

Inspection of Wiltshire Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 25 September to 29 September 2023

Lead inspector: Kendra Bell, His 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children living in Wiltshire benefit from high-quality services that make a positive difference to their lives. Since the time of the last inspection in 2019, when services were judged to be good, political, corporate and children's services leaders have focused successfully on strengthening existing services further, including through investing in new preventative services and specialist teams. While levels of need have risen in much of the country, this investment, particularly in preventative services, has helped to ensure that the level of need for children's services remains stable and services are meeting more children's needs well. The quality of the services provided to children in care is much improved and the quality of support to care leavers is a standout strength. Services for children in need of help and protection have improved in many areas, including private fostering, early help, support to children on the edge of care and support to children at risk of extra-familial harm. While continuous improvement and consistently good support has been provided to the vast majority of children, the support provided to the small number of vulnerable children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness is not effective. Although social workers talk positively about the support they receive, the recording of frontline management oversight and

supervision is limited. This limits workers' and managers' ability to track progress and to reflect on practice.

What needs to improve?

- The effectiveness and quality of practice to support and safeguard 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
- The quality and consistency of recording of supervision and frontline management oversight and direction, including the tracking of actions and completion of tasks.

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

1. Children and families benefit from effective early support led by family key workers who respond quickly to meet children's needs. Children's support assessments are timely and comprehensive, and written sensitively to them. They include information from the child, parents and carers, and relevant professionals. Risks to children are clearly identified and assessments lead to support plans that focus on what needs to change to reduce concerns for children and to improve family life. Children are seen regularly by workers who make effective use of practice tools to capture their wishes and feelings, measure progress and conduct safety planning with children and their parents. Parents are engaged well in interventions that help them to improve their well-being, address their own challenges and to focus on the quality and impact of their parenting. Children and families are helpfully signposted to community services for ongoing support when the aims of the plan have been successfully achieved. When concerns increase for children, or support does not make a sufficient difference in reducing concerns, children are appropriately referred into statutory services.
2. Children in need of help and protection receive a swift and effective response from the Integrated Front Door (IFD), the team of children's services staff and workers from partner agencies who jointly assess and plan initial responses to referrals about children who may be in need or at risk. A consultation line provides timely and helpful advice to professionals and members of the public who have concerns about children. These calls are well managed and help to ensure that children receive the right level of support from the right agencies as quickly as possible. Workers in the IFD quickly identify risk to help safeguard children, and the co-location of key partners and agencies in the IFD adds significant value to the richness of the information gathered about children. Workers gather relevant information about children, including historical information, and use this to make informed recommendations about the level of need and the help and support children require. Thresholds are applied appropriately and the need to gain parental consent and provide a rationale for when consent is overridden is understood by workers and managers. However, management oversight does not always provide clear directions for workers or describe what needs to happen next for children and why. For a very small

number of children, the rationale for the dispensing of consent is not clearly recorded by managers within case records.

3. The IFD provides a seamless service to children and their families during the evening and at weekends. For almost all children, appropriate and timely action is taken by workers to help protect and support them at times of increased concerns and crisis.
4. Child and family assessments, including pre-birth assessments, are strength-based, analytical and timely. Children's voices are captured well within assessments and workers gather relevant and comprehensive information from families and partner agencies to help inform their professional judgement and analysis. Children's needs, and any concerns and risks to them, are clearly identified. When domestic abuse is a concern, assessments appropriately identify the risks to children and social workers undertake safety planning during the assessment stage to help reduce risk. Children and parents benefit from a range of supports, including school-based workers and victim and perpetrator programmes, to help increase protective factors and to reduce the risk of harm.
5. Children at risk of significant harm, including disabled children, are discussed at multi-agency child protection strategy meetings. These meetings are timely and well attended by a range of professionals who share relevant information to help inform decision-making. For some children, actions from strategy discussions are not sufficiently specific or timebound. This limits managers' and the social workers' ability to monitor the progress of the plan and whether actions are completed. When strategy meetings lead to child protection enquiries, these are timely and include social workers seeing children alone. Enquiries are comprehensive and provide a solid rationale for the decision to move to a child protection conference or to step down to a lower level of support. Child protection conferences are timely and well attended and lead to strength-based plans that focus on increasing protective factors and reducing harm.
6. A large majority of children subject to child in need and child protection plans are supported to make good progress. Children are helped by social workers who understand their needs well. Their plans are regularly reviewed and written to them so that they can understand what is happening. Many social workers are skilled at recognising risk, taking action to reduce risk for children and helping parents to understand what needs to improve for their children. Social workers use family group conferences to help parents successfully identify sources of support from their friends and family members. A very small number of children are subject to repeat plans and interventions before they get the help and protection they need, including coming into care. This includes children experiencing harm from domestic abuse, and chronic neglect. The cumulative impact of chronic neglect is not always recognised quickly enough to give children the help and protection they need at the earliest point in time.

