

Inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services

Warrington

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Reporting inspector Brendan Parkinson

Age group: All

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About this inspection

1. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services in the local area towards ensuring that children and young people are properly safeguarded and to determine the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. The inspection team consisted of four of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one inspector from the Care Quality Commission. The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004.
2. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:
 - discussions with children and young people receiving services, front line managers, senior officers including the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, elected members and a range of health and other partner agency and community representatives
 - analysing and evaluating reports from a variety of sources including a review of the Children and Young People's Plan, performance data, information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day care provision and the evaluations of a serious case review undertaken by Ofsted in accordance with *'Working Together To Safeguard Children'*, 2010
 - a review of 97 case files for children and young people with a range of need. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision making undertaken
 - the outcomes of the most recent annual unannounced inspection of the local authority's contact, referral and assessment arrangements undertaken in June 2009, and the inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services undertaken in October 2009
 - a review of evidence of the contribution of health agencies since the last safeguarding and looked after children inspection in October 2009.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

3. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding (Grade 1)	A service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good (Grade 2)	A service that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate (Grade 3)	A service that only meets minimum requirements
Inadequate (Grade 4)	A service that does not meet minimum requirements

Service information

4. The population of the borough of Warrington has risen rapidly over the last 30 years, and currently stands at 197,800. There are 47,900 children and young people under the age of 19 years. This represents 24.2% of the total population, of which 5.9% are from minority ethnic groups including Polish, Pakistani and Indian. There are 3.5% (1,101) children for whom English is an additional language and in total there are 64 different languages spoken by children and young people. The inner wards based around the town centre are among some of the most deprived in the country and contain 26% of Warrington's residents, with the remaining 74% living in the more affluent suburbs and outlying villages.
5. The strategic partnerships with regards to children and young people are the Children's Trust (now known as the Children and Young People's Partnership in Warrington), the Warrington Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB) and the Warrington Local Strategic Partnership. The Warrington Children's Trust Board was set up in April 2008 developing from the previously established Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. This has further developed into the Children and Young People's Partnership in late 2010. The partnership board includes representation from the local authority, NHS Warrington Primary Care Trust (PCT), the Five Boroughs Health Partnership, Warrington Police Authority, and other agencies including the voluntary sector. The WSCB became independently chaired in October 2009, bringing together the main organisations that work with children, young people and families to provide safeguarding services.
6. Children's social care services are delivered through an access to social care team, an out of hours team, one duty and assessment team, children in need teams, two children in care teams, adoption, fostering, children with disabilities and young people's teams, and a conference and review

unit. As at 31 December 2010, there were 235 looked after children in Warrington and 172 children were subject to child protection plans. A further 550 children were receiving services on a child in need basis and 808 children had Family Support Plans based on the common assessment framework (CAF). There are two children's homes in Warrington, one of which provides short breaks for children with disabilities. There are 117 local authority foster carers and an additional eight carers who provide short breaks for children with disabilities. There are 12 children's centres.

7. Education in Warrington is provided by 69 primary schools, 12 secondary schools, three special schools, one nursery school and one pupil referral unit. Six schools have designated provision and there is nursery provision in 27 primary schools. All three to four year-olds can access early years' education through a range of maintained, private and voluntary organisations. All schools provide access to the core extended services offer in line with the Government's 2010 target. There are no further local authority targets for delivery of extended services. Post-16 education and training is provided by one general further education college, one sixth form college, seven school sixth forms and a range of work-based training providers.
8. Commissioning and planning of national health services and primary care are the responsibility of NHS Warrington PCT. Healthcare is provided by Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust acute provider, NHS Warrington – Community Services Unit and the Five Boroughs Partnership NHS Trust. In addition to this, NHS Warrington commissions specialist services for children from Alder Hey Children's Hospital, Central Manchester University Hospitals Foundation Trust and Cheshire and Wirral Partnership Foundation Trust, although the latter organisations were not part of this inspection.

Safeguarding services

Overall effectiveness

Grade 3 (adequate)

9. The overall effectiveness of safeguarding services is adequate. Statutory requirements are now met and the child protection needs of children are being more effectively addressed. Safeguarding services were judged as inadequate in the first inspection in October 2009. Since this time a wide range of improvements have been made, notably in the period preceding this inspection. These have taken place across a broad range of performance measures and no services have deteriorated in performance across a range of key indicators since the first full inspection of safeguarding. The duty and assessment team operates clear thresholds, provides a robust and timely response, and assessments undertaken are of adequate or better quality. Effective working arrangements are in place with Cheshire police to undertake child protection investigations. Many improvements have been delivered through necessary increases in social care capacity and the dedicated efforts and effective leadership of the children's services senior management team, as well as the continued delivery of valued family support services through partner agencies.
10. A developing performance management approach supports and reports on the improvements. More effective reporting arrangements have been made through the council's elected members, middle and senior managers of children's services and the partner agencies of the WSCB, enabling appropriate and more effective challenge to take place. Multi-agency case and organisational compliance audits are positive examples of activity of the WSCB, which is now compliant with the expectations of *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2010*. However, much remains to be done in embedding quality assurance in relation to individual children's cases, notably for those children and families still receiving services whose assessments and plans were made before summer 2010. The local authority accepts that further remedial work is yet to be completed for some vulnerable children in relation to the quality of continuing assessments and service plans. A large-scale audit, conducted early in 2010, was successful in establishing a baseline of compliance with statutory duties.
11. The children's trust is yet to deliver significant outcomes in enabling the development of services in support of the safeguarding agenda, having had to also respond to national changes in requirements as well as to anticipate the consequences of other changes in commissioning arrangements, notably within the health care communities. Good attention has been given to increasing the general engagement of children and young people in providing commentary around public services, although the impact of this is on safeguarding matters is limited.

