

Inspection of City of Wolverhampton local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 28 March to 1 April 2022

Lead inspector: Andy Waugh, Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
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

Services for children and families in the City of Wolverhampton needing help and protection have improved and are now good. There is some outstanding practice in relation to care leavers and overall services for children in care have been sustained. Since the previous inspection in 2017, senior leaders have led a relentless drive to improve services, which has led to innovative social work practice. This work continues, underpinned by senior leaders' determination to keep improving the experiences and outcomes for all children in the city.

A strength-based practice model is supporting social workers to make good decisions for children, which enables the majority of children to receive the right help at the right time. This is underpinned by a strong corporate and political commitment through additional financial investment, which allows for the development of innovative projects that make a positive difference for children.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has presented the local authority with challenges and pressures, it has not prevented the development of services and the enhancement of relationships with partners. Children increasingly receive interventions through an embedded early help offer, which has reduced the number of children requiring statutory services. A mostly stable permanent workforce, along with manageable caseloads, enables positive relationships to be built with children and families. Several successful projects, such as Power2 and the House Project, have had a

positive impact on children, diverting them away from the risks of exploitation and providing them with support to live independently.

What needs to improve?

- The arrangements for tracking and monitoring children who are missing from education.
- The recording of return home interviews to identify wider patterns and trends.
- The virtual school should improve the quality of PEP's and address the persistent absence for some children in care.
- The virtual school needs to ensure that children in care receive career advice earlier so they can make better informed decisions about their futures.
- The quality of information provided to 16- and 17-year-old homeless children about their rights and entitlements including to become looked after.

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

1. Children receive the right help at the right time. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH24), which is a combined MASH and emergency duty team, provides a strong effective service that applies thresholds consistently well and directs families to the appropriate service in a timely way, including out of hours. MASH24 has effective systems for accepting and processing information to ensure accurate identification of risks to children and adults.
2. Managers have oversight at the point of receiving the contact, and the information is risk rated, with guidance for next steps. Partners share information in a timely way, which enables social workers to analyse all the information and make appropriate recommendations for future actions. Identity, including culture, race and how identity applies to presenting concerns, is routinely considered. Overall, management oversight is consistently recorded, with the correct thresholds applied. Children's needs are understood and signposted to early help services when appropriate. However, the gaining of parental consent or the rationale for overriding of consent are not consistently recorded.
3. Children benefit from comprehensive early help assessments, using family history to understand needs. However, analysis in assessments is not strongly focused on identifying risks and past concerns to inform planning. The views of children and parents are evident throughout the assessments. Early help plans and actions identify outcomes to help support children and parents to improve relationships and reduce risks. The number of early help interventions continues to increase, with a small minority needing to be stepped up to social care, indicative of successful interventions and outcomes for children at the early help level.

4. Effective domestic abuse triage arrangements are taking place daily. Initial screening is completed by experienced police officers to ensure that children at the appropriate level of risk are referred through to MASH24.
5. Children at risk of exploitation in Wolverhampton are benefiting from effective, prompt and careful consideration of their risks and needs through the daily exploitation meeting held in the Exploitation Hub. Child-exploitation screening tools are completed and appropriately used by partners alongside multi-agency referral forms. Children receive a swift response and are signposted to targeted support services or escalated to multi-agency child exploitation meetings when higher risk is identified.
6. Where concerns escalate for children, strategy meetings are held in a timely way. They are well attended by partners, with information shared leading to informed decision-making. The outcomes of strategy meetings are well recorded, with a clear rationale for next steps and actions that address risks to children.
7. Children's assessments are analytical and effective in identifying risks and needs. Managers provide strong oversight when assessments are allocated. They are focused on reviewing risks and provide clear direction about expectations and timescales. This means that children receive support at the right time. Assessments are updated to re-evaluate current needs and risks.
8. Children benefit from effective planning that addresses increased needs and reduces risks. Most plans include children's wishes and feelings. In the majority of child-protection and child-in-need plans, there is evidence of effective partnership working that contributes to the reduction of risk or needs for children.
9. Social workers visit children frequently in line with children's plans, to build trusting relationships and further understand their experiences. Through creative direct work, social workers gain insight into children's interests and abilities, and have a good understanding of their wishes and feelings.
10. In most cases, child-protection plans are effective at reducing risks for children. Plans are restorative and focused on the impact of actions on improving children's circumstances. The majority of children's plans are progressed in a timely way. Actions are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) and consistently reviewed and updated at well-attended monthly core group meetings.
11. The pre-proceedings process of the Public Law Outline is used effectively when risks to children are not diminishing. Pre-proceedings work is supported by skilled in-house Parent Assessment Manual assessors, promptly commissioned cognitive assessments and family group conferences, resulting in a significant number of children remaining with their family. Where concerns continue to escalate, early permanence is achieved for most children through timely care proceedings that have been fully informed by the completion of strong assessments in pre-proceedings.
12. Children at risk of exploitation and their families receive high-quality, intensive support to successfully reduce risk. Those children at higher risk of exploitation