7. When risk for children remains too high, appropriate action is taken by managers to move into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. For children who need to come into care, this process helps to ensure that this is achieved in a timely manner. For other children, the process is successful in helping their parents to make the much-needed changes to their parenting and their children remain in their care and court proceedings are avoided. The quality of pre-proceedings letters sent to parents is inconsistent. Some letters are not sufficiently detailed and do not clearly outline to parents what changes they need to make for their children to safely remain in their care.
8. Children on the edge of care, outside of the Public Law Outline, are supported to remain living at home when it is right and safe to do so. Highly skilled workers provide intensive and targeted interventions to repair family relationships and prevent children from coming into care. Their approach is highly successful in keeping families together and strengthening parenting.
9. Children at risk of extra-familial harm, including youth violence, are supported by skilled and tenacious social workers who understand their needs and the risks to them very well. The style of children's plans and the focus on seeing risk through a strengths-based lens is having a very positive impact in helping children and parents to focus on the actions that increase safety for children. Children's plans are dynamic and include a range of bespoke multi-agency supports, protective interventions and targeted disruption activity. They are regularly reviewed with children, parents, senior managers and relevant multi-agency professionals to measure progress and respond to any changes in risk. When children go missing from home and care, they are consistently offered a return home interview. These conversations capture key information to identify actions needed to reduce risk, and interventions are successfully making a difference for many children in reducing the number of times they go missing. Appropriate and timely referrals are made to the national referral mechanism, and social workers work well with other local authorities to map and monitor the risks to children who travel across county borders.
10. Work to assess and monitor the suitability of private fostering arrangements is effective. Managers oversee the quality of these arrangements well to ensure that they remain suitable and safe for children. Workers help families to achieve permanency for children whenever possible and to reduce the need for statutory intervention in children's lives. There is a comprehensive awareness-raising programme to help identify further children who may be privately fostered in Wiltshire.
11. A small number of 16 and 17-year-old children who present as homeless are not provided with good enough help and support and practice does not reflect the well-written joint housing protocol that is in place. Joint assessments are not consistently timely or of sufficient quality. They do not consistently lead to a clear or an immediate plan of what needs to happen to ensure that children are safeguarded and have sufficiently safe and appropriate accommodation.

Children are not always provided with detailed information about their options or how to access advocacy in a timely way.

12. The targeted education service has effective systems in place to identify those children missing education, and action is taken to return children to education as soon as possible. When children are home educated, processes are in place to help ensure that children are safeguarded. When arrangements are not working well for children, the education welfare service works with parents to achieve a return to school.
13. There is a robust system in place to manage allegations against professionals. The local authority designated officers respond to concerns in a timely and proportionate way as well as providing advice and guidance to relevant agencies to help them understand their responsibilities in safeguarding children.
14. The recording of frontline management oversight and reflective supervision does not consistently capture the level of positive support and direction that social workers report. This inevitably makes it more difficult for social workers or their managers to track action completion and benchmark progress, and means that the care and thought that have gone into practice may not be evident should children come and read their records later in life.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

