

Wiltshire Council

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 3 June 2019 to 19 June 2019

Lead inspector: Steve Lowe
Her Majesty’s Inspector

Judgement	Grade
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

The determined and well-focused leadership of the executive director, combined with the corporate resolution of key elected members, has paid dividends for children in Wiltshire. There have been significant improvements since the last inspection in 2015, when all areas of the service required improvement to be good.

With strong political and corporate support, senior leaders have succeeded in stabilising the workforce and giving social workers the time they need to work purposefully with families and children. The local authority has improved its services for children and offers a consistently good response to families and children in need of help and protection. Senior leaders have built strong partnerships that strengthen the response that families get when they are in crisis.

Social workers know the children they work with very well. Children increasingly receive the help and support they need from the right people at the right time. Children in care and care leavers are in permanent, stable homes and make good progress in all but a small number of cases.

Senior leaders and frontline practitioners are driven by a determination to improve the life chances of children in Wiltshire, including those who arrive from overseas during times of crisis. A sophisticated approach to performance management has resulted in there being a tight grip on current practice and an ability to both plan for and transform the services that children and families need through the Families and Children's Transformation (FACT) programme, which is a whole-system partnership approach.

Senior managers have responded well to increasing pressure to find the right places for children to live, and have created a greater choice of homes. However, for some children this choice remains too limited. In addition to this, children's records are not clear and accurate across all parts of the service. However, senior leaders were already aware of this issue and show a commitment to achieving greater consistency through robust quality assurance.

What needs to improve

- Raising awareness of private fostering in the local community.
- The impact of services on children's health and education when they are in care.
- The clarity and accuracy of children's records when they are in care.
- The availability of suitable placements when children first come into care.
- The quality of social work supervision.

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

1. Children and young people in Wiltshire benefit from increasingly timely and well-targeted early help services. Senior leaders have streamlined services to make it easier for families to get the help they need as early as possible, and have engaged well with partners to strengthen the local offer. Senior leaders have taken action to ensure that awareness of the local early help offer is more widely understood across the partnership.
2. The local authority has also taken decisive action to improve the offer to children and families where early help has not supported families quickly enough. Family keyworkers have been introduced as part of the support and safeguarding service. Their direct work with families is having a positive impact on children.
3. Children in need of help and protection, including disabled children, receive a swift and effective response to their needs. Senior leaders have implemented a Diagnostic and Referral Tool (DART) to ensure that the quality of referral information from partners is of a good quality and that thresholds are well understood and applied. The development of the early help hub ensures that partners concerned about children can readily access services through a variety of pathways as well as seek advice from social care professionals. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) in Wiltshire demonstrates impressive partnership working, ensuring that decision-making on contacts is swift and is considered from multiple points of view.
4. Referrals, including domestic abuse notifications, are well managed, and thresholds for intervention are applied consistently. Managers within the MASH make good decisions on contacts and this oversight results in clearly recorded action plans for social workers to follow. Consent is sought appropriately, and social workers ensure that parents, including absent fathers, are encouraged to participate in assessment and planning appropriately. Referrals from the police

clearly identify the risks to children and contain well-informed recommendations for further action.

5. Child protection enquiries are effective and well coordinated. Risks to children are identified swiftly, appropriate decisions are made, and subsequent actions are purposeful. Strategy meetings and discussions are timely and are well attended by a range of agencies, which contribute appropriately. Strategy meetings result in clear, timebound action plans that target what needs to change in order for children to be protected.
6. The quality and timeliness of assessments of children are good. Assessments routinely identify risk and protective factors and result in a detailed and comprehensive analysis of risk and the lived experience of the child. Pre-birth assessments and assessments of parents completed by the specialist contact and assessment team are of a consistently high quality. Children's views routinely influence children's assessments and plans.
7. Social workers visit their children regularly and often exceed the levels of visiting frequency expected by managers. The quality of direct work with families undertaken by workers is a strength. There are many examples of highly sensitive and powerful direct work that has resulted in a deeper understanding of the child's experiences. Social workers routinely see children alone. Social workers are highly committed to monitoring the welfare of children and go 'above and beyond' to ensure that these relationships are protected and strengthened at every opportunity.
8. The quality of child protection and child in need plans is good. Plans are outcome-focused and specific, with a consistent emphasis on the needs of the child. Timescales are clear, and actions are clearly tracked and reviewed by managers and child protection chairs regularly. Plans clearly set out for parents what needs to change, as well as the consequences of not making these improvements. In a small minority of cases, contingency planning is weak. Multi-agency meetings, such as child protection conferences and core group meetings, are well attended. Key partners share information in a timely and effective way, and this information is routinely used to inform assessment and planning for children.
9. Responses to children at risk from domestic abuse are effective, and decisive action is taken by social workers to protect children when required. The use of safety plans for families to reduce risk themselves is routinely in place and these are of a good quality. Social workers' expectations of parents are realistic, well recorded and specific.
10. The use of the pre-proceedings aspect of the public law outline (PLO) is good. Letters before proceedings appropriately outline concerns and the actions required of parents. Social workers ensure that parents are clear about what is expected of them and which areas of their parenting need to improve.

