

Aviation House  
125 Kingsway  
London WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231  
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk  
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Paul Boyce  
Director of Children's Services  
Metropolitan Borough of Wirral  
Hamilton Building  
132 Conway Street  
Birkenhead  
Wirral  
CH41 6JE

Dear Mr Boyce

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

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Wirral children's services on 11 and 12 December 2017. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2016. The inspectors were Sheena Doyle HMI and Shabana Abasi HMI.

The local authority is now beginning to show signs of making some progress in improving services for its children and young people who are looked after. Following a slow start, the direction of travel is now more promising, though there is still a great deal of work to be done.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

The focus of this monitoring visit was looked after children. Inspectors tracked and sampled a number of children's cases to assess how well their needs were being met and their outcomes improving, including their emotional well-being and the progress of their education. The local authority audited each child's case file in advance of the monitoring visit. Consideration was also given to the impact of advocacy services and the progress of planning for children subject to care proceedings.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records and discussions with social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs). Meetings were held with senior managers to discuss the improvements in services for all children looked after, including their educational attainment. Inspectors spoke with nine children in care and care leavers and their views are included in this letter.

### **Overview**

The local authority, in addition to the inspection findings, has identified other areas requiring further improvement and has taken action to achieve these improvements,

but this has happened too recently for the impact to be evaluated. The focus is shifting from social workers complying with minimum standards and procedures to improving the quality of practice for the benefit of children, but this will require wholesale cultural and practice changes. The local authority has a well-informed understanding of the scale of changes required and is now in a better place to achieve these. Overall, inspectors saw improvements in compliance but little improvement in the quality of practice. Of the small sample of cases inspectors looked at, good practice was seen in a minority of cases, and this good practice was largely down to the good work of individual social workers rather than the progress in implementation of the improvement plan.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Services for children looked after have been subjected to internal scrutiny since June 2017, some 11 months after the last inspection. The number of children looked after at the time of the inspection was 705. The number of children looked after continues to increase and currently stands at 837, in turn increasing the demand on all parts of the service. Senior managers told inspectors that they have identified more deficits than was reported at the time of the inspection. An increase in the number of social work staff and managers is a welcome response to managing the increasing demands on the service, even though this has necessitated an increase in temporary staff. Considerable effort is under way to stabilise the workforce, with some early signs of success. However, the majority of the tracked cases show that many children have had two or three social workers and IROs so far in 2017, as well as a number of changes in social worker in previous years.

Children looked after described to inspectors what staff turnover meant for them. They unanimously expressed unhappiness at the number of changes of social workers and IROs. One young person said that they had had 36 different social workers. They described the range of negative impacts on them: they felt unhappy about not being given advance notice of a new worker or who it would be, and said that the new social workers did not always understand their past or what life was like for them. Changes of workers meant that there were delays in things happening for them, and understandably, they have become increasingly unwilling to form trusting relationships with another person when they cannot be sure how long they will be their social worker for.

Senior education and health staff spoken with said that changes in social workers sometimes result in poor information sharing, for example in advising partner agencies of placement changes or breakdowns.

The local authority accurately notes that the six tracked cases highlight areas of historic poor practice. Senior managers believe that there is evidence of better practice over the last three months. The local authority's overall judgement of the cases found one to be good, three to require improvement, and two to be inadequate. Inspectors agreed with many of the findings of the audits, but found the

judgements made by the local authority in some of the cases to be overly positive given the volume of deficits identified by both the local authority auditors and inspectors.

Inspectors saw recent better compliance with essential minimum requirements, such as completing plans, convening essential meetings and recording casework. Social workers understand the need for children to have plans, including personal education plans (PEPs). Full compliance on PEPs has not yet been achieved and the virtual headteacher noted that only 50% of children looked after had an up-to-date PEP in November 2017. The quality of PEPs remains variable, as it was at the last inspection, although very recent plans show improvements, for example they detail educational progress to date and future target setting. This is not true of earlier PEPs completed by social workers without sufficient input from schools. Since September 2017, draft PEPs have been quality controlled by the virtual school's progress officers to ensure that they are sufficiently aspirational and take account of the child's views. This should improve their quality and value.

Increased capacity in the virtual school is showing early signs of benefits to children looked after, but it is too soon to see the full impact of these changes. The virtual headteacher's post only became full time in July 2017. An additional senior post was also created to focus on improving educational outcomes for all vulnerable children. From September 2017, the team has had access to an educational psychologist on one day per week. However, because of sickness, the educational psychologist is not currently working.