15. Almost all children come into care for the right reasons and at the right time. Children in care, including disabled children, make good progress and live in stable homes. They are supported to stay healthy, to attend and to achieve in their education, to enjoy family time, and to pursue their hobbies and interests.
16. Children in care are supported by caring social workers who are proud of their children's achievements. Social workers build enduring relationships with children and have high aspirations for them. They visit children regularly, both in and outside of the home, giving children the opportunity to talk openly. When the time is right, permanence planning is discussed with children to help them feel more secure and to understand their future plans.
17. Permanence planning is considered well for children and starts at an early stage. Appropriate and sensitive decisions are made for brothers and sisters to live together whenever possible or apart, if this is necessary. For many children in care, the continuity of relationship with their social worker is a significant strength in terms of securing their long-term plan and helping them to move into long-term care arrangements as soon as possible. A range of tracking systems ensure that the timeliness of achieving permanence for individual children is monitored effectively by managers. This supports children to achieve permanent care at the earliest opportunity.
18. Social work practice for children who have a plan for adoption is strong. Family finding starts as soon as possible for children and is pursued through a wide

range of networks and events. There are persistent efforts to find the most suitable adoptive parents for children and to keep brothers and sisters together, even when this causes some delay in the plan being achieved. Sensitive direct work by social workers helps children to move successfully to their new family and to remain in touch with their foster carers when this is right for them. Most later life letters are written carefully to children to explain the reasons why they were adopted and life-story books for adopted children are thoughtfully made.

19. Children in care living at home under 'placement with parents' regulations are supported well by workers who regularly review the quality of the care provided to them. Senior managers have appropriate oversight of these arrangements.
20. The voices of children are captured well in records that are written warmly and carefully to them. Social workers extensively use direct work to help children to explore their situations and to learn more about their views and experiences. Children in care are also very well supported by advocates and independent visitors to ensure that their wishes and feelings about their care are promoted and well understood.
21. Children are very much involved in their care planning. Assessments are regularly updated to reflect their changing needs, and their care arrangements and care plans are regularly reviewed to ensure that progress is being made for them. Children benefit from consistent oversight by independent reviewing officers (IROs) who review the progress children make in between reviews. This helps to ensure that children make consistently good progress. IROs write thoughtfully to children after their looked after children reviews so children have a clear written explanation of what decisions have been made and why.
22. Children's health needs, including complex health needs, are identified, and met when they come into care. Children and their carers can access a broad range of support, including therapeutic support, provided by a specialist well-being worker, to support their emotional well-being and to further strengthen the care provided to them.
23. Most children in care attend and achieve well in school. The virtual school is ambitious for children and provides effective support and challenge to schools. Personal education plans are of good quality and help schools to plan for and to meet the needs of children well. When children in care find school difficult, the virtual school helps designated teachers to secure appropriate alternative provision.
24. Children in care at risk of extra-familial harm and those who go missing are supported well by social workers who develop safety plans to help reduce risk. IROs contribute well to the individual safety planning for children.
25. A very small number of children with highly complex needs live in unregistered children's homes. Senior leaders leave no stone unturned in trying to avoid the use of such homes and in taking steps to move children to appropriate

registered provision as soon as possible. Senior leaders and operational managers have robust processes, due diligence and regular oversight of the quality of care provided to these children to help to ensure that the arrangements to meet the needs of these children are safe. Managers understand the potential risks to children who live in unregistered children's homes and are working closely with providers to register the current arrangements and bring the provision within regulations as soon as possible.

26. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by specialist social workers who understand the complexities of their needs and are sensitive to the trauma they have experienced and continue to experience. Children's assessments and plans reflect their cultural and religious needs well and identify the right types of support to help them to adjust to living in their new communities.
27. Rigorous panel processes support the recruitment of prospective foster carers and adopters. Foster carers and connected person carers receive high levels of support and have access to a wide range of formal and informal support networks. They are well supported in their roles and provided with extensive training that helps them to provide consistent and nurturing care to children.
28. Prospective adopter assessments are equally as thorough and sensitively undertaken. There is cohesive partnership working between regional adoption agency workers (Adoption West) and children's social workers to progress and achieve adoption for children in a timely way.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