Experienced managers monitor the progression of cases under PLO well. In the vast majority of cases, applications to court are timely when children's circumstances do not improve. Family group conferences are used well by social workers to explore opportunities for children to remain in the care of their wider family. In a small minority of cases where children have experienced long-term neglect, escalation to PLO and care proceedings does not take place within a timescale that meet the needs of children. While action has recently been taken to address this matter, this cohort of children have been exposed to risk longer than necessary.

11. Responses to children who go missing are largely effective, and reporting mechanisms are swift, resulting in well-coordinated plans to locate and safeguard children. Coordinators for children who go missing ensure that any missing children are tracked, notifications are quickly assessed, and information is disseminated to allocated social workers when appropriate. For those children already receiving a service, return home interviews are not always completed promptly by social workers. The completion of return home interviews for children in care is low. As a result, there are missed opportunities to gather information that could reduce individual risk to children and inform wider intelligence gathering across Wiltshire.
12. Arrangements to identify and provide support to young people at risk of sexual exploitation are well coordinated and are delivered effectively by a specialist team. Use of the child sexual exploitation tool is of a good quality and is reapplied as risks change. The quality of planning to reduce risks to children is consistently strong. Effective multi-agency strategic work results in a comprehensive understanding of vulnerable groups of young people as well as local hotspots. Coordinated work with the newly formed national county lines centre is well embedded. Strategic disruption and prevention activity has led to a variety of creative interventions to protect young people.
13. There has been a steady rise in parents electing to educate their children at home in Wiltshire. The local authority is acting to ensure that it understands why parents are making this decision and to ensure that there is effective support for families. The number of children missing education has reduced. Those missing education are mainly children whose families have gone to live abroad or who are from the Traveller community. The local authority shares information and makes checks, including with the police and border agencies, to ensure that children moving overseas are protected. However, senior leaders recognise that there is further work to be done to engage more proactively with Traveller families.
14. Arrangements to respond to children in Wiltshire who are privately fostered are underdeveloped. Awareness-raising and training for key partners in Wiltshire is limited and does not sufficiently promote the needs of these children or the requirement to assess their living arrangements. When children are identified as being privately fostered, social workers visit the families in a timely way.

However, case records do not always reflect whether the child has been seen or seen alone. As a result, senior leaders cannot satisfy themselves that the welfare of these children is sufficiently monitored.

15. Children who are 16 or 17 and are potentially homeless receive a sensitive and timely service and their rights and options are carefully considered. The vast majority of these children are helped to return to their family and friends.
16. Children are safeguarded by a responsive and effective emergency duty service (EDS). Partners use the service well for consultation and advice and get a sound professional response. Good communication exists between EDS and day services. Action taken to address the presenting emergency is thorough and children and families in crisis receive a swift response to their needs.
17. Arrangements to manage allegations against professionals are timely, comprehensive and effective. Thresholds are well understood and are consistently applied. Allegations management meetings are well attended and well recorded. Multi-agency meetings share information effectively. This results in well-coordinated and timebound action plans that protect children and ensure that investigations are thorough and purposeful. Tracking arrangements to monitor progress of individual investigations are comprehensive and prevent unnecessary delays for children.

