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Dear Ms White

Focused visit to Wirral children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wirral children's services on 25 and 26 January 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Matt Reed and Louise Hollick.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for planning and achieving permanence, with a particular focus on children at home on placement with parent regulations, children living with connected carers, and special guardianship orders.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out partly by remote means. Inspectors used video and telephone calls for discussions with leaders, young people, carers and professionals from other agencies. Inspectors were primarily on site to meet social workers.

Headline findings

At the last inspection, in 2019, children's services in Wirral had improved in all areas and were judged overall to be requires improvement to be good. Planning for permanence, and direct work and life-story work for children, were identified in the inspection as areas which required further improvement. Improvements have been achieved but further work is required to ensure that assessment and permanence planning is consistent for all children.

Senior leaders continue to have an accurate and realistic view of the quality of services. They acknowledge the need for ongoing improvement, the pace of which has slowed partly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Robust quality assurance and performance management by managers and senior leaders ensure that they are well sighted on where improvements have been made and where further work is required to strengthen practice.

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

- The evaluation of direct work, to demonstrate that children's views and experiences influence care planning.
- Escalation by independent reviewing officers (IRO) to address drift and delay in planning for children.
- The consistency of records of supervision, to evidence that reflective discussions are being held that help social workers to deliver plans for children.

Main findings

Wirral children's services last judgement inspection was in 2019, when overall services to children and families were judged to have improved from the previously inadequate judgement. Senior leaders have ensured that service improvement has continued, alongside adapting to the challenges brought by the pandemic. There has been some workforce instability due to increased sickness levels. Staff retention remains a challenge as more employment opportunities arise outside the local authority. Senior leaders are well sighted on these issues and acknowledge that the pace of improvement has been affected by the ongoing pandemic.

Social workers who met inspectors were positive about working for Wirral. They believe that there have been service improvements and they feel supported by managers, who are available to them.

Children are being seen regularly. As a result, children are given the opportunity to develop positive and trusting relationships with social workers, who know them well and have a good understanding of the children's history, current needs and circumstances. Direct work is being carried out but is not always purposeful or evaluated. Therefore, it is not clear if, or how, children's views and experiences are influencing care planning.

Planning for permanence is not consistent for all children. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary report that the local authority is making applications at the right time for the child. Care planning and consideration of permanence is effective when matters enter the courts. Social work evidence to the courts is of a good quality. However, inspectors found that, for some children, planning for permanence was more process driven and sequential, rather than one in which all options are considered in parallel. This means that, for some children, permanence plans are not confirmed at the earliest opportunity.

Thresholds for Public Law Outline (PLO) are appropriate and regular legal gateway meetings help senior managers to ensure that they maintain oversight of decision-making. Appropriate assessments of parents and extended family are completed for cases in PLO processes and, whenever possible, children are supported to remain within their family network. Effective pre-proceedings meetings are timely for most

children. This ensures that plans progress and decisions are made in a timescale that is right for the child.

For children subject to legal orders at home, a lack of decision-making, alongside a lack of urgency in completing parenting assessments, means that some children are subject to these arrangements for extended periods of time. Some children have been subject to these arrangements all their lives. There is little evidence in case records of this drift being challenged or addressed by team managers or IROs. For some children, there was little evidence that sustained social care involvement had resulted in significant progress in their experiences.

Not all assessments are of a consistently good quality and they do not always prompt effective decision-making. Some children and families' assessments are overly descriptive, with limited analysis of risk and need. Permanence assessments are stronger; they are concise and enable the reader to gain an understanding of historical concerns, current issues and the rationale for plans. Parenting assessments to guide decisions about children returning home are thorough. They also enable social workers and managers to reach clear decisions which effectively balance children's risks and needs, and support to families.

Children's therapeutic needs are identified and most children are helped to understand their life history and circumstances. Children's case records and care plans are sensitively written. These will aid a child's understanding of their history should they seek to view their files at a later date.

There is oversight of children's plans, but this is not always effective in addressing delay. Not all care planning meetings are attended by the relevant professionals, which limits discussion and oversight of the plan. The input of IROs is evident in case records, but these do not evidence that issues are escalated to managers when relevant or that they lead to actions that reduce delay for children. As a result, not all care plans progress in a timescale that is right for the child.

Social workers receive regular supervision, but the recording of supervision does not consistently demonstrate that reflective discussions have taken place that are driving plans for children. Better quality recordings are detailed and clearly demonstrate the quality of discussion, alongside identifying actions and timescales. Others are bulletpoint lists, with no indication that any drift and delay in planning is addressed effectively.

Senior managers provide robust oversight of children when they are matched with long-term carers. Permanence panel minutes show that meeting discussions include appropriate challenge and consideration of support, to ensure that children's needs are met and that placements are not vulnerable to breakdown.

Connected carers report a good level of support, regular supervision and access to training which is helping them in their caring role. Alternative permanence options, such as special guardianship, have been discussed with them. Although none were

choosing to pursue these options, there was no detriment to the children, who have been able to live in stable homes within their extended family network.

Cafcass and the local judiciary provided positive feedback about the quality of work presented to court. The local authority is open to challenge and is actively part of regional working groups to consider changes to practice in the local area.

Inspectors met with the care leavers' group to seek their views. The young people provided a positive view of the service and the support that they have received, especially from their personal advisers. They are a dedicated, committed and engaging group of young people, who provided a good overview of what they have achieved to improve services. Although most are now older and no longer in receipt of social work services, it was their view that services have improved.

The quality assurance framework is comprehensive, audits are thorough and auditors are realistic about the quality of work. Moderation offers additional oversight of the work and auditing practice. Thematic reports, enhanced by seeking feedback from families and young people, provide a useful overview of practice. Social workers are invited to a reflective discussion, which facilitates them in being active participants of the audit process and promotes their learning.

Senior leaders have an accurate and realistic view of the quality of services, of where improvements have been made and where further work is required to strengthen practice. As a result of robust quality assurance and performance management, senior leaders target the areas that need the most improvement to facilitate a more consistent service for all.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Matt Reed
Her Majesty's Inspector