12. Partnership arrangements with key statutory agencies continues to be a clear strength in supporting children requiring additional support or who no longer require specific child protection or children in need plans. While the voluntary sector is involved in a number of important areas of targeted services, their role is yet to be fully realised. The support and challenge of local authority elected members in sustaining the substantial increase in social work capacity has been crucially important in securing many of the improvements. Sound and safe recruitment practices are in place, as well as accessible training and continued professional development opportunities for staff. Budgetary and financial plans are in place to support both the improvement programme as well as in refocusing resources to areas most in need of further improvement, including improved targeting by, and integration of, some current service functions such as the youth services in the area.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 3 (adequate)

13. The capacity for improvement of safeguarding services is adequate. Safeguarding was judged inadequate when Ofsted undertook a full inspection of safeguarding in October 2009. This confirmed and added to findings from the unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment conducted in June 2009. Following extensive changes at all levels of the organisation, coupled with a clear understanding of the deteriorating performance, senior managers and elected members acknowledged that urgent and extensive action was required to improve safeguarding services. Substantial improvements have since been achieved across a range of objectives, particularly in the effective response by the duty and assessment team and through an audit of children's cases, to assure the local authority of compliance with statutory performance requirements. Extensive social care service restructuring has been completed through an ambitious yet realistic plan to drive improvement, coupled with a substantial increase in workforce capacity. Final aspects of implementation were continuing at the time of the inspection. Senior officers from key partner agencies have also been engaged in supporting and enabling these improvements. However, it is acknowledged that further improvements in quality assurance of assessments, direct work and service planning are key objectives in the next stage of development.
14. Improved outcomes have been achieved incrementally since the previous inspection, with increased effectiveness in compliance with statutory requirements. Constructive, longstanding relationships with statutory partners at an operational level provide a positive context and delivery of important educational, behavioural and health outcomes in support of child protection plans. The WSCB has a clear purpose and focus and makes good use, for example, of multi-agency quality audits in driving up the quality of practice. The Children's Trust has been refocused to provide greater multi-agency cooperation and coordination of working

arrangements, following a review of the children and young people's plan in June 2010. While the Children's Trust has yet to deliver substantial impact, foundations are now in place to move forward. A more sustained, productive relationship with the voluntary sector is yet to be established within future planning and commissioning relationships.

15. The local authority and partner agencies have workforce strategies in place. The local authority has made considerable progress recruiting qualified and experienced social work staff. Existing, established posts are filled, although a small number of additional posts are yet to be recruited to. Progress is yet to be made in fully establishing strategic monitoring of outcomes for the most vulnerable and in maintaining challenge, as well as in planning and implementing future service commissioning arrangements. While practitioner and front line manager capacity has increased these are yet to achieve full impact in relation to both performance management and establishing more effective commissioning arrangements. Detailed quality assurance arrangements are in place in relation to individual child care cases but are yet to be fully embedded across social care at team level. It is important, for example, that the local authority is assured about the quality of assessments and service plans of longstanding child care cases.

Areas for improvement

16. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Warrington, the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

Immediately:

- Complete a quality audit of all longstanding child care cases, focusing on key safeguarding requirements and assessment of parenting capacity
- Ensure that case file recording, including management guidance and direction, is clear, up to date and focuses on planned objectives.

Within three months:

- Improve the quality of assessments and service planning to demonstrate good quality analysis and clearly identified objectives, from which improvements in safeguarding can be evaluated
- Improve the recognition and impact of factors such as ethnicity, culture and religion on safeguarding work with individual children and their families
- Establish and implement an effective framework for commissioning, including joint commissioning of services across key partner authorities that includes rigorous evaluation of the services established.

Within six months:

- Fully engage children, young people and their parents and carers in contributing to further service development, including learning from current arrangements involving disabled children and their families
- Engage effectively with emerging commissioning arrangements within health services, as well as with the voluntary agencies in the area and neighbouring authorities
- Embed the quality assurance culture within social care teams and partner agency services through fully establishing audit activity and adapting evaluation procedures to reflect the quality of work undertaken as well as compliance with statutory requirements.

Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people

Children and young people are safe and feel safe

Grade 3 (adequate)