29. Care leavers are supported exceptionally well by caring and compassionate personal advisers who are determined in their efforts to provide the right support to help them to achieve their ambitions. Personal advisers keep in regular contact with care leavers and play a prominent and active role in their lives. They visit as much, and as often, as care leavers need them to. Personal advisers make good use of translation services to ensure that all care leavers can talk openly and with ease. When care leavers live at a distance from Wiltshire, personal advisers ensure that local provision and resources are available to help support care leavers where they are living. Care leavers are supported to maintain a support network of friends and family members to help them with the practical and emotional support they need as they move into independent living.
30. Pathway plans are skilfully created with care leavers. They are updated on a regular basis to reflect any new or emerging needs and are written sensitively to them. Plans include their wishes and feelings, capture their progress and ambitions, address their needs and risks, and celebrate their achievements. Plans include support from a range of professionals to help support care leavers to make progress, including support from the specialist personal advisers for homelessness and emotional well-being.

31. Personal advisers identify risks for care leavers clearly and put in place actions to help to reduce risk. When risks are particularly complex or serious, multi-agency transitional safeguarding arrangements are set up to help care leavers stay safer within the community. Transitional safeguarding plans are regularly reviewed and involve adult services, police, specialist drug and alcohol services and housing staff working effectively together to help safeguard care leavers.
32. Care leavers are supported well in their education, training, apprenticeships and employment. They are helped to pursue further and higher education and benefit from support packages to help them achieve further qualifications. Care leavers are guaranteed an interview for council apprenticeships if they meet the eligibility criteria, and a growing number of care leavers are employed in the council as participation workers and youth ambassadors. When care leavers are not in education, training or employment, they are supported to access work experience and other activities to help them to pursue and to secure the best opportunities they can.
33. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation which is typically well chosen to match their cultural needs. This includes shared accommodation, independent living, supported housing and 'staying put' arrangements. Moving to independence is a planned and gradual process for care leavers, and work is undertaken to ensure that they are ready to hold a tenancy and to live independently.
34. Care leavers who are pregnant or who are young parents receive good support. Personal advisers provide them with help and support in their role as parents. They have access to a bespoke parenting support group which supports their needs and vulnerabilities as care leavers as well as their needs as young parents.
35. The care leaver local offer, known as the 'care leaver promise', is comprehensive and easy to understand. Care leavers receive a range of ongoing support as well as one-off support. This includes support for accommodation, health, work and independence. Financial support includes council tax exemption regardless of location up to the age of 25, help with Wi-Fi costs, free gym membership and support with learning to drive. Care leavers understand their health histories and are helped to obtain important identification documents, such as passports.
36. Care leavers who are in custody receive a high level of indirect and direct support from personal advisers to help support their emotional well-being and engagement in education and training. Personal advisers link in well with prison staff to ensure that support plans are in place when there are concerns for care leavers' health and well-being. Care leavers have support to maintain contact with family and there is good multi-agency planning to support their return to the community.

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

37. Stable and effective political, corporate and children's services leadership is making a positive difference to children. Leaders work seamlessly together in achieving the council's priorities for children. Committed and dedicated political leaders are well informed on key aspects of children's services delivery, performance, successes and challenges. There are regular meetings with corporate leaders and well-established corporate boards which review, scrutinise, challenge and support service performance and development.
38. Children feature prominently in council strategic plans and the continued investment in children's services is making a significant difference to an increasing number of children's lives. The highly successful cross-council work to deliver improved support and services for children and young people in respect of housing, the care leaver offer, and in safeguarding young adults is perhaps the best illustration of the Wiltshire 'one council approach' for children.
39. Children's services senior leaders are unwavering in their pursuit of excellence in the outcomes they achieve for children. They support and encourage innovation and new ways of working with children and their families to improve and strengthen services further. This is both in Wiltshire and in the contribution they make to regional and national developments. Investment in the family and children transformation programme has delivered both improved services and new services which have had a positive impact for many children. This includes the new out-of-hours service, which is providing a seamless response to children and families at evenings and weekends. The new transitions team is helping to keep care leavers at risk of harm safer, while the new unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's team is assessing and understanding the needs of children in greater depth and providing the trauma-informed response they need. The edge of care team is successfully helping children to remain living with their families and avoiding the need for them to come into care.
40. The introduction of a new model in working with children at risk of extra-familial harm is making a positive difference in reducing risks, maintaining important family relationships and keeping families together whenever possible. The independent visitor service has been expanded and this means more children in care are being supported by an independent person whom they can share their experiences with. Senior leaders regularly seek out opportunity for the external review of services to identify learning and to help strengthen services further. Peer reviews, local government reviews, sector-led improvement work and the ongoing involvement in national and local research projects support the continuous and sustained improvement of services for children.
41. Strategic partnerships in Wiltshire are strong. The local authority is central to a number of high-performing strategic and operational partnership boards and

