

Isle of Wight Council

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 19 November 2018 to 30 November 2018

**Lead inspector: Tracey Scott
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

Services for children in the Isle of Wight have improved since the single inspection in 2014, when they required improvement to be good. The strategic partnership between the Isle of Wight Council and Hampshire County Council has brought stable and consistent leadership, increased resilience and a firm focus on continual improvement. The island location brings unique challenges and opportunities that leaders have understood and responded to well. They have worked purposefully to improve services for children and to create a sustainable service. Children’s lived experience is at the centre of social work practice on the island.

Highly skilled, ambitious senior leaders have a clear, shared vision and an accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement of the service. Together with political leaders, they have responded well to growing demands, creating a stable and permanent workforce.

Children in need of help and protection receive a good service, but the council has more to do to in a small number of areas to achieve greater consistency of practice. Multi-disciplinary teams are a particular strength, adding value, capacity

and expertise to the support that social workers provide to families, and ensuring that children benefit from purposeful interventions to sustain positive change.

Children in care benefit from reliably good care and support, with a strong focus on early permanence. Care leavers are well supported, although, for a small number, their choice to remain on the island and their corporate parents' determination to achieve this limits their accommodation options. Senior leaders have already taken assertive steps to improve the sufficiency of accommodation on the island.

What needs to improve

- The quality and oversight of children subject to pre-proceedings plans and the accessibility and clarity of letters before proceedings.
- The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who are homeless.
- The sufficiency of suitable housing to meet the needs of all care leavers who wish or need to live on the island.
- The recording of reflective discussion and actions to progress plans in case supervision records.

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

1. An increasing number of children and families access early help services and benefit from a comprehensive range of support, commissioned through an external provider via a network of family centres across the island. In partnership with the local authority, the voluntary sector provides a strong community response to families who need to access early help services.
2. Early help coordinators proactively support lead professionals to complete good-quality early help assessments and to coordinate helpful team-around-the-family meetings. Early help professionals, including those from the early help commissioned service, undertake imaginative work with children to ensure that their views are heard and taken account of. Families benefit from timely and effective interventions. Good attendance by lead professionals at early help hub meetings ensures the ongoing development of the service by raising awareness of service developments, information-sharing about emerging issues and the sharing of good practice.
3. Social workers and managers in the children's reception team (CRT) and the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) make timely and appropriate decisions about levels of need when children are first referred to the service. The response by the MASH to safeguarding concerns about children is

prompt and effective. Good-quality strategy discussions, informed by multi-agency information, lead to the right decisions about next steps. In response to occasional delays in health information being received at the right time, the local authority is introducing a new system to streamline the process. The police send all notifications involving children directly to children's social care without considering whether they meet the threshold for intervention. The local authority and police are working together to introduce a daily triage meeting to address this.

4. Strong partnership working in the MASH supports effective information-sharing to inform decision-making. While referrals are made with parental consent, further discussions with parents do not always take place prior to MASH checks being undertaken. Decisions by managers to dispense with consent are not always recorded well. In all other areas, management oversight and the recording of reasons for decisions are rigorous.
5. Positively, the introduction of the children's assessment and safeguarding teams (CAST), has reduced the number of transition points for children. The model has enabled social workers to build stronger relationships with families at an earlier stage. Social work 'personal assistants' provide significant administrative and practical support to social workers, adding considerable value to the service. An externally commissioned analysis of this personal assistant role has shown a 20% increase in social work time being spent with families. A range of innovative and effective services is helping to meet increasing demand. This includes the disabled children intervention team, the resilience around families team (RAFT), child practitioners and family intervention workers (offering specialist support in mental health and substance misuse). These teams provide high-quality, tailored and intensive support to families that contributes to improved outcomes.
6. Social workers know children well, visit children frequently and are passionate about their work. They undertake sensitive direct work to understand children's wishes, feelings and experiences. The majority of assessments are evidence based, well written and holistic. Children's histories are well understood and are used to inform assessments. Written chronologies, although up to date, are variable in quality. Children's lived experiences are well considered and there is good analysis of children's needs and the risks that they face. Visits by social workers to children and families are purposeful and they are clearly linked to children's plans. Although disabled children are supported well with regular visits and child in need meetings, assessments of their needs are not always updated regularly enough in some cases to ensure that they are receiving the right support to meet their needs.
7. Social workers recognise when concerns for children escalate and they take appropriate steps to respond. Overall, strategy discussions lead to appropriate decisions and effective plans to protect children. Child protection

enquires are comprehensive, leading to timely action, and strong management oversight supports robust evidence-based decision-making. Child protection conferences effectively analyse risks and consider the potential for future harm to children. There is good multi-agency attendance and participation. Minutes of meetings are succinct, with clear analysis, and they are written in language that is meaningful for parents.

