



Warrington Borough Council Children's Services Peer Challenge

Date: 14th-17th June 2022

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

The peer team is impressed with the culture in Warrington. It is clearly a child centred organisation and system that is focussed on meeting the needs of children and the young people in its care. Morale amongst staff is high and the organisation is highly thought of by colleagues, partners and young people.

There is a shared vision for children, which is seen in the strategic plans and operational policies. This is delivered through strong and effective council leadership. The lead member, chief executive and the senior leadership team are knowledgeable, engaged and their approach is appreciated by staff. Senior leaders have a clear line of sight to frontline practice and actively engage with more junior managers and practitioners on cases to ensure needs are met and children are kept safe.

There are strong partner relationships at a strategic and operational level. Issues are discussed and acted on swiftly, which is aided by the co-location of key staff. There is a joined-up commitment to addressing identified problems, which is backed up with resources both from the council and partner organisations.

It is clear from the self-assessment and from the evidence gathered by the peer team that Warrington is an organisation that knows itself well and is aware of what needs to be done.

There are recruitment and retention issues in the social worker workforce, particularly in the child in need teams. These have previously been highlighted and action has been taken to address the points of concern. The furthering of in-house opportunities for non-qualified social work staff to pursue professional development may additionally support these efforts.

A lot of work has been undertaken to improve the sufficiency of placement opportunities for those children taken into care. Not least of these is the adoption of the Mockingbird and No Wrong Door approach, which is highly valued. However, more needs to be done to develop the in-house and regional approaches to ensuring that there is sufficiency of placements.

Care leavers generally speak highly of the council and the services available for them. The level of those care leavers who are not in employment, education or training is relatively high and opportunities both within the council and local businesses needs to be developed further.

2. Key recommendations

The peer team was impressed with the arrangements for children's services in Warrington. The council is driving for continuous improvement from their strong base, there are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions to support this. It is clear to the peer team that Warrington is an aware and reflective organisation. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

Invest further in care leaver services: Personal Adviser caseloads are high and the level of those young people leaving care who are not in employment, education or training is also relatively high. Consider the further use of the council as an employer and the influence that can be brought to encourage local employers to provide further opportunities is required. Increase the availability of accommodation for care leavers along similar lines to the provision of supported accommodation for 16-18 years olds.

Consider how early help under-pins social care: early help and social care are in separate directorates and do not use a common data recording system. There are some reported delays in the step-up/step-down arrangements between early help and social care. Implementing a common data system and common routes of accountability would help provide a smoother transfer of cases and go some way to prevent re-referrals

Consider how to invest more in your 'grow your own' initiatives: there are continuing difficulties in the recruitment and retention of social workers. It is recognised that this is a national issue. Further responses to the issue could include increasing the use of apprenticeships and developing links with local universities to run social work courses aligned to training placements in Warrington. This would give opportunities for the clearly motivated and skilled non-qualified social work staff to progress in their professional development pathways.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

Independent, external evaluation and feedback from the sector has endorsed peer challenge as an approach that promotes learning from a sector-led improvement perspective. All local authorities and their partners are constantly striving to improve outcomes for children but an external and independent view can help to accelerate or consolidate progress.

The peer team was sourced specifically to address the areas of focus highlighted by WBC. The team consisted of senior colleagues with significant experience of leading and managing children's services within local government, supported by an experienced LGA challenge manager.

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced officer peers. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and their participation was agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge were:

- **Trevor Doughty**, Director, Children's Sector Led Improvement, LGA
- **Carolyn Knight**, Head of Service Quality and Standards and Principal Social Worker, Lincolnshire County Council
- **Cliff James**, Head of Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting , Children and Families, Suffolk County Council
- **Jonathan Trubshaw**, LGA manager

The process

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information, in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. This included two days of reviewing 16 case files before the onsite work (the report from this work is provided in Annexe A). The team then spent four days onsite at WBC, during which they:

- Heard from over 100 people, including: young people, foster carers, lead member, chief executive, senior leadership team, front-line practitioners and managers and partners
- Observed meetings
- Read background documentation
- Undertook visits to settings.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit on Friday 17th June 2022. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Scope and Focus

You identified six areas of focus for the peer challenge that were agreed at the beginning of the scoping process, which are listed below:

- Is our current and planned innovations and developments to improve sufficiency of placements, including for children with complex needs appropriate
- Is Warrington an effective corporate parent – are we ambitious enough for our children
- Do the right children come into care, are our PLO processes robust and effective, do we achieve permanency timely for our children
- Our ambition is to co-produce, have we made progress in our participation strategy
- Have we maintained good services for our children during and throughout the pandemic
- How effective are leaders in driving this strategy?

5. Main Findings

Sufficiency of placements

From the young people, foster carers and partners who spoke with the peer team there was a clear message that the council was well thought of. Some young people contributed to videos in which they were extremely positive about their experience of living in the council's supported living provision.

The peer team was impressed by the range of resources that Warrington offers to young people in care and care leavers, as well as more broadly to young people in the borough.