forums, including the Safeguarding Vulnerable People Partnership, that regularly measure and evaluate the impact of partnership working for children. There is effective support and challenge between leaders and managers when partnership working and services are not making the positive difference they need to for children. The family judiciary, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and key partners, including police and schools, report positively about the quality of practice, strong partnership working and the impact of services for children.

42. A high number of children in care live in stable foster homes that are close to their home communities. This reflects the successful recruitment of foster carers, including connected carers, and strong and effective external commissioning arrangements. The sufficiency of homes for children in care and for care leavers has been a key priority for senior leaders over the last three years and continues to be an area of significant investment and development. A sufficiency strategy is in place and positive progress is being made to continue to increase the number and range of local foster carers, supported accommodation and children's homes for children.
43. Leaders across the council are incredibly proud and motivated corporate parents. There is robust scrutiny of the development and impact of services for children in care and care leavers through a high-functioning corporate board. Partner agencies are engaged well in planning and oversight. Children in care and care leavers take part in a regular programme of activities to help to increase their confidence and life skills as well as influencing how services and support are developed and provided. They are involved in creative projects such as a podcast to help other children understand what it is like to be in care as well as in the recruitment of staff.
44. The views and experiences of children and parents are being listened to by political and children's services leaders and acted upon. A significant and ever-growing number of children, parents and carers are actively involved in an extensive range of meaningful participation activities and forums which have informed strategic plans and led to positive changes in operational practice and service development. These include the creation of a new care leavers' young parent group, a young people's fostering panel consultation group, parents designing the Wiltshire 'family promise' and the creation of the new family advisory board.
45. Senior leaders have a good overview of service strengths and of almost all areas for further development. Practice standards clearly set out expectations for how services and support for children will be delivered. Performance information is used effectively to help get in front of emerging trends and to address the impact of increasing need. A comprehensive quality assurance framework, including a new audit reporting and management system, is used well at a strategic level by senior leaders and managers. Alongside performance management information, it is used to identify areas of practice that can be improved and to monitor subsequent improvement activity. However, for

individual children and individual workers, managers are not using the learning from audits within supervision to support practice improvement. Audits are too often overly focused on compliance rather than the impact being achieved for children and the quality of audit recordings do not always reflect how judgements have been arrived at. While leaders have identified where improvements need to be made in the quality of auditing, quality assurance activity has not identified the limitations in the recording of management oversight and supervision of frontline practice.

46. Leaders are responding to, and managing, workforce pressures well and there are lots of opportunities for workers to meet senior leaders and to help influence the development of practice. Workers benefit from a comprehensive employment and workplace well-being offer and are encouraged to pursue career progression and development. They have access to a comprehensive range of training which is informed by skills surveys and confidence surveys to ensure that it meets their needs. These measures are helping to ensure that there is a stable workforce, which, in turn, supports more children to benefit from enduring relationships with their workers.
47. Workers report feeling highly supported by accessible and visible managers. Workers' caseloads are mostly manageable and, for a small number of workers with higher caseloads, including newly qualified social workers, managers are actively working on plans to reduce these. Workers are positive about working for Wiltshire. They are passionate and proud about their work with children and the positive difference they make for them.



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