8. Child protection plans and records of core group meetings evidence a firm focus on children's needs. Support provided to families reduces risks to children, and their outcomes improve. However, the actions noted in records of core group meetings are not always clear enough. Sometimes language is over-professionalised, making it difficult for parents to be clear about what is required of them and the consequences if this is not achieved. Inspectors saw some good examples of child-specific and carefully considered contingency planning.
9. Good-quality legal planning meetings are comprehensive, clearly identifying the threshold decision and the next steps that are needed. Letters to parents and written agreements clearly state why professionals are worried, but they are not always written in clear and accessible language. Steps taken during the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline are effective in most cases. While children who have recently become subject to pre-proceedings have benefited from more timely decision-making, some children have continued to be subject to pre-proceedings when risks have reduced. This had already been identified by the local authority and steps have been taken to address this, resulting in far fewer children's cases being held for longer than six months in pre-proceedings. Once care proceedings commence, high-quality evidence that is promptly compiled enables proceedings to progress at the right pace for each child.
10. A small number of children are subject to private fostering arrangements. Assessments for this group do not always fully address children's needs and vulnerabilities, and plans are not always progressed in a timely way.
11. When 16- and 17-year-olds are at risk of becoming homeless, high-quality and effective support is provided to them by RAFT to enable them to remain with their families. When young people become homeless, they are offered accommodation on the island, but they do not always have the benefit of a social work assessment of their needs, and they are not always fully informed of their rights and entitlements to become looked after. Leaders accepted the deficits in practice that were identified by inspectors and are taking action to review the pathway for assessment and the information provided to young people.

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

12. Social workers make timely and appropriate decisions for children to come into care when they cannot remain in the care of their families. The vast majority of children in care live with carers who meet their needs, promote their development and provide many opportunities to enable them to enjoy life. Social workers build strong relationships with children. They see them regularly, develop a good understanding of their needs and undertake meaningful individual work. Discussions with inspectors and social work records of visits demonstrate a real interest in and a genuine affection for children. High-quality life-story work is routinely undertaken when children are emotionally ready and receptive.
13. The recording of children's circumstances is frequently updated through informative and evaluative assessments, resulting in outcome-focused care plans that are used to closely measure children's progress.
14. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) carefully oversee children's care plans, undertaking regular visits to children to gain an understanding of their experiences. IROs consider children's individual needs through regular reviews that strongly represent children's views. The participation of children is widely promoted, and many children have regular access to senior managers to influence the development of resources and services.
15. Most children benefit from a good range of support to meet their needs, including specialist placements on and off the island. An increase in the number of children in care has resulted in some pressures on the availability of foster carers who live on the island. The impact of this is seen for a small minority of children who experience a change in placement in the first year before a suitable match to long-term carers is found for them. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who were allocated to the Isle of Wight via the national transfer scheme are placed off-island to promote their cultural identity and sense of belonging. These children benefit from dedicated, culturally sensitive and informed social work support.
16. The training and approval of foster carers are effective. The fostering panel carries out its core duties diligently and makes timely and appropriate recommendations. The information that is provided to the panel is of a good standard. Foster carers say that they feel part of the professional network and that their views are valued and used to influence children's plans. They are integral to the team around each child, and this is a mutually supportive arrangement. Although foster carers manage children's vulnerabilities and risks well, the written management plans and strategies to address these are not always specific or clear enough.

