

1 November 2024

Ms Alison Hinds
Director of Children's Services
St Peters Square
Wolverhampton
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Dear Ms Hinds

Focused visit to Wolverhampton children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wolverhampton children's services on 2 and 3 October 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Gareth Dakin and Sophie Wales.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan with a primary focus on services provided to children in need.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

At the time of the visit, Wolverhampton was one of 10 local authorities designated by the Department for Education as wave one of the 'Families first for children pathfinder programme'.

Senior leaders, supported by the lead member, the wider council and key partners, have continued to ensure that services for children and families remain a high priority across Wolverhampton, and aspirational plans are in place to improve services further. The needs of children and families subject to child-in-need or protection planning are understood.

Areas for improvement raised in the ILACS inspection in 2022 and considered in this visit have been advanced by senior leaders and the practice regarding children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless and children who go missing has strengthened as a result.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Quality and consistency of supervision.

Main findings

Children receive an effective and timely response when they are referred to the Children's Assessment Team. Comprehensive family help discussions and plans provide a clear and focused analysis of the presenting needs of children. These are informed by the family's history and specific circumstances and include multi-agency input.

Thresholds in Wolverhampton are well understood and are consistently applied. Most children who are supported by child-in-need assessments and plans in Wolverhampton receive a consistent and effective service. Children are seen regularly by skilled and committed practitioners who show patience, kindness and understanding in how they engage and build relationships with children and their families.

Rigorous and detailed management oversight in the Children's Assessment Team is a strength. It provides clear rationale, direction and decision-making. This ensures that children do not need to wait for interventions to commence.

A new Family Help Service brings together targeted early help and child-in-need social work in eight community-based family hubs. For some children in need, their plans are allocated to and progressed by strengthening families workers. Those children in need who require ongoing social work involvement are allocated a social worker. Although this model of practice is not mature, having recently been implemented, the direction of travel is positive. Most children and their families are provided with the right level and type of support at the right time.

Practitioners in the Family Help Service know their children and families well. They work positively and proactively with children and their families and provide support and guidance to promote positive change for children and families.

There is a strong recognition and consideration around the needs of children and families. Where risks and other needs are identified, these are responded to in a timely way for most children.

Family help discussions and plans are detailed and are appropriately focused on the needs and risks present in children's lives. Most family help plans clearly set out what help is needed, by who, why and when. Reviews of family help plans ensure that children and families participate in their planning, and this supports plans to progress for children.

Most children presenting as homeless receive a timely and proportionate response. Alongside a shared protocol with housing, children who present as homeless have access to specialist support to ensure that they are informed of their rights and

entitlements, and they are provided with safe and appropriate accommodation, care and support in line with their needs.

When children go missing, skilled practitioners respond in a proportionate and considered way. Risks are identified and are reviewed by a range of agencies to ensure that risk is understood, shared and responded to, to safeguard children and mitigate risk.

Management oversight at key decision points is mostly strong. Interventions for children and families are appropriately escalated and de-escalated in a timely way. Managers are supported by clear systems and processes, and they collaborate with practitioners to ensure that informed and timely decisions are made for children and families.

Practitioners said that they feel well supported and described managers as 'approachable' and 'knowledgeable'. Supervision is held regularly for most practitioners, and this is recorded on children's files. Records of supervision show that children's plans are being discussed and there is management oversight. Nevertheless, records of supervision do not consistently provide sufficient reflection, direction or challenge.

Strong relationships across the council and with safeguarding partners ensure that most children can access the right services at the right time. Information-sharing protocols are clear and there is a collaborative and coordinated approach to working with children and families.

Senior leaders have developed a clear quality assurance framework that supports them to understand social work practice and children's experiences. In most cases, audits are carried out collaboratively with practitioners to understand impact for children. More work is needed to strengthen the audit process and support further learning and improvements in practice. Leaders are aware of this and are reviewing their quality assurance processes as part of their wider service plans.

Strong corporate support has enabled strategies to be implemented that attract and retain staff within family help and children's services as a whole. This is improving workforce stability in Wolverhampton, and children and families are having fewer unplanned changes of practitioner as a result.

Practitioners feel positive and proud to work for Wolverhampton and feel that they are having an impact on the lives of children and families. Senior leaders, managers and practitioners are strengthening the practice culture in Wolverhampton so that it is shared and understood by all. This is reflected in the strength of work with children and families in Wolverhampton.

Ofsted will consider the findings from this visit when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Gareth Dakin
His Majesty's Inspector