17. Arrangements to ensure that children and young people are safe and feel safe are adequate. Surveys undertaken as part of the inspection indicate that children feel safe and know how to access help; this was also the case for young people spoken to during the inspection, who were able to identify people they could speak with if they had a concern. Safeguarding provision is judged adequate or better for child care providers and in school inspections. Safe recruitment practices meet statutory requirements. Children who are not educated at school receive strong coordinated support. Clear, well established information, training and procedures are in place for children who go missing from home. The 'Talk, Don't Walk' service through the Relationships Centre in the area is particularly helpful. Independent advocacy, provided by the National Youth Advocacy Service gives a more effective voice to some of the most vulnerable children.
18. The WSCB has recently completed an audit of compliance with statutory requirements by all partner agencies in relation to their duties toward safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Arrangements for an auditing programme as well as direct reporting by conference and review managers (CRM) are now firmly in place, with findings being used to improve service effectiveness. No children were identified as being inadequately protected during the inspection although the assessments and plans for some children with longer term involvement in social care services require more thorough reviews of their quality and focus.
19. Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) arrangements are satisfactory with the appointment of a designated LADO and assistant. Systematic and valued training has contributed to improving awareness of safeguarding responsibilities amongst partner agencies and this has been well received, particularly amongst schools and voluntary sector organisations. While strategy discussions are appropriately held and action is taken to ensure children are safeguarded, systems to ensure that actions are followed through by other agencies require further development. Statutory guidance is followed ensuring that effective complaints arrangements are in place. A dedicated children's services complaints officer, in post since June 2010, provides an increased focus on informal resolution where appropriate. Complaints are monitored and reported to senior managers. However, learning from complaints is yet to lead to service change. Parents and young people are informed of the complaints procedure as they become involved with services; although not all young people who

responded to the survey completed for this inspection were aware of how to make a complaint.

Quality of provision

Grade 3 (adequate)

20. The quality of provision is adequate. Partner agencies confirm that the thresholds for access to targeted social care services are now clear and appropriate. Likewise responses from social care services are described as timely, thorough and sustained until safeguarding needs are no longer evident. Contacts and referrals are responded to promptly and appropriately. The recruitment of a stable, permanent workforce has been a major contributor to this improvement, as has the review and clarification of thresholds. Front line managers within the duty and assessment team are successful in ensuring that statutory requirements are now being met in relation to children being seen. Strategy discussions are held between social care and the police, and these are recorded and shared appropriately between the two agencies. Child protection enquiries are being undertaken effectively, leading to child protection conferences and subsequent core group activity. Social work case loads are now mostly manageable and staff value being able to undertake more thorough, focussed work with families, contributing to improving outcomes for individual children.
21. Considerable improvements in integration have been achieved between the family support arrangements and social care services so that children and families who move between levels of need receive appropriate services with continuity of delivery. The broad range of family support services continue to provide flexible, coordinated and well received support to children and families at different levels of need. Out of hours arrangements between social care and key partner agencies provide an assured response to children and families in urgent need. There are effective communication and recording arrangements between the out of hours and daytime services, including the capacity to support these services by, for example, conducting urgent checks on the well being of children as well as providing continuity in urgent and extensive, or complex, enquiries. However, there is no provision within the area for children requiring medical examination and assessment in relation to sexual abuse enquiries out of hours. They are subject to a lengthy journey to a hospital in Manchester some distance away, potentially adding to their likely trauma, although this is described as a child friendly service offering crisis worker support throughout the process with follow on services for both the child and the parent/carer.
22. The safeguarding needs of children in those cases seen during the inspection are currently being met. However, in many there was evidence of previous drift and delay in assessments and implementation of plans. Initial assessments are now completed in a timely way and clearly focus on safeguarding risks and needs. It is now more evident that children are

seen during assessments and their views established, appropriate to age and ability. However, it is not always evident when children are being seen alone. There is improved clarity about when core assessments should be undertaken, but further progress is required to ensure this is achieved consistently. The majority of current assessments are of adequate quality, although they contain description rather than coherent analysis or evaluation. A small number of assessments seen are inadequate, as they fail to address the key issues in the case or they insufficiently incorporate the views of the child or other family members.

23. There is variability in the identification of individual needs of children arising from race, culture, religion and other factors. While basic details are recorded and individual practitioners are able to give examples of adequate or good attention to addressing needs within practice, in some cases seen there is limited attention to how these needs inform practice or impact on service delivery. A well focussed and supported range of services, including some from within the voluntary sector provide support to children and young people according to their assessed needs; for example, in respect of sexual abuse, domestic violence or emotional, behavioural or psychiatric support.
24. Case recording in cases tracked by inspectors was mostly up to date, although records did not always succinctly pull together the key information in the case, and there were gaps in recording in cases which the local authority had not audited prior to the inspection. In some cases seen recording did not accurately reflect the practice described by managers and practitioners, although in other cases weaknesses in analysis and planning were accurately reflected in recording. While children in need including children in need of protection now have plans in place, the quality of planning is weak overall, with a lack of identified outcome focussed objectives and actions. In some cases, agreed actions had not been followed up promptly or had been allowed to drift.
25. Core groups meet regularly with active contributions from key professionals and families. There is an improved focus on core group activity, as well as more rigorous follow up by CRMs where previously agreed plans of action have not been implemented or actioned. Initial and review child protection conferences take place within required timescales and a range of professionals contribute appropriately to these. Reports and assessments are routinely shared with families prior to conferences and reviews. Some good examples were seen by inspectors in case work where care and sensitivity was afforded to families in preparing and supporting them to maximise engagement.