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

18. Children in care and care leavers receive a good service in Wiltshire. The vast majority of children in care live in stable, permanent homes that meet their needs. Social workers and personal advisers (PAs) know the children and young people well, visit them regularly and build meaningful relationships with them. Tenacious social work and advocacy ensure that children's views are pivotal in plans for their future, and their experience and progress improve once they are in care.
19. When decisions are made for children to come into care, these are appropriate. When necessary, immediate action is taken to safeguard children. Effective use of pre-proceedings letters and the good quality of assessments result in timely court decisions that meet the needs of the children and keep them safe when they can no longer remain at home.
20. When children return home from care, there is mostly purposeful work to ensure that changes have been made and sustained by parents. Social workers and family key workers help families to develop support networks in their community.

21. Children are seen and the majority are seen alone by their social workers. They have good relationships with their social workers, who take great care to ensure that their needs are met, that they are happy and settled and are achieving their potential.
22. Care plans for children are of a variable quality but most reflect the individual needs of the child, including contact arrangements, identity and diversity. Children and young people have regular visits with their family and other people who are important to them wherever possible. A minority of plans are not updated routinely or in a timely way following significant events or changes in children's circumstances.
23. The majority of children's assessments completed for looked after children reviews are of a good quality, with children's wishes and feelings carefully considered. Some social workers write in the first person. These children's records are child friendly; they bring the child to life and evidence a real sense of care. Independent reviewing officers are effective in supporting the progress of children's plans and appropriately escalating when needed. However, care plans are not always clear about when actions need to be completed.
24. Since the last inspection, meeting children's health needs has improved. However, challenges remain in ensuring that all children benefit from a timely initial and review health assessment, particularly those children placed at a distance from their families.
25. Not all children receive timely therapeutic support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). However, once children are seen, it makes a positive difference to their lives.
26. School leaders are positive about the support provided by the virtual school officers. However, attainment and progress in reading, writing and mathematics for children in care is too variable between subjects. Leaders of the virtual school have a wealth of data information, but, when weaknesses are found, they do not act with sufficient urgency to make the changes needed to improve pupils' achievement. Leaders are not sufficiently rigorous in their monitoring of the work and impact of the virtual school officers. As a result, the quality of personal education plans (PEPs) is variable.
27. There is careful oversight of children's journeys to permanence, underpinned by sensitive, child-centred work. In the strongest examples, there is careful planning covering two or three options for permanence. A wide range of options are pursued, including special guardianship, long-term fostering, adoption and enabling children to live within their extended families.
28. The majority of children in care in Wiltshire live with foster carers on a long-term basis. The stability of these placements is good, and most children stay in the same place once they come into care. Children are supported to see their birth

families, go to local schools and take part in a range of activities that they enjoy. Most children are making good progress due to the tenacity and care provided by well-supported carers.

29. Social workers and PAs engage in some creative direct work with children. This includes life-story work, which helps children understand why they are in care and decisions that have been made about the rest of their family.
30. The arrangements for finding children adoptive parents are a strength. The new relationship with Adoption West, the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) is working well and has been seamless for both children and carers. Children in Wiltshire are waiting less time than ever to move in with their adoptive family. The scrutiny of the performance of the RAA is thorough and challenging.
31. Children who arrive as unaccompanied minors are promptly safeguarded and placed in independent supported accommodation or foster care according to their assessed needs. Clear planning ensures that these children make progress in all areas of their lives. The specialist social workers in Wiltshire have responded well to the complexities of safeguarding these children.
32. When children in care go missing, the number who are offered return home interviews has improved since the previous inspection, and these are routinely completed by adults that the children know well. However, they are not always timely or recorded in detail.
33. Advocacy is a strong feature for children in Wiltshire. A large number of children benefit from independent advice from advocates because of an effective opt-out process. This, and the good use of independent visitors, gives children a valuable support to have their views heard and their rights upheld.
34. Children are actively involved in the running of the council. Senior leaders respond quickly to issues raised by the children in care council and individual children through complaints and representations. The care leavers' promise delivers practical support that young people have identified as important for them.
35. For care leavers, there is tenacious work by PAs, and young people value their support. PAs work hard to stay in touch with young people at a level that balances need with a respect for independence. In some cases, PAs significantly increase visits at times when young people are in crisis. Most care leavers are routinely provided with support to develop independence skills. Care leavers are supported to move on into their own accommodation at a time when they are ready. Young people report that they are provided with good accommodation in areas where they feel safe. An increasing number of care leavers continue their education or gain employment due to the tenacity and resourcefulness of their PAs. In too many cases, this valuable work is not reflected in case records and pathway plans. Senior managers are aware of this issue.