There is a sufficiency strategy in place with strong corporate backing to ensure that this is delivered. This is particularly impressive given the relatively small size of Warrington and is a clear indication of importance the authority places on children.

There is a strong range of edge of care resources and placements available. There are well thought through in-house services including foster services and residential resources for 16-18 year olds, which have been developed from a clear evidence base for adopting these approaches.

Although commissioning is based in adult services it works well in covering the needs of children, particularly in relation to housing and accommodation provision. There is a joined-up approach with the strategic thinking and guidance clearly coming from the leadership in children's.

The approach to delivering sufficiency appears to join-up across the various elements that ensure children in care have the resources that are needed. There are clear steps being taken to move away from an over reliance on Independent Fostering Associations (IFAs), which is coherent with other initiatives to ensure that there is adequate fostering and residential placements. However, the cross-Cheshire partnership for fostering is currently mainly focussed on recruitment and advertising and there are opportunities for the council to develop arrangements further.

There is good evidence of the council encouraging care leavers, where appropriate, to 'Stay Put' with their foster carers once they reach the age of 18. However, more could be done to develop supported accommodation for those care leavers who, for whatever reason, are not able to continue living with their foster carers and those leaving other residential placements. By increasing the offer of support up to the age of 25 this would help them to 'Stay Close' to the residential area.

Consideration needs to be given to the recently published Care Review recommendations and the potential impact on Warrington. There may be implications in relation to ensuring the approach to achieving sufficiency, both within the council and with partners, is appropriately met. The peer team recognises that the full impact of the Care Review and the awaited Government response is not yet understood and that Warrington – along with every other authority - is considering how best these may be addressed.

Effective corporate parent

In the view of the peer team, Warrington is a council that 'gets' its responsibility to children in care and care leavers. There is a clear culture that goes beyond an understanding of responsibility to ensuring that the council is delivering on its ambitions for young people.

There is a clear and passionate engagement from the lead member. It is clear that there is a corporate priority on delivering for young people and this is driven by the chief executive. This is evident in the resources that the council continues to make available, and which are also committed by partners.

The peer team saw evidence of effective partnership working, both across the council and with external agencies. Staff respectfully challenged each other and agreements were reached to meet the needs of children.

The peer team heard from carer leavers that the local offer is welcomed. However, the offer is not always understood, and young people are not always aware of what is available to them. There are opportunities to engage more fully with young people so that they can help shape the way in which the offer is produced and communicated in ways that are more accessible.

The peer team was impressed with the examples of the council's provision for young people that were seen, including the Lighthouse, Pure Insight and the mockingbird initiative. The involvement of the police and health in the Lighthouse was seen as noteworthy in providing a high level of outreach and the facility as a whole is delivering what is needed for young people. The partnership with Pure Insight is providing advocacy and emotional support for young people in addition to the services offered directly by the council's staff. The mockingbird constellations are working well, the carers spoke highly of the work undertaken to give them an increased level of support from the authority and from each other.

The plan for a care leavers' hub is seen as positive and should be taken forward as soon as possible. The care leavers the peer team spoke with thought that having a space that they could identify as "their own" was important to them and that it would help them to feel recognised.

The peer team saw that the care leavers service is well managed. However, 49% of care leavers were Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) between the ages 19-21 years. Given the economic environment in the area and the skill and dedication of your staff more could be done with local employers – and the council itself - to help this group find jobs and training opportunities.

The caseloads for personal advisors (PAs) and independent reviewing officers (IROs) are high. PAs spoke of undertaking work with 16-17 year olds, even those these young people already had an allocated case workers. Whilst on site the peer team was made aware that additional resources were being made available to recruit additional PAs and that this should go some way to reducing caseloads.

The existing children in care and care leavers strategy, with regards to decriminalisation, is yet to embed fully for care leavers.

Timely permanency

The foster carers that the peer team met clearly valued the support they received from Warrington. They spoke highly of the staff and the procedures that are in place. They

also stated that the support provided between the carers was well developed and appreciated, including making themselves available to be contacted out of hours.

Placement planning meetings were seen to be timely and effective. There are sound adoption processes that are put into action through good relationships with good placement provision via regional adoption agency.

The peer team was impressed with the way in which finance issues are addressed between partners. There are innovative match-funding initiatives that enable services to be brought into the borough, including the matching of National Lottery monies to enable the work of Pure Insight. There is also evidence of pro-active funding for some young people with significant mental health needs to ensure suitable accommodation was available.

The supported accommodation initiative, although relatively new, was well received with positive feedback from young people. There was strong evidence that the service had been created through good levels of participation and co-production.

There is a proactive legal gateway for the child's journey from pre-proceedings and throughout care proceedings. However, the court timescales do not help in achieving permanence in a timely manner for the child. It is recognised that the impact of COVID has also had a negative impact on court timescales. This may be an issue that a collective partnership response could help find ways of supporting.