The contribution of health agencies to keeping children and young people safe Grade 3 (adequate)

26. The contribution of health agencies to keeping children and young people safe is adequate. Improvements have been made in the joint commissioning framework, with progress in the validation and quality assurance processes within the PCT to ensure more focused outcomes. Safeguarding performance is more effectively monitored through quality and contract review meetings with partner agencies. Commissioning arrangements link with the joint strategic needs assessment, and a joint funded commissioning post is supporting partnership in service delivery. Work is at an early stage in the development of a GP commissioning consortium, with the establishment of a health and well being board imminent. A comprehensive safeguarding risk dashboard has been implemented within the provider arm of the PCT, identifying priorities and an action plan. There is effective leadership from the designated and named lead professionals across health with increased capacity since the last inspection. The PCT safeguarding team and lead professionals work with the local authority and WSCB to deliver multi-agency training. Reviews of policies and procedures have improved scrutiny of health partners' safeguarding practices.
27. There have been major improvements in the provision of CAMHS since 2009. Thresholds for access to services for children and young people are now better understood with more effective performance monitoring in place. Targeted adolescent mental health service provision is now in place across secondary schools through local authority funded workers seconded to CAMHS. There is a 24 hour psychiatric service, offering assessments and consultations within accident and emergency departments and paediatric wards. CAMHS also provides a duty service for urgent referrals during working hours. Implementation of the family support model within CAMHS has meant better screening with waiting times for assessment reduced to an average of three weeks.
28. Although health visiting capacity has not been increased within health since the last inspection, interventions are risk based and regular service audits identify no detrimental impact to children. Newly established healthy start scheme posts, supporting early intervention for the most vulnerable families from the point of child birth, are in place although caseloads are high. Teenage pregnancy rates have remained static, although young people have been involved in the development of a "Need to Know" DVD, providing advice and signposting to services, as well as a sexual health website and text messaging service. Partnerships with education and colleges are good, with trained health advisors located in secondary schools and a domiciliary outreach service providing sexual health advice to parents and carers of young people with learning difficulties. The acute trust paediatric emergency unit provides a suitable environment with safeguarding leads identified in all departments,

supported by a 'flag and tracking' system alerting staff to those children presenting who have a child protection plan, leading to more focussed assessments and aiding communication with social care.

Ambition and prioritisation

Grade 3 (adequate)

29. Ambition and prioritisation are adequate. The WSCB has ensured that there is significantly improved and clearer ownership of the responsibilities for the protection of children by key partner agencies. The independent chair commencing since the previous full inspection has reviewed a range of essential requirements resulting in revised governance and a board that is now compliant with statutory guidance - Working Together to Safeguard Children 2010. An emphasis is now placed on performance reporting, supported by multi-agency case file auditing. A more cooperative and collaborative working relationship has also been established with adjacent, pan-Cheshire boards. These provide sound foundations for the further development of the board. Elected members are now more aware and engaged with their responsibilities for safeguarding children. The development of 'emissary' members, developing in-depth knowledge of particular aspects of children's services provision, supports improved knowledge and engagement by many more elected members. Good progress has also been made in developing some services, for example, the multi-agency approach to domestic violence, including the multi-agency risk assessment conference. Voluntary sector agencies particularly welcome the sustained access to, and quality of, safeguarding training and support through the CAF and family support services. It is recognised, however, that much remains to be done to strengthen previously identified weaknesses in performance management and challenge, although some improvements have clearly been made. Priorities for targeted work have been identified, building on the core requirements put in place through the delivery plan 2010–11. While safeguarding is not a specific priority area for the children's trust, the trust has targeted improvement activity on key inter-agency related recommendations from the previous inspection. The chair of the WSCB, appropriately, is also a full and active member of the trust.

Leadership and management

Grade 3 (adequate)

30. Leadership and management are adequate. The strengthened strategic infrastructure combined with clearly expressed ambition by the local authority and other key services is now driving service improvement. However, statutory agencies are realistic and are aware that much remains to be done in driving forward with a wide range of much needed improvements. Notable amongst these is the move from basic compliance to the consistent delivery of high quality assessments, plans and services, following these being achieved in the duty and assessment team. A commissioning team has recently been appointed with the brief to implement a commissioning strategy across the partnership, although this is not currently in place. While there has been limited strategic commissioning activity, there is a joint commissioning strategy agreed and endorsed by the Children and Young Peoples Trust, and, there are examples of satisfactory or good commissioning practice resulting from

specific initiatives such as aiming high for disabled children. Prevention and early intervention services are well supported and owned by key partner agencies, including the voluntary sector. These include numerous examples of good services that meet need and have effective and positive impact. This is underpinned by the valued support, advice and training provided to those agencies delivering the majority of prevention services. Action has now been taken to address a number of major service gaps, such as the re-commissioning of CAMHS.

31. Good action has been taken to ensure that there is appropriate staffing capacity within social care services both in terms of operational staff, front line managers and business support. Plans to further streamline duty functions within the referral and assessment team are well advanced with full implementation by April 2011, with the aim of improving the focus and smooth transfer of work from the point of contact to referral and assessment. Coherent workforce strategies have been developed, particularly in social care. Vacancies in this area have been very high, but are now significantly reduced, with existing staff and those in partner agencies experiencing the benefits of more stable social work teams with greater consistency and improved depth of knowledge of the children and families being worked with. Practitioner and manager development training is part of a strategy to improve the skills of the social care workforce, and includes an attractive programme of support for newly qualified social workers. Partner agencies, for example the continuing professional development services for teachers, already have training programmes designed to enhance skills and encourage retention. A recent survey of front line staff identifies that improvements have been experienced across all areas, including induction, training, workloads, support from line managers, senior managers and the local authority, effective communications and equality and diversity. However, practitioners express unease about the ability of the council to retain staff in the context of wider, national staffing pressures. Clear career progression for social workers such as access to post-qualifying awards is also yet to be fully developed.
32. The views of children, young people and parents inform individual assessments and plans. There is clear guidance and expectations that parents will be provided with child protection reports prior to conferences ensuring improved engagement and effective contributions. Conference and review chairs ensure that time is spent with parents and, where appropriate, young people in preparation for conferences and to maximise their participation. Some young people have also been involved in the preparation of a DVD to help prepare others for the experience of conferences and reviews. Some initiatives, such as aiming high for disabled children, demonstrate good practice in involving parents and children in service design and development. However, overall there is little clarity as to how the views of children, young people and parents contribute to the development and improvement of services other than on

an individual basis. The further development of meaningful opportunities for user involvement is acknowledged as an area for improvement by the council.