17. Children in care benefit from a range of support to meet their emotional needs, including the therapeutic writing group. This helps to compensate for weaknesses in child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Recently, children have benefited from more timely initial and review health assessments, but review health assessments are too infrequent for some children who are placed outside the island. Active dedicated nurses for children in care ensure that children's most important health needs are quickly addressed, and, because of this, no detriment was seen for children when health assessments were overdue.
18. The leadership of the virtual school is strong, leading to improved outcomes for children in care. Leaders are committed to continually improving outcomes for children in care. A good example of this is the work to refine the monitoring of their academic progress. Although the current system is effective, leaders have rightly identified the need to strengthen this work so that they can more rapidly identify when these children are not making enough academic progress. Children's wider social and emotional development is actively promoted by their carers, who provide a broad range of social, physical and educational activities.
19. When children go missing, their circumstances are well understood by practitioners, but records of return home interviews do not always highlight critical 'push and pull' factors. The majority of young people who have been missing decline a formal return home interview in favour of conversations with familiar and trusted adults. Practitioners and trained volunteers go to great lengths to contact children and the adults around them to understand why children go missing and their associated dangers and vulnerabilities. The information gained is used to contribute to the monthly multi-agency missing, exploited, trafficked risk assessment conference. This meeting identifies multiple vulnerabilities effectively, and attendees share helpful information and intelligence. Risks for children in care who go missing frequently and for longer periods reduce through services that provide bespoke support.
20. Children's need for permanence is considered at the earliest opportunity. This means that most children in care move to live with their permanent families without delay. The vast majority of assessments of alternative carers are of good quality. Children benefit from timely adoptions and placements with special guardians and connected carers. Recruitment processes for adopters are thorough, and the assessment, training and support for adopters are sound. Good-quality assessments inform considered decisions about whether brothers and sisters should stay together or not. Carefully thought through introductions prepare adopters and children well and ensure smooth transitions for children as they move from foster care to live with their adoptive parents. Children enjoy stability and thrive in their adoptive families, with no breakdowns in these placements.

21. Careful consideration is given to the possibility of children returning home from care through thoughtful assessment, planning and managerial oversight. Appropriate support is provided to children and families after children return home, and this provides a sound platform for enduring and successful rehabilitations. Children rarely return to care. Placement with parents assessments are detailed and rigorous.
22. Personal advisers have regular, purposeful contact with care leavers. Young people receive strong support from personal advisers, who know them well and are genuinely interested in their welfare. The local authority ensures that care leavers have a voice and that they are well informed about their rights and entitlements. Creative and effective work takes place to encourage young people's participation through their active engagement in developing the local offer and in young people's involvement in the tendering process for the new supported housing pathway.
23. Most care leavers benefit from up-to-date and good-quality pathway plans that describe their needs and experiences and identify the actions that are needed to help them to achieve their goals. Inspectors saw positive examples of work being undertaken with young people through the use of workbooks to help them to develop their independence skills. However, the plans are not always updated when young people's circumstances change.
24. Care leavers' health and education needs are identified well and are fully considered in pathway plans. However, information about young people's health histories is not always made available to them in a straightforward format that will help them to make informed decisions about future health choices. Work is underway to address this, but it is belated. The large majority of young people are in education, employment or training and their engagement is actively promoted by personal advisers. The local authority is aspirational for its care leavers and has created a range of opportunities in the council, including apprenticeships to support care leavers in their pathways towards good quality employment. A high number of care leavers are supported to attend higher education, including through the provision of consistent and familiar accommodation during vacations.
25. Almost all care leavers live in suitable accommodation, with high numbers remaining in staying-put arrangements with their foster carers after they turn 18, and some remaining with their carers after they turn 21. Personal advisers and managers are committed to helping care leavers to remain on the island and close to their family, friends and support networks. This, together with an unpredicted reduction in provision, has led to a lack of suitable accommodation for a very small number of care leavers. Unlike mainland authorities, the Isle of Wight cannot place children 'over the local authority border' and as easily continue to maintain those important personal relationships and community and continuity of support. In some circumstances, these young people have stayed in one of two known and

vetted bed and breakfast arrangements. Managers ensure that effective risk assessments and extensive support are in place when such accommodation is used and have taken appropriate steps to meet care leavers' needs. When the shortfall in suitable accommodation first emerged, senior leaders took assertive action to address this through a new tendering process for semi-independent accommodation, co-produced with young people, and aimed at expanding the availability of provision. The tendering process was due to conclude shortly after this inspection.