Training in PEP completion has been delivered, and the educational progress of children looked after is now being carefully tracked. The virtual headteacher has a good grasp of current strengths and weaknesses, and has a clear plan to drive forward further improvements. Current performance outlines the scale of the task faced by the virtual school. The local authority's data shows that while the gap between attainment for all pupils and children in care was roughly the same as the previous year, there is variable progress across the key stages. At key stage 1, attainment in reading, writing and mathematics combined, fewer children looked after met the expected standard and the attainment gap between all children and children looked after widened. Progress was better at key stage 2. At key stage 4, the local authority reports that the gap between all Wirral children and those who are looked after remains an important area requiring further improvement.

The expansion in the virtual school is also essential to addressing issues of attendance and exclusion. There are 27 pupils whose attendance fell below 90% and increasing numbers of children looked after have been permanently excluded this year. The limited capacity in the virtual school means that it does not directly liaise with the education providers for children who are placed outside the borough, relying on social workers to do this. As a result, the virtual school is unable to assure itself that the out-of-borough providers are suitable and sufficiently ambitious for these children.

All children looked after who were tracked have up-to-date completed strengths and difficulties questionnaires (SDQs) that provide a measure of the children's emotional well-being and needs. However, not all social workers understand the purpose of SDQs or what they need to do with the findings in order to help children. Senior health and children's social care managers confirmed that training has been rolled out, but not all staff have accessed this. Therefore, the impact of this is limited.

A key shortfall remains the absence of up-to-date assessments for children looked after. These are crucial as their circumstances and needs change over time. Historical concerns are not always appropriately included in forward plans. Risks from, or to, children are not clearly articulated. Senior managers advised that, at the beginning of the year, no children looked after had an up-to-date assessment of need, but there has been recent activity to begin to redress this. None of the tracked cases had an up-to-date assessment, although all the social workers said that they were in the process of undertaking these. The absence of up-to-date assessments blunts the focus, and undermines the effectiveness, of plans and interventions.

Care planning is not 'SMART' enough. It is not always clear what outcomes are expected for children looked after from their care experience. Children's plans do not always take account of all of their needs and do not progress swiftly enough. Clear planning is essential for achieving permanency for children in care. However, permanency is not well understood by most of the staff that inspectors spoke to. Some short-term goals and services, such as time-limited placements, were described as providing long-term stability for them. Drift in care planning has led to some children ending up in long-term placements by default rather than by good planning. It was not clear that placement breakdowns had been sufficiently analysed to reduce the likelihood of recurrence and improve matching for some children going forward. For children who have been in care for a long time, deficits in assessment and planning have exacerbated their already traumatic experiences. The full impact of this is not taken into consideration in their current plans.

Case recording is generally up to date. The electronic case recording system is not being used to its maximum. Children often do not have genograms or useful chronologies, which would provide accessible ways of seeing what life has been like for them. These become even more important when there are frequent changes of staff and, alongside up-to-date comprehensive assessments and smart plans, are essential to avoid drift and delay.

Case files show variable managerial case oversight and staff supervision. Some show frequent oversight while others show infrequent or no electronic records of supervision. The complexity of the cases tracked demonstrates the need for good-quality reflective supervision and management oversight to ensure that children's plans are appropriate and progressing swiftly.

Increasing numbers of IRO escalations show more strength from this service in addressing drift, and this is positive. However, the service is not yet ensuring that

children's plans are sufficiently specific and measurable. For a minority of the tracked children, professionals working with the children did not demonstrate sufficient strength and tenacity in ensuring that the child was being well cared for and thriving. Social workers vary in the extent to which they undertake and record direct, purposeful work with children.

Auditing continues to be undertaken by managers, helping them develop their skills to agree and share what good practice should look like. Social workers told inspectors that they find the auditing process and feedback useful. The current audit tool used for this monitoring visit contains too much narrative. It would be more useful for there to be a sharper focus on strengths and weaknesses of different aspects of social work practice. The local authority has revised its audit template in recognition of current shortfalls and plans for the revised template to be rolled out shortly.

Headteachers spoken with described a positive change of culture over the last 18 months. This has been led by the senior leadership team in children's services. They say that this has resulted in more collaborative working between agencies, and better multi-agency work with families and children. They were particularly positive about additional mental health and well-being resources linked to schools, and described swift access to appropriate services for vulnerable pupils as a result.

Participation by children in their own planning processes is encouraged well. A good range of child-friendly tools are used to help them share their views, and children have been involved in the design of these. The IRO service tracks participation closely. Children looked after have access to advocates, but the extent to which they understand and know how to access advocacy is unclear. The advocacy service attended 36 meetings for children looked after in the most recent quarter, offered interventions to seven living outside the borough, and independent visitors were offered to four. Advocates in total offered support to 89 children in the last quarter. However, the data from the electronic case record indicates that only 13 children looked after and care leavers were receiving a service from the advocacy service at the time of the monitoring visit.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sheena Doyle  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**