33. Cross regional approaches are being developed with neighbouring authorities to address a more effective use of resources. There is now active benchmarking against other local authorities and, where appropriate, the council is adopting good practice from elsewhere. The undertaking of the partnership section 11 safeguarding audit on a pan-Cheshire basis and ongoing work with neighbouring local authorities and Cheshire police to develop a regional approach to improving risk assessment and screening in domestic violence exemplifies this.

Performance management and quality assurance

Grade 3 (adequate)

34. Performance management and quality assurance are adequate. A range of performance management and quality assurance systems has been developed and delivered at social care team level. These include regular file audits, multi-agency file audits by the WSCB, clearer recording of management directions and decisions, and strengthening the quality assurance role of the CRMs. Performance reporting requirements to strategic partnerships, such as WSCB, are clearer with a recently agreed common dataset to support these. As yet, the potential impact of this framework has not been realised. Clearly articulated reporting requirements, with evidence of impact are not yet in place to a range of bodies including the executive board, the social care improvement board, the WSCB performance and monitoring group, the overview and scrutiny committee, and the children's trust. The council's own recent data on key indicators demonstrate a solidly improving performance picture.
35. Social workers feel valued, supported and well led. Regular supervision is now prioritised and considered as developmental and supportive. All social care teams are now located centrally, adjacent to managers and senior managers. This has been particularly welcomed by staff, who feel there are significant benefits from the visibility and presence of the management team. There is clearer management oversight of cases, particularly evident in the duty and assessment team. While management decisions and directions are now more regularly recorded in file records they are not always sufficiently clear or challenging and are too often focussed on process rather than outcomes.

Partnership working

Grade 3 (adequate)

36. At an operational level there are good working partnerships to promote better outcomes for children and young people, with examples of good joint work with police, health, schools and the voluntary sector. Good partnership working is demonstrated in respect of children who go missing

or who experience domestic violence. There are also examples of additional service developments in response to identified need, for example, work with perpetrators of domestic violence and a project in development to work with young people who have been sexually exploited. Good partnership working is also evident in respect of family support services with a well integrated approach to CAF, resulting in flexible, well-received support which is appropriate to the needs of children and families.

37. Strategic partnerships have been strengthened and are developing further. The WSCB now operates effectively with clear, established processes and structures. Partners express confidence in the board and its focus on core safeguarding performance. The children's trust is yet to provide the necessary clear strategic lead across partnerships, within the local strategic partnership framework and the emerging neighbourhood approach in the area. This is acknowledged as an area for continuing development. Voluntary and community sector representatives do not feel that their contribution is sufficiently or consistently valued in identifying opportunities to contribute to strategic planning.

Services for looked after children

Overall effectiveness

Grade 3 (adequate)

38. The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children is adequate. Managers have delivered the structural and organisational improvements needed to ensure that statutory requirements are met and no services are deteriorating. Elected members are now taking their responsibilities as corporate parents seriously and these responsibilities are now better understood. However, the current Children and Young People's Plan does not specifically identify looked after children as a priority group and much work remains to engage the looked after children population in both consultation and in a more effective children in care council. Children and young people spoken with are clear that their views are listened to and mostly responded to, although the aggregated views of looked after children are yet to be established or lead directly to service improvements. Placement stability is good, with many other indicators showing as adequate or better, with length of time to adoption placement, GCSE achievement and placements made within 20 miles of the home community being particular strengths.
39. The quality of case planning has recently begun to improve, although delays in implementing plans remain apparent for some children who are looked after for longer periods. The authority recognises that improvements in assessment and effective care planning have yet to take full effect. The performance within the looked after children part of the service is recognised as not being as strong as that for safeguarding services, which has been the focus of the improvement board, although an increased pace of improvement has more recently been pursued. Although increased numbers of children have become looked after, this is currently being balanced against those ceasing to be so, and the profile of looked after children in Warrington is similar to the average nationally. Progress is being made in enabling some children to no longer be looked after, but sometimes only after lengthy periods when there was no longer a need to be in care. Quality assurance and performance management processes are yet to be firmly embedded and there is insufficient attention to remedial activity for those children whose previous needs were poorly met, or whose plans were subject to drift. Operational managers are yet to provide the necessary consistent focus to ensure that the needs of all looked after children are fully addressed.
40. The social care workforce for looked after children has been relatively stable, mostly comprising experienced staff. Practitioners surveyed and spoken with value the training opportunities available and actively engage with partner agencies and services best placed to deliver improved outcomes, which is an improvement since the last inspection. These relationships and the commitments from partner agencies result in

adequate and sometimes better outcomes for looked after children, particularly in narrowing the gap in learning achievements as well as in improved health, safeguarding, and stability in making the transition into adulthood. Warrington, for example, secures safe accommodation for care leavers without resort to the use of bed and breakfast provision through active and constructive relationships with housing services. Strong support is provided by schools and the looked after health team with some services commissioned with the voluntary sector are notable, for example in delivering independent advocacy. Learning outcomes have been consistently good, and improvements have been established in addressing the emotional health of looked after children with the additional dedicated CAMHS workers. This support extends appropriately to children on the edge of care as well as in the early stages of rehabilitation or within kinship care arrangements. However, health care and dental assessments have dipped this year, although performance is now steadily recovering.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 3 (adequate)