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

26. The strategic partnership between the Isle of Wight and Hampshire county council has enabled the Isle of Wight local authority to build stable, experienced leadership, increased capacity and a focus on continuous improvement. Clear lines of reporting and accountability are in place. Children are at the heart of the service and leaders have worked relentlessly to improve services and create a sustainable service.
27. Aspirational and highly competent leaders have a clear and shared vision for children's services. The open, collaborative and exacting approach adopted by these leaders has led to significant improvements in social work practice. Political leaders are engaged with, and visible to, children and staff. They have a good understanding of the service and have secured significant financial investment. This increased understanding has ensured more vigorous scrutiny and challenge and a greater focus across the council on meeting the needs of vulnerable children.
28. Senior managers have worked hard to build partners' trust and confidence in the service. Partnership arrangements are more constructive and continue to mature. Priorities are aligned, but there are some continuing challenges linked to the insufficient capacity of some health provision, for example access to CAMHS, particularly assessments for autistic spectrum diagnosis. The local authority has appropriately advocated for children and has challenged the NHS Trust and Clinical Commissioning Group. Service provision is now in place to begin to address these gaps.
29. The council's transformation programme has led to the development of multi-disciplinary teams. This is an innovative response to growing demand, enabling social workers to focus their time on providing tailored and intensive support to families. The vast majority of practitioners say that their caseloads are manageable. Inspectors found that a small number of caseloads were too high. The local authority has secured further financial investment to reduce caseloads further. A surge in referrals occurred in the week preceding the inspection. Senior managers were responsive in ensuring that additional capacity from the island and Hampshire was provided to meet the demand.

30. A comprehensive quality assurance programme, combined with the rigorous use of performance information, enables leaders to maintain effective oversight of practice. Performance meetings take place in every part and level of the service. Regular auditing by managers and senior leaders, alongside social workers, provides helpful opportunities for reflection and learning. The records of these audits have an insufficient focus on the quality of practice or the experiences and progress of the child. The local authority has a strong learning culture, undertaking regular peer reviews alongside multi-agency audits and learning reviews. The learning from these, and from the regular audit programme, informs the quality improvement programme and leads to a tangible focus on continual improvement.
31. Corporate parenting is much stronger across the council since the last inspection. The corporate parenting board receives regular, comprehensive performance data and reports, enabling effective scrutiny and challenge. The corporate parenting board maintains a strong focus on achieving positive outcomes for children in care and care leavers. A high number of young people are supported to attend university and the council actively promotes apprenticeships, particularly for those with care experience. 'Hearing young people's experience' (HYPE), Isle of Wight's children in care council, is an active and influential part of the corporate parenting board.
32. The local authority engages well with children to ensure that their views and experiences shape policies and contribute to service development. Care leavers have been actively involved in improving service delivery, such as through the tendering process for the new supported housing pathway and the local offer for care leavers. Participation is widely promoted across the service through events such as 'have your say' activity weeks and 'come dine with us'. These popular and vibrant events are excellent opportunities for children in care to spend enjoyable time with each other and with managers, council members, social workers and foster carers. The 'young inspectors' programme supports disabled children or those with additional needs to provide valuable insight and feedback. This programme has been effective in influencing commissioning arrangements and short break provision and activities.
33. The current information record system does not support social workers in finding documents swiftly, and electronic operational information is not readily available to inform performance management. Teams have developed effective manual performance management tools to assist the progress of children's plans and interventions. The local authority has taken appropriate action to tackle this shortfall and is nearing the completion of a tendering process for a new system that will be implemented over the next 12 months.
34. Managers consistently provide valuable support to social workers, ensuring good oversight of children's plans. Management involvement at key decision

points and in reviewing important documents provides clear, accountable reasons for their decisions. Social workers say that management oversight and support is regular, reflective and helpful, and staff supervision records evidence this. In most cases reviewed by inspectors, the case supervision discussions between managers and social workers did not include a meaningful analysis of the progress of the plan or the actions that are needed.

35. The island location presents unique challenges for social work recruitment, limiting the resource pool available. However, senior leaders have worked diligently to address this, creating a stable workforce that is predominantly permanent. This is a significant achievement since the last inspection, when agency rates were high.



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