and wider vulnerabilities receive high-quality support packages through the Power2 service and associated resources. This is helping Wolverhampton children to remain safely with their families. Performance-management arrangements are strong, supporting mapping activity and hotspot identification, and the tracking of individual children's circumstances.

13. Disabled children have social workers who understand their needs well and work creatively to seek their views using a variety of tools to support children's communication needs. Where disabled children are at risk of harm, risks and needs are well understood and responded to effectively.
14. Children who are 16 or 17 years old and present as homeless are supported to find alternative suitable accommodation. However, they are not routinely and explicitly made aware of their rights and entitlements, meaning that they may not be fully aware of their options when making choices and decisions about their accommodation and care arrangements.
15. Where children are missing from education, the local authority carries out a range of checks to try to locate missing pupils as quickly as possible. However, on occasions, for some children who cannot be located, managers do not consistently take additional steps to inform key agencies such as Border Force or the police. In response to this shortfall, senior managers have strengthened the service by committing dedicated resources to ensure that risks to missing children are fully explored.
16. The number of children who are electively home educated has risen significantly. Managers have strong oversight of any parental decision for a pupil to become electively home educated, to assure themselves of the welfare of the child.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: good

17. Children in Wolverhampton are supported to remain with their families when it is safe to do so. Strong edge of care services, such as the Star Project and Power2, complete effective work with children and families that makes a positive difference. As a consequence, children only come into care when it is in their best interests.
18. When children do come into care, they benefit from effective social work practice, supported by constructive management oversight and a clear focus on early permanence planning. This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who are supported into accommodation that, wherever possible, meets their religious and cultural needs.
19. Children benefit from timely applications to the family court. Assessments, statements and care plans are of a good quality. Inspectors were informed by both the judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service of the positive impact of timely care proceedings and the consistently good-quality work that has resulted in the right outcomes for children.

20. Social workers spend meaningful time with children and build positive relationships. Creative direct work with children enables them to understand their experiences. Children are helped to understand their own journeys into and through care, through sensitive later-life letters and life-story work.
21. Where children are moving to adoptive placements, introductions are carefully planned and supported by inventive practice tools to help to prepare children. Children's records are sensitively written and include their views, strengths and abilities. Should they wish to read their records at a later stage, children would understand why decisions were made about their care.
22. Children's assessments are regularly updated to reflect changes in circumstances. Care plans are reviewed, with additional quality assurance checks by independent reviewing officers (IROs) to monitor children's progress. Clear plans for permanence are formed as early as possible, including foster to adopt placements and other family members.
23. Children are supported and encouraged to attend their reviews. Their voices help inform their plans, which helps them progress with their independence and aspirations. IROs write reviews using accessible and child-friendly language, with some recommendations that are underpinned by research to enhance understanding of the reasoning and importance of achieving actions.
24. Achieving permanence is a priority for both children and young people staying put with their former foster carers. Children benefit from planning for their futures at the earliest opportunity, to enable a smooth and supportive transition to adulthood.
25. Children in care who are preparing for independence receive effective support to move on to independence from foster care and children's homes. The House Project enables children to gain independence skills, including financial and practical support, through a team approach to testing the young person's capacity before moving on to permanent accommodation.
26. Most children in care live in foster homes. Placement stability for children is strong. Children live with carers who understand their needs and promote their health and well-being, with referrals to specialist services when needed. Children's emotional well-being is supported through access to therapy and by specialist support for foster carers.
27. Foster carers feel welcomed and supported by the local authority. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the recruitment and support of foster carers have been sustained. The capacity of foster carers means there continues to be more children living with in-house carers than with independent foster carers. However, there are shortfalls in the quality of some foster carer assessments, the timeliness of foster carer reviews and the formal supervision of staff. Senior leaders cannot be assured that these placements continue to be suitable for children where this is the case. There are firm plans to tackle the drift in this area of the service.