41. The capacity to improve services for looked after children is adequate. Statutory requirements are met with a track record of positive outcomes for many children, albeit within the context of a higher rate of looked after children than both statistical and national averages. The leadership and management of services for looked after children and care leavers are driving a range of suitable improvements across children's social care and other services, including for looked after children. However the children's services leadership team acknowledge they are at an early stage in sustaining and improving quality assurance practice within social care. Further work is also required to ensure consistent improvement in the quality of assessment and direct work, more effective care planning for looked after children, and in minimising drift within the care system.
42. Improved staffing capacity, lower caseloads, a restructured and refocused service, and the strengthened performance management arrangements through the CRMs all support a steadily, albeit recently, improving service. Arrangements to enable the views of looked after children and care leavers to contribute to improving service provision are currently also at an early stage. Pathway planning for care leavers is variable and requires further strengthening to support young people into adulthood. Partner agency support for looked after children is good or very good in the statutory and further education areas. The support for the health of looked after children is also much improved. However, the resilience of the looked after health team is reduced due to limited capacity and the absence of cover provision. The local authority is addressing the financial challenges presented by the additional costs of purchasing placements for children, particularly in view of the sustained numbers in care following earlier increases.

Areas for improvement

43. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for looked after children and young people in Warrington, the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

Immediately:

- Ensure that good practice standards are implemented in the management and quality assurance of work with all looked after children, minimising drift and, as appropriate, considering court proceedings
- Ensure that when children have been looked after for lengthy periods, or on several occasions, that there are quality assurance processes in place so that their plans are robust and implemented in a timely manner.

Within three months:

- Improve the quality of assessments and care planning for all children from the point of entry to care, including the identification of needs arising from ethnicity, culture and religion
- Ensure coherence of pathway plans for all looked after children, where required, and at least within three months of them becoming 16 years of age
- Establish effective consultation and engagement with looked after children through the children in care council
- Strengthen, within the work of the Children's and Young People's Partnership and the Local Safeguarding Children Board, the prioritisation of looked after children as a key group of vulnerable children.

Within six months:

- Develop a leaving care strategy, identifying expectations, plans and resources and ensure their implementation
- The PCT should ensure sufficient staffing capacity within the looked after children health team, to secure the delivery of assessments and services.

How good are outcomes for looked after children and care leavers?

Being healthy

Grade 3 (adequate)

44. Outcomes for the health of children and young people are adequate. Improved communication and better integrated working between health and social care teams is beginning to have an impact on supporting outcomes for looked after children. Good attempts to reduce the delay in arranging initial health assessments whilst waiting for consent forms to be completed has been effective. Assessments are carried out within acceptable timescales. For the current year, immunisation and review assessment figures have reduced. The quality of health records examined is good, evidencing clear information sharing with social care as well as with other agencies where children are placed out of borough. The completion or follow up of identified actions in health care plans are clearly evidenced. The introduction of looked after children CAMHS workers has resulted in a significant improvement in service access ensuring earlier intervention, with the care in partnership approach now well established. Looked after children have good access to a central dental practice and almost all are registered with a named dentist.

Staying safe

Grade 3 (adequate)

45. Outcomes for staying safe are adequate. Most children in care are in stable placements and their outcomes are at least adequate or improving. There is evidence of good risk assessment practices in residential homes, and of safe caring policies within the fostering service. There are newly developed arrangements for the monitoring of care placements for children placed in external provision which, as yet, have had limited impact although most young people are placed in provision which is judged to be adequate or better. Those children and young people seen or responding to surveys during the inspection describe feeling and being safe within their placements, with access to trusted adults. Young asylum seekers are safeguarded well and good account is taken of cultural and religious needs. Some children also report having choice of placements. Accessible and widely known advocacy services that provide children with an effective voice when they have complaints or grievances offer good support, adding to the good arrangements for children being involved in their reviews. Good partnership working takes place between care providers and the police when looked after children go missing. The strengthened roles that the LADO and the CRMs have in the area add to the increasingly robust safeguarding arrangements for children.

Enjoying and achieving**Grade 2 (good)**

46. Outcomes for enjoying and achieving are good. The local authority, schools and further education providers have high aspirations for looked after children, who are supported well by multi-agency teams, designated staff and specialist provision. Comprehensive data from the virtual team provide clear management oversight, including specific data for children placed outside of the borough, and are used well to monitor provision and further improve outcomes. Children and young people make good progress in their learning. Personal education plans show good understanding of individual needs and suitably personalised additional support, such as individual tuition. These assist multi-agency working well and are integral to care plans, but children's contributions are generally limited and targets are not always measurable. Educational attainment for 11 year-olds has been above national figures for several years. At age 16, higher grade examination results were well above the national average for looked after children in 2009, although fell below this in 2010. Results are satisfactory given that many looked after young people had a statement of special educational need or received intensive learning support. Admissions, transfers between schools and transitions are planned and managed well. Looked after children and young people attend school regularly and absences are managed well. Effective preventative work has resulted in no permanent exclusions from school for the past ten years and fixed term exclusions are of short duration. Looked after children, including those with disabilities, have access to a wide range of high quality leisure activities of their choice, both in and out of school, of which some are accredited. These are supported by good use of personal education allowances, and young people report good opportunities for personal development as a result.