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

36. Resolute corporate and political support has resulted in more resources being made available to senior leaders who have used these to good effect; services for the most vulnerable children and families are now securely good. The extra resource has successfully stabilised social work teams, bringing down workloads to a manageable level.
37. Since the previous inspection, the executive director for children and education and senior managers have invested time and effort in a performance management system that allows them to identify current trends and areas for improvement. In turn, this results in effective scrutiny and oversight of children's services by elected members.
38. Joint working between the local authority and the police is particularly effective and has progressed significantly in terms of community support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), and a shared vigilance of the threat of county lines and exploitation in the county.
39. Senior leaders know where to focus their energy, time and resources. They have effective strategies in place to address current and future demands. The introduction of the early support hub is clearly giving families access to the services they need at the point they need them. The PAUSE project, supporting women who have had children removed in the past, is proving successful. Both of these examples illustrate a cogent response to the needs of Wiltshire's children and families.
40. Relationships with the judiciary and CAFCASS are strong, reflected in the positive feedback that both give regarding the quality of legal support, evidence and preparedness of social workers presenting in the family court.
41. The executive director has taken personal responsibility for the recent move to Adoption West, taking on the role of responsible individual for the new agency. There has been no detriment to Wiltshire children; in fact, performance has improved through this time period.
42. Relationships with health colleagues are less effective, as evidenced by the waiting lists for CAMHS and delays in assessing the health needs of children in care. This has been exacerbated by poor joint scrutiny of commissioned health services.
43. Senior leaders in the council are active and effective corporate parents. Consequently, children receive tangible benefits from their corporate parents. For example, care leavers are exempt from paying council tax, receive free

leisure passes and have access to apprenticeships and work opportunities within the council.

44. Senior leaders have a good track record of responding to emerging issues. They demonstrate learning from serious case reviews, their own auditing of practice and intelligence shared by partners, for example increased services for unborn babies and those children under one, a quick and effective response to a large increase in UASC, and a front foot response to the challenges of exploitation. The three executive directors who have chief executive responsibilities combine to consider vulnerable children in planning across the council. The new arrangements for safeguarding children are forward-thinking in that they consider vulnerable children and adults on a continuum, rather than in isolation.
45. Due to a lack of placement choice, a small minority of children are poorly matched. These children experience a number of moves or are in placements that are not meeting their needs. Senior leaders have a comprehensive and credible strategy for addressing this challenging issue.
46. The local authority has a good knowledge of its community, including pockets of poverty, vulnerabilities to exploitation and the impact of armed forces resettlement. Senior leaders' self-assessment is accurate and demonstrates that they know their services well. However, the links between children's social care, education and the Traveller community are under-developed.
47. Performance management has improved significantly since the last inspection. Senior leaders have a determined interest in monitoring performance and a system that they trust. This information is analysed effectively, and the performance outcomes board combines data, feedback and auditing activity to drive improvements for children. A comprehensive range of themed audits add insight for senior leaders and highlight areas for development clearly.
48. Management decisions for children in need and for those children who need help and protection are clear, and supervision is regular and reflective. For children in care and care leavers, the recording of management decisions and supervision is much more variable, with significant gaps for some children. Consequently, it is not always clear when and why important decisions have been made or how significant events in children's lives have been responded to.
49. Social workers have a workload that is manageable, following significant investment to increase the number of practitioners in Wiltshire. Social workers in their assessed year are protected and the aspiring manager programme gives extra supervisory capacity to teams, as well as an additional career path option.
50. Senior leaders have managed the introduction of a new recording system well. This ambitious project is on target to make information between services and partners more immediate and contextual. During the changes, locating children's information has been challenging for some parts of the service.

51. Senior leaders acknowledge that the workforce strategy requires updating to reflect Wiltshire's ambitions for the future and to develop core skills across existing partnerships. Consultation and analysis of these service priorities is well underway. Currently, training needs are identified through workforce surveys, audit findings, feedback from children, learning from complaints and serious case reviews. However, social workers largely self-identify their training needs and find it difficult to evidence the impact of training. Annual appraisals are not routinely undertaken.
52. Staff report that they enjoy working for Wiltshire and have a career path that meets their aspirations. Mentoring for staff gives more depth to this approach and is having a positive impact on staff retention. The use of agency workers is greatly reduced, and children are having fewer changes of social worker as a result.



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