering information are congruent with local guidance, and social workers form well-considered recommendations for management oversight. Social workers routinely obtain consent from parents and carers to seek further information from other professionals.

3. A small number of screening decisions concerning repeat contacts with the MASH are made without sufficient checks on children's progress with all universal or early help services involved in their case. In some of these cases, services are already in place and decisions are made that are not fully informed by full and updated information. Consequently, a small number of children may not receive the right type of help at the earliest opportunity. Senior managers are fully aware of this issue and have recently introduced credible checks and balances to address it. However, limited positive impact of these was seen during this inspection.
4. Children at risk of harm are protected by timely and rigorous responses from the MASH and the out-of-hours service. Strategy meetings are used to share information quickly and comprehensively, and immediate protective actions are clear. Assessments are thorough and closely consider children's and their parents' histories. They convey a clear insight into children's lives and evaluate information with balanced analysis. Interventions are arranged quickly, often while assessments are in progress, so that children do not have to wait for the help they need.
5. Most social work practice for children who are on child protection and child in need plans, including practice with disabled children, is of a consistently high standard and has a positive impact. A recently implemented service structure ensures that children can receive support from the same social worker, from the point of an assessment through to the stage when the case is stepped down to early help or closed. Although uninterrupted social work relationships with children are a cornerstone of senior managers' improvement activity, at this inspection some children had experienced too many changes of social worker.
6. Child protection conferences prioritise enabling parents to share in the evaluation of risks and concerns about their children. This inclusive approach is further enhanced through using plain, accessible language in the meetings. Plans are written clearly and usually illustrate in straightforward terms for parents what needs to change, although timescales for priority actions are not always explicit enough. Partner agencies are well engaged, which is demonstrated in their involvement in regular core groups and child in need review meetings. Children's progress is closely evaluated, and support is changed, if necessary, to ensure that it continues to both improve their circumstances and safeguard them.
7. A broad range of intensive interventions help children and families to address a range of complex difficulties, including neglect, domestic abuse and substance misuse. A large team of skilled workers from an edge of care service supports children across the thresholds of need, building continuous, trusting relationships with children and their carers. The level of support and intervention is increased during more difficult periods, providing the critical support to help parents rapidly develop the skills, routines and basic care

required to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children. Social workers see children regularly and are knowledgeable about their circumstances. They adapt their home visiting schedules to respond to periods of greater stress and risk. Most social workers are creative and curious in their direct work with children, and use pictures, play and numerous initiatives to explore the children's worlds.

8. When standards of parenting do not improve quickly enough to ameliorate risks to children and address their unmet needs, most cases are appropriately escalated to the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline through well-recorded legal planning meetings. Social workers and the edge of care service engage purposefully with families to explore and test all opportunities to help parents improve their care. For a small number of children, particularly those experiencing long-term neglect, authoritative measures are not taken soon enough. Senior managers recognised this shortfall and had implemented tighter checks and balances, including closer scrutiny of children on child protection plans for longer periods, and more frequent legal planning reviews. The effects of these initiatives is emerging through decisions to instigate legal proceedings sooner when improvements in children's circumstances are either too slow or highly unlikely.
9. Responses to children with specific vulnerabilities are well managed. A small number of children who are notified as living in private fostering arrangements are promptly assessed and regularly reviewed, ensuring that their circumstances are suitable and that their needs are met. Allegations and concerns regarding unsuitable behaviours and potential abuse of children by professionals and volunteers are rigorously screened and closely tracked by an experienced designated officer. Older children aged 16 to 17 years of age who present at risk of homelessness receive timely, well-coordinated assessments and comprehensive support arrangements. Well-established pathways with housing partners result in prompt and thorough joint assessments. When necessary, the children are provided with a good standard of emergency and longer-term supported accommodation.
10. Children who are missing from education, and those who are electively educated at home, are efficiently tracked and monitored. Collaborative multi-agency oversight ensures that support is provided to improve the education provision for children educated at home. The missing education team diligently ascertains the whereabouts of children who are absent from school and the destinations of those who leave school. These efforts mean that most children's whereabouts are known, and their well-being is safeguarded.
11. Children who go missing and are at risk of harm and exploitation in the community receive well-coordinated and proficient services to assess concerns and mitigate risks. Return home interviews are arranged promptly and care is taken to try and understand the underlying factors that lead to episodes of going missing and also what children do while they are missing. Children who

go missing repeatedly, and for whom there are heightened worries, are considered at multi-agency monitoring and intervention meetings, which share intelligence effectively. Gaps in information are identified, and tailored multi-agency interventions are targeted for direct work with children and to disrupt, pursue and prosecute individuals of concern. These measures are regularly reviewed to test their impact, and the reasons for concluding monitoring and tracking are clearly documented. A small number of children identified as being at risk of female genital mutilation, forced marriage, honour-based abuse or radicalisation are safeguarded through effective partner arrangements and clearly understood and applied pathways.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good**