Making a positive contribution, including user engagement**Grade 3 (adequate)**

47. Arrangements for looked after children to make positive contributions are adequate. There are increased opportunities for looked after children's involvement in decision making through a range of well supported groups, although active engagement is inconsistent. The children in care council, called 'Have Your Say', has been active in developing the 'pledge', although further development is needed. While the views of looked after children inform their own assessments and plans and contribute to the recruitment of senior staff, their collective voice is yet to influence strategic planning. Looked after children and care leavers report that their needs are met well, including from a befriending project, and that they are appropriately prepared for independence. A local website also helps them to contribute to plans that affect their lives and a DVD has been commissioned by young people for others needing additional support. Multi-agency support for looked after children who are at risk of offending or who offend is now good. Young people known to the criminal justice

system have a good range of positive activities that deter them from reoffending and restorative justice approaches are promoted well to divert children from formal interventions. While there has been an increase in looked after children within the criminal justice system, the needs of this small group are known clearly and targeted appropriately. A range of multi-agency initiatives include projects to promote awareness of diversity within communities and positive activities for hard-to-reach groups.

Economic well-being

Grade 2 (good)

48. Outcomes for economic well-being are good. For most looked after children, low attainment at age 16 does not prevent significant success in further education. More young people are continuing in learning and more are gaining qualifications. Partner agencies provide a good range of opportunities for learning, including for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and for teenage mothers, and very good support for individuals from personal advisers, designated teachers and through targeted events. These result in plans that map progression in learning, securing a smooth transition from school. The circumstances of the small number of care leavers not in education or work placements are well known, reviewed regularly, and supported by designated professionals using a range of sensitive, coordinated multi-agency interventions that focus on re-entry to learning or gaining employment. Care leavers are positive about good multi-agency support that prepares them well for the transition to adulthood. Young people contribute routinely to reviews of their personal circumstances but some do not know what pathway plans are. Work with housing and provider services is effective in ensuring that care leavers have suitable accommodation. For disabled young people, educational provision is mapped well, but despite some recent progress transition planning remains weak and concerns remain about access to adult social care and health services on transfer. Work with Traveller children has been successful in securing their continuance in learning, and support for young carers leads to them feeling less isolated.

Quality of provision

Grade 3 (adequate)

49. The quality of provision is adequate. There are appropriate, clear and established procedures for decision making in determining whether a child should become looked after. Good quality, consistently applied family support services are in place to support young people on the edge of care as well as those returning home. These encourage improvements in family relationships and parenting, access to appropriate leisure activities and also to educational support. Senior managers now monitor the changing profile of those requiring looked after services. Social workers have access to legal advice when considering care proceedings, benefitting from the use of a legal mentor who provides direct practical support.

50. The quality of assessments is variable, with some weak, as well as some good work seen during the inspection. Some assessments seen do not routinely provide a comprehensive understanding of the needs of children, nor do they contain all information required to make informed decisions and develop effective care plans. The quality of recording is also variable and in some cases, work has been completed or information known that has not yet been recorded. Young people are encouraged and supported in preparing for reviews or placement changes, although the identification of strengths and needs arising from religious and cultural identity is limited in assessments. There is evidence of some good individual casework with young people, which positively impacts on outcomes, including placement stability. The work undertaken by the newly appointed CAMHS social workers and staff at local authority children's homes contribute positively to these aspects, as does the life story and preparation work undertaken by the adoption team. It is unfortunate that the high turnover of social workers within the children in need teams has resulted in many children having frequent changes in social worker, and therefore being unable to maintain a trusting and effective relationship with a single worker.
51. The majority of young people are in appropriate placements and make good or stable progress. However, until recently many young people have been subject to drift in their care plans and some experience frequent placement changes, leading to poor outcomes. Senior managers are aware that too many children have remained placed at home with parents for lengthy periods and limited use has been made of other provisions, including special guardianship orders. The impact of this, combined with historic gaps in recording, has left an enduring legacy for some children. The quality of care planning has been weak until recently with knowledge and skill gaps in some practitioners and managers. Some care plans seen have been either too adult-focussed or unrealistic in expectations. Placement break downs are not systematically evaluated to ensure that lessons are effectively learnt. However, recent organisational and cultural changes have resulted in more robust plans and renewed energies to remedy deficiencies and improve outcomes. CRMs now have a greater clarity of role and authority provide more effective challenge and encourage greater participation by young people.

Ambition and prioritisation

Grade 3 (adequate)

52. Ambition and prioritisation are adequate. There is now a clear vision, ambition and priorities for looked after children, with evidence of solid foundations in place and commitments to sustaining recent improvements supported by partnership agencies. The virtual education team, with clear outcome-focussed priorities, and a revitalised CRM service, are examples of improved focus on raising performance with, and an ambition for, children in care. The corporate parenting group has been re-established for some time with many elected members expressing improved knowledge and commitment within their responsibilities. This has been

aided by individual members adopting 'emissary' roles, achieving greater levels of knowledge about specific areas of activity. Corporate parents are aware of the many challenges facing children in care, although there remains limited involvement or awareness of the needs of some groups, such as those with adoption plans, or those placed outside the borough. The recently produced children in care strategy provides a welcome foundation for further service development, as well as some particularly challenging timescales for a wide range of essential improvements. The children's partnership, more active and focussed on its shared commitments, also has a children in care sub-group. Despite the identification of a specific children in care sub-group, there have been limited outcomes directly attributable to this. A strengthened strategic focus is yet to be achieved for those children and young people preparing for and leaving care.