28. Children's academic needs are mostly met by the virtual school. The use of pupil premiums is successful in enhancing children's education. Children who live outside Wolverhampton receive support equal to that of their peers. Children's attendance at school is generally good but the persistent rate of absence of some children is too high, meaning some children are missing significant parts of their education. The quality of personal education plans is variable, with managers not having a concerted grip on the overall quality assurance. The number of care leavers aged 19 to 21 years who are not in education, employment or training has recovered since the initial stages of the pandemic to be in line with the national average. The virtual school is becoming more aspirational in seeking to close the gap between children in care and their peers.
29. The majority of children in care who are at risk of harm as a result of going missing and exploitation receive a proactive response from social workers based on their individual assessments of risk. Return home interviews are mostly timely and comprehensive. They clearly capture information about children's safety and worries, to enable review and analysis of whether risk is reducing or escalating. Social workers frequently visit children after missing-from-care episodes to understand their experiences and to help children avoid attempts to exploit them. However, when children refuse a return home interview, it is not always evident why this is and what efforts have been made to understand and help reduce risks to individual children and to gather wider intelligence and learning.
30. Adoption is considered carefully and promptly for all children who are unable to return home to their birth families and who need a permanent alternative. Senior managers, through regular oversight, assure themselves that children receive an effective service from the regional adoption agency, Adoption@Heart.
31. A very small number of vulnerable disabled children are currently placed in homes registered only with the Care Quality Commission, with plans for the placements to be registered with Ofsted. Senior managers have oversight of these placements and there is increased visiting by social workers. Persistent efforts are made to find registered settings. A small number of older (post-16) children are placed in unregulated settings, which are meeting their needs.
32. Care leavers benefit from high-quality services that make them feel valued and listened to. They experience positive and trusting relationships with tenacious and highly dedicated personal advisers (PAs). Young people consistently told inspectors that their PAs are significant people in their lives, that their PAs don't give up on them and that they could not have succeeded without them, referring to them as 'like parents to me'. Young people in custody receive an excellent service through the Always Hope project, which draws on the probation and prison service to support young people returning to the community.
33. Young people are introduced to their PA at the age of 15 years and nine months, enabling the development of strong relationships. A seamless transition provides effective support into adulthood. The commitment of PAs to these young people has involved supporting them with appointments, and social events at weekends and evenings and responding to both positive developments and crises in young people's lives with equal vigour and attention.

34. Care leavers are consulted on the strategic direction of the local authority, and they are pivotal to key decisions. The care leavers independent collective and the Children in Care Council are a force for change and are fully integrated into commissioning, tendering, strategic overview, the corporate parenting board and interviews for all social work posts at all levels.
35. Young people's successes are celebrated at an individual level, for example through PAs and monthly children in care and care leavers awards, and at an annual I Award celebration of achievement covering children in care. Young people told inspectors that cultural activities, including the arts, music and self-identified interests, could be better funded and more encouraged by the local authority.
36. The majority of care leavers are living in safe accommodation that meets their needs. However, for the small number of care leavers who are in unsuitable accommodation, PAs increase their visiting patterns and managers have increased oversight to proactively support young people to find more permanent living arrangements.
37. The housing offer and associated commissioning is an area of significant strength in Wolverhampton. In partnership with local providers, care leavers have a range of housing options, from carefully scrutinised supported accommodation and emergency options through to independent living. The Wolverhampton iteration of the Housing Project has successfully supported three cohorts of young people into secure tenancies through intensive, and then tapered, support. This is repeated if young people are deemed not ready, rather than it being seen as a failure.
38. Young people's pathway plans (PWPs) are regularly updated when needs and circumstances change. They include multi-agency input and reference to the local offer to ensure that young people understand the support and entitlements available. PAs prioritise young people's culture and identity when understanding their experiences and worries, to bolster resilience and challenge discrimination. PWPs are written to, and in collaboration with, young people, with clear objectives and measures of success. For young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers, a specific part of the PWP addresses legal status and contingencies if legal immigration status is denied. Safeguarding risks are considered and addressed well, including when care leavers are parents.
39. Most young people are engaged in education, employment or training (EET). This is against a backdrop of poverty, high local unemployment and the COVID-19 pandemic. The EET figures for 16- to 17-year-olds and 18- to 21-year-olds have either stabilised or improved. Young people are supported by dedicated EET advisers with strong local connections, guaranteed interviews for the 10 apprenticeships in the local authority, a thorough preparation for independence programme and repeated attempts by PAs to find the right opportunities for young people that suit their skills and abilities.