12. Decisions to bring children into care are generally appropriate, timely and are based on well-written assessments. The pre-proceedings stages of the public law outline are used constructively to rigorously test, through intensive support, whether families can achieve and sustain safe and nurturing parenting for their children. If this is not possible, assessments are completed quickly, which prevents subsequent delays in court proceedings. Legal powers are used well to safeguard children through carefully prepared evidence and prompt completion of care proceedings.
13. Children's permanent living options are considered through comprehensive planning as soon as they enter care. Strong efforts are made to consider whether children can safely live in their family networks, and the importance of this is exemplified in well-prepared connected persons assessments. Many children live with their relatives, or foster carers, under special guardianship order arrangements. Brothers and sisters are assessed and supported to live together. Careful assessment and planning precede appropriate decisions to return children home from care and ensure that most then receive the necessary support to successfully remain at home. Ongoing support is provided, particularly from the edge of care service, to help children resettle into their birth families.
14. Extensive efforts are made to find adoptive families for children who are unable to live with their birth families. Social workers diligently tackle obstacles to ensure that children are matched and placed with adopters who can best meet their needs. Consequently, an increasing number of children are placed in nurturing and loving adoptive families. Detailed plans support children's successful transitions into their adoptive families, and adopters are provided with the right help to overcome difficulties they encounter as their children progress.
15. Social workers understand the children who they provide support to well. They visit children regularly in their placements and they record these episodes thoroughly. Many social workers engage in focused and creative direct work

with children, helping them to understand their family histories and their feelings about being in care. Senior managers have appropriately recognised that this important work should be better collated, and they have recently introduced a 'My Life' framework to draw this together more coherently.

16. Social workers regularly update assessments of need for children in care. These are well written and provide an informative overview of children's daily lives and the progress they are making. Consequently, care plans strongly reflect children's current circumstances. The plans are detailed, but they do not always prominently record the overarching aim of the child's care plan or include a clear summary of permanence objectives. Some actions do not have sufficiently clear timeframes. Senior managers have recently launched a new permanence policy, which includes an improved care plan template.
17. A significant number of children who are the subjects of care orders are placed at home with their parents. Some of these children have remained the subjects of statutory orders for unnecessarily long periods, and a very small number have continued to experience poor parenting. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are not active enough in challenging drift and delay for these children and for a small number of other children in care. This is partially the result of their high caseloads. Senior managers are reviewing all children who are placed at home; however, the pace of this work has been too slow and lacks a sense of urgency.
18. IROs prioritise children's participation in their reviews, and advocacy support is used well. Recommendations are clear and measurable and are checked at subsequent reviews. IROs' reports are written directly to children, and the sensitivity with which they explain circumstances and decisions demonstrates excellent child-centred practice.
19. Most children thrive in well-matched placements that improve their circumstances from their starting points following entry to care. The local authority has a good range of available placements, and offers many children and social workers a choice of placements to consider. This provides opportunities to match children with carers who are best-placed to address their specific needs. Effective foster carer recruitment is increasing the numbers of local placements. Prospective foster carers are carefully assessed and trained and, following their approval, are well supported by their social workers. Foster carers offer a wide range of skills and experience to help children who are placed in their families. Many children can 'stay put' with their foster carers when they reach 18 years of age if they choose to, and a significant number do so.
20. Children enjoy and benefit from a wide range of leisure activities provided by their carers, although the take-up of leisure activities is less apparent for children placed at home on care orders with their parents. Contact with family members (referred to as 'family time') is carefully considered and strongly

supported when it is in children's best interests. Social workers and carers are keenly attuned to children's physical and emotional health and well-being. Children's health assessments and checks are largely up to date, and social workers consider emotional and mental health issues routinely. A social worker from the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) is permanently based in the child in care service, offering social workers and children accessible advice and support.

21. Proactive measures are taken when children encounter difficulties in their placements, and there is a risk of the placement breaking down. Senior managers prioritise the importance of children retaining continuous care, and a designated edge of care service worker provides advice and support for foster carers. However, disruption meetings are not held routinely, and this omission is a missed opportunity to identify important learning themes to inform subsequent placement planning and matching. It also means that any critical learning points are not captured to use in additional training and support for foster carers.
22. The virtual school effectively supports children's educational progress through strong leadership. Close attention is devoted to the impact of personal education plans (PEPs) and they are consistently scrutinised through a high standard of quality assurance. This ensures that PEPs are well informed by all involved agencies. They also assist professionals to better understand children's social and emotional development in order to help them focus on their school work. As a result, outcomes at most key stages are improving, although more work is needed to support the attendance and engagement and to improve outcomes of children at key stage 4.
23. The small number of children in care who are placed at a distance from the local authority receive provision and support equal to that received by children who are placed in the local authority area. Some of these children have highly complex needs and additional vulnerabilities. The local authority responds quickly when these children go missing, and associated risks are considered carefully in strategy and other intervention meetings. Return home interviews for the children placed out of the local authority area are undertaken by local area services, and the quality and timeliness of these are variable. However, diligent safeguarding responses ensure that risks are explored and understood.
24. Many young people leaving care do well and make good use of the support offered by conscientious personal advisers (PAs). The percentage of care leavers participating in education, employment or training has increased and is now above the national average; the effective input of partners has helped with this. Most young people live in suitable accommodation in their preferred areas of the town.
25. Young people are supported to learn and practise independence skills and live in good-quality supported accommodation until they are ready to live

independently. PAs are diligent in maintaining contact, and in re-establishing it when young people disengage. Caseloads are too high, which results in delays of several months in PAs' introductions to some young people during their transition into the leaving care service. There are also significant gaps in management oversight of young people's case records. Leaders and managers are actively addressing these shortcomings through a recent restructure of the team, including the recruitment of an experienced team manager.