Leadership and management

Grade 3 (adequate)

53. Leadership and management are adequate. The current leadership in children's services provides ambition, consistency and pace in the continued essential developments to looked after children services. These build on some outcomes already consistently achieved by concentrating on the quality of assessment and planning in combination with the continued contributions of some partner agencies. Some delivered improvements, notably through the looked after children health team and CAMHS workers, provide a good base from which further improvements to outcomes can be achieved. There is clear evidence of strengthening partnerships at both strategic and operational levels. Senior local authority managers express a clear vision, ambition and identification of priorities for looked after children within the recently developed children in care strategy. At a local level there is evidence of effective partnership working, particularly at the children's centres and with the young people's team. The support from and contributions by schools and other learning environments have been key to maintaining stability of placements and positive outcomes in this area. Partnership working with health, housing and the Connexions service has also contributed to a reduction in the number of homeless young people aged 16 and 17 years, as well as improving numbers of young people accessing education or employment.
54. Commissioning arrangements, including joint commissioning, are not yet in place. Although a commissioning team is being implemented, this is yet to be fully operational in delivering outcomes. A looked after children commissioning action plan has also been developed on behalf of the children's trust, and although this has been endorsed it is also yet to be implemented. Where good arrangements are in place, including work with the National Youth Advocacy Service and the After Adoption service, these are a result of long-standing arrangements rather than as part of an overall commissioning strategy. The local authority is now using the known and projected profile of the looked after children population to plan

a redesign of its own current provision, aimed at raising the standards of in-house provision as well as enabling more children from the area to continue residing there, rather than being placed in externally procured placements.

55. Workforce planning has ensured an increased and now sufficient number of staff in place to carry out the range of roles required to provide a better quality service to children in care and to their families and carers. The workforce profile is generally reflective of the diversity profile of local communities. Social care practitioners report consistent access to regular supervision, training and developmental opportunities as well as support from a strong, supportive and visible senior manager group. Principal and practice managers have recently undertaken a substantial amount of management training to enhance their knowledge and skills. However, the full impact of this is yet to have a significant impact on the quality of work and management oversight of a more focussed delivery of individual care plans. With vacancy rates now at or below the national average, the key challenges are accepted as a focus on staff retention and continuing professional development.
56. There is a positive approach to address the efficient use of resources, as well as the recent increased focus on achieving economies. The council has engaged with Placements North West, a collaborative approach to activity in finding and purchasing out of authority placements by a number of local authorities in the region, but has not as yet been able to use this to reduce costs and increase the quality of services purchased. The redesign of Warrington's own residential provision aims to make use of local 'invest to save' arrangements. This is one of a range of efficiencies supporting the continuation of the higher children's social care budget. Procurement of placements continues at present to be based on individual spot purchasing. The two software applications used for social care information recording are cumbersome. While some recent changes have been made, these applications are not integrated and do not support staff in their work. The format of some records, in particular pathway plans and statutory review records, are neither easy for professionals to use nor child friendly. Additional concerns have been expressed by practitioners about difficulties in accessing some historic documentation.

Performance management and quality assurance

Grade 3 (adequate)

57. Performance management and quality assurance are adequate. Key indicators are mostly in line with statistical neighbours, with identified performance targets generally being met. A range of performance reporting arrangements are in place, although they focus on aggregated data more than a qualitative perspective on the work being undertaken. Monthly feedback on the quality of care plans being reviewed by the CRMs is a welcome recent addition in refocusing the improvement agenda.

Inspectors saw some cases in which front line managers had approved work that was of poor quality. Weaknesses have been identified at front line manager level and senior managers fully acknowledge that while basic, sound performance management arrangements are in place, there remain challenges in ensuring consistent quality assurance in the work undertaken. Senior and middle managers exercise robust oversight of the work, additional to the improved functioning of the CRM service. A manager development programme has been recently instigated. It is clear that the performance management and quality assurance systems have not been sufficiently firmly embedded to effectively identify actions and monitor progress in all cases.

Record of main findings: Warrington

Safeguarding services	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate
Capacity for improvement	Adequate
Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people	
Children and young people are safe and feel safe	Adequate
Quality of provision	Adequate
The contribution of health agencies to keeping children and young people safe	Adequate
Services for looked after children	
Ambition and prioritisation	Adequate
Leadership and management	Adequate
Performance management and quality assurance	Adequate
Partnership working	Adequate
Equality and diversity	Adequate
How good are outcomes for looked after children and care leavers?	
Being healthy	Adequate
Staying safe	Adequate
Enjoying and achieving	Good
Making a positive contribution, including user engagement	Adequate
Economic well-being	Good
Quality of provision	Adequate
Services for looked after children	
Ambition and prioritisation	Adequate
Leadership and management	Adequate
Performance management and quality assurance	Adequate
Equality and diversity	Adequate