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

40. Since the inspection in 2017, leaders at all levels have continued to drive forward improvements, which has resulted in the delivery of consistently good-quality services that meet the needs of children and families. Senior leaders show determination and insight into how they use learning to constantly challenge themselves and improve services. At a strategic and corporate level, children's needs are prioritised. An aspirational transformation programme, supported by substantial financial investment, has been embedded and has improved services and practice. This is having a tangible impact on improving the experiences for vulnerable children and families. Creative projects are now established services and are effective in supporting children and families at the right time. These include: the innovative MASH24, which provides a consistent service every day of the year; the multi-agency exploitation hub and Power2 team, helping to support and divert children away from being exploited; and the House Project, which is highly effective in supporting young people to successfully live independently.
41. The unforeseen challenges and pressures brought on by the pandemic did not prevent the local authority from ensuring that the needs of vulnerable children continued to be prioritised. Leaders and managers across the service continued to encourage the strength- and relationship-based restorative social work model and, as a consequence, there has been a significant reduction in the number of children requiring statutory interventions.
42. Senior leaders have been relentless in engaging partners effectively, which has resulted in strong and effective strategic partnerships that have taken forward integrated approaches to MASH24 and early help intervention through the Strengthening Families hubs. The social workers in schools project has demonstrated a commitment to working closely with education partners, to support children before statutory services are required. In addition, leaders have responded to the findings of the recent inspection of the local area services for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), with virtual school leaders working with SEND colleagues to ensure better oversight of education and health plans, to minimise the impact on looked after children.
43. Children, families and workers benefit from leaders who are committed to co-production and who incorporate their views when developing services. A corporate parenting panel challenges the views of leaders and enables the voices of children to be heard. Elected members are committed to and prioritise the needs of vulnerable children in the city. The Children in Care Council is routinely engaged in shaping new services, for example the improved supported accommodation provision.
44. Senior leaders know themselves very well and endeavour to meet the needs of children and families through high-quality effective services. They have a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service, which has led to a culture that is open to challenge and learning. This has led to

a high level of consistent, strong social work practice being embedded across most service areas. During the inspection, leaders responded quickly to areas of the service that need improving, for example pledging dedicated staff to improve the service to children who are missing from education.

45. The local authority commissioning hub has responded creatively to the current and future demands on placement sufficiency. Detached youth work, outreach, an emotional well-being service and Power2 key workers have been commissioned to protect children and prevent care from being necessary, in a bid to shift resources to where families will benefit the most.
46. Children in care and care leavers benefit from proactive joint commissioning with partners that has provided a wide range of internal and external housing options. A detailed and comprehensive strategy is underpinned by meaningful consultation with young people and is shared with regional colleagues to drive improvements beyond the borders of the local authority.
47. Regular performance and quality assurance reports and meetings focus on compliance but also on what the findings indicate about the experiences of children. This informs an approach to audit priorities and practice improvement. Quality assurance arrangements are strong, with a comprehensive approach to learning from audits. There are a range of effective processes. Learning is shared with staff through 'learning' bulletins and regular practice weeks. However, the evidence of follow up on actions and 'closing the loop' on individual cases is not yet consistent.
48. Staff consistently described feeling valued and well supported by managers and senior leaders, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social workers are positive about the range and quality of training opportunities that help them develop their practice. Those staff who are newer and those with less experience are positive about their induction and the higher levels of training and support they receive from managers at all levels of the service.
49. Overall, stability of staffing is a strength and is a positive factor in the ability to maintain high-quality services for children. Nevertheless, managers remain committed to the recruitment and retention of staff. The local authority promotes its various pathways for current staff to become qualified, along with 'growing your own' through an effective assessed and supported year in employment programme. Where appropriate, unqualified staff are encouraged to consider a social work qualification, through an apprenticeship model. As a result, the majority of children benefit from stable and strong relationships with their social workers, who have manageable caseloads that enable them to strive to carry out quality work with children to improve children's circumstances and experiences.

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