26. All young people leaving care have up-to-date pathway plans (PPs) that are regularly reviewed. Plans do not always consider specific vulnerabilities closely enough, and actions and timescales are often not sharply aligned with young people's identified needs. Senior managers have recently provided training for PAs to improve the quality of PPs. The local offer for care leavers is comprehensive, featuring clear, accessible information on their rights and entitlements. Care leavers in independent accommodation are exempted from paying council tax. Not all care leavers have full information on their health histories, but senior managers had imminent measures in place to provide these important summaries to all care leavers.

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

27. Leaders and senior managers are energetic, collaborative and highly committed to the continued improvement of services for vulnerable children. Political leadership is vibrant and inquisitive. A bedrock of good practice standards, and improving outcomes for children throughout the service, is already established. The service and structure have recently been redesigned to reflect a 'systemic' practice model. Senior managers are highly focused on the impact of all their initiatives on enhancing the standard of social work with children. The reflective approach used in senior management meetings is mirrored in much purposeful support and intervention with children.
28. Senior leaders' goal of bringing team managers closer to frontline practice is already apparent in their detailed knowledge of children's cases. Staff across all layers of the hierarchy are undergoing extensive and accredited training in systemic approaches and value the investment in their professional development. The operational director determinedly and prominently promotes and expects high standards from frontline staff and managers, and is instrumental in creating a favourable operational environment for good social work to thrive. Caseloads are manageable, and the service structure has been streamlined to minimise service-led changes of social worker.
29. Mature strategic partnerships have been forged and strengthened by the chief executive and DCS. Strategic intent and proficient, collaborative multi-agency delivery are clearly aligned throughout operational services. This is evident across early help services, in the effective and influential edge of care service; in children's cases in the MASH and the cases of those on statutory plans; in



improved arrangements for vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds; and in the strong contextual safeguarding arrangements.

30. The corporate parenting panel has an active, ongoing constructive exchange with a small number of highly engaged children representing the children in care council. The panel chair and senior managers recognise that the range of voices from children in care needs broadening and active measures are underway to attempt this. There is no representation from young people leaving care on the panel, and their regular participation would help senior managers to address improvements, although the core service provided largely meets their support needs.
31. Senior managers look outwards to consider best practice from other local authorities and invite regular peer reviews across the range of services. This has helped to provide senior managers with a balanced self-assessment of progress and has identified areas where further improvements are indicated. Consistently good timeliness in completing care proceedings and a high standard of evidence preparation are recognised by both the family court judge and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service.
32. Regular practice learning is embedded and closely linked to the ongoing quality assurance of frontline practice. These initiatives are rapidly evolving, as the recent restructure and introduction of the local authority's preferred practice model gain momentum. A raft of measures, including reflective group supervisions, frequent learning circles and regular staff engagement sessions, extract key learning themes from both good and weaker frontline practice. Not all periodic thematic practice audits are sufficiently evaluative in balancing the importance of process compliance with critical practice learning. Regular dip sampling audits inform subsequent learning shared in staff engagement sessions. Staff value continuous senior management acknowledgement of effective practice with children and families at individual, team and service levels.
33. Senior managers have access to reliable and accurate performance information, which is regularly interrogated. Monthly performance clinics quickly spot trends, triggering explorations of underlying practice themes, which enables issues to be efficiently identified and tackled. This is demonstrated, for example, in recent measures leading to improved timeliness in holding initial child protection conferences, and in reducing nearly all overdue visits to some children on statutory plans.
34. Most social workers are permanent and experienced employees. This is complemented by a continuous supply of both recently qualified and qualifying social workers, who unanimously endorse the high standard of support and early career development provided by the local authority. Social workers' morale across the service is high, and they are realising the benefits of smaller teams, continuous allocation to children, manageable caseloads and the

considerable investment in their training and development. Social workers also appreciate the importance given to their emotional well-being and welfare through regular 'check-ins'.

35. Most social workers receive regular case supervision, alongside group supervision and learning circles. The quality and extent of recorded supervision are mixed. While most recording is detailed, demonstrating reflective discussions about children's daily lives and their progress, some records include descriptive updates and a simple set of tasks to action. A small number of case records for care leavers featured gaps in supervision of many months. Senior managers recognise that the quality and depth of supervision discussions are not always well evidenced in children's case files. They are taking action to improve this.



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