The peer team saw examples of young people in residential care who could be in fostering placements, if these were available. There is an issue with the sufficiency of fostering placement and the council has plans, including increasing in-house foster parents, which should go some way to address this – particularly if the Mockingbird approach is further developed.

The recruitment and retention of social workers is clearly understood and there are plans for addressing this. More could be done to increase the development and progression of the highly motivated non-qualified social work staff who could help provide stable and on-going relationships with young people. The peer team recognise that this is a national issue. However, this is having an impact on permanency and is particularly an issue within the child in need teams.

Participation and co-production

The housing core strategy incorporates and prioritises children. Managers in the housing service clearly understand their corporate parenting responsibilities and work with staff in children's services to support young people, particularly care leavers, to access suitable accommodation. Homeless assessments are co-worked between housing staff and social workers.

The Mockingbird initiative was seen to have a high level of involvement with foster carers. They spoke highly of engaging in the process and of being able to create the support that they needed.

The peer team heard of a range of participation projects for children in care and care leavers, including Express (children in care council) and Empower (forum for BAME children). Some of these were impacted by the necessary COVID arrangements and these are now back up and running again.

Over the past few years there have been a number of new initiatives that have been brought in to enhance the social work provision, not least the systemic approach model for social work. With future strategic and operational developments there are opportunities to engage more fully with staff – and where appropriate, partners – so that they can co-produce initiatives and how these are implemented.

There are good examples of care leaver ambassadors being used to help those about to leave care prepare for their new experience. These could be more broadly developed so that they not only help shape future developments but communicate them to those about to leave care.

Impact of COVID

Some young people said that they liked conducting meetings virtually, rather than in the traditional way. They were familiar with the medium and so they were less averse to engage.

Relationships with partner organisations improved due to meeting virtually. People spent less time travelling and were more often available so more issues could be addressed swiftly.

It was clear to the peer team that progress was maintained throughout pandemic. The evidence for this was summed up in the positive Ofsted focussed visit (December 2021).

The long-term negative impact on some children needs to be monitored and steps taken to address any issues. This is the case nationally and there may be learning that can be used from elsewhere that will be helpful.

The peer team heard evidence that the impact of working remotely and virtually has created for some a sense of detachment from the “Warrington family”. There is a culture of Warrington being a warm and welcoming place and when people are not coming into work this is naturally somewhat lost. This is having a negative impact on recruitment and retention. Plans are in place to help address this.

Leadership effectiveness

The peer team was impressed with the leadership at all levels. There is strong, committed strategic leadership at political and officer level. There is a clear corporate commitment to children, this is evidenced with significant investments in resources for children’s social care. It was clear to the peer team that the council knows itself well and is prepared to take action to address identified issues. The self-assessment

highlights areas of concern and it was reported amongst the senior leadership team that there are robust challenges to ensure the most appropriate solutions are found.

Senior managers have a line of sight on all areas of the service. They meet regularly with their staff and are familiar with their work. Staff in turn said they were supported and had ready access to their managers and senior leaders.

A social work model of practice has been introduced and implemented. All staff the peer team spoke with know the model and understand it, with around 90% of staff having received training in how they are to use it.

Early help and the social care teams are in separate directorates with different recording systems used in early help and in the child in need teams. There is regular and frequent discussion between the two teams, both at a strategic and operational level. However, having two systems prevents timely interventions as there is no direct access to what decision or work has been done before in another team.

The peer team was told that there are delays in the step-up/step-down of some cases and that this can lead to re-referrals. Social workers said that they experienced a lack of capacity in early help, so that some cases wait for allocation to social care.

The performance information being extracted from the recording systems, particularly Mosaic, does not appear to be as comprehensive as it could be. The peer team is aware that this is an area the council is seeking to address in the near future.

6. Next Steps

We hope that you will find the above findings to be a considered and true reflection of the discussions we had with you, your staff, your partners and families in Warrington. You and your colleagues will now want to consider how you can incorporate the peer team's findings into your ongoing planning. Relevant details are included below should you wish to access further support via the LGA.

For further improvement support you can contact the LGA's Principal Advisor for the North West: Helen Murray - Tel: 07884 312235, email: Helen.Murray@local.gov.uk or the Children's Improvement Adviser for the North West: Linda Clegg - Tel: 07545 787882, email: Lindaclegg0@gmail.com

Once again, thank you for participating in this review and please pass on our gratitude to everyone involved, particularly Tania Young for her preparation work and day-to-day support of the peer challenge.

Annexe A

Warrington Council Children's Case Review Report

Introduction

This case review took place as part of the wider LGA Children's Peer Challenge. A sample of case files were selected by the LGA and these were aligned to the key lines of enquiry that have been agreed by the Council. This report, alongside the range of information and data that the Council has shared with the peer team, will provide a key strand of evidence for the peer challenge.

It needs to be recognised that the number of cases reviewed is a relatively small sample. However, this sample size is usually sufficient to identify the key themes of strengths and areas for improvement that would exist across the system.

Scope

The Council has agreed the following key lines of enquiry for the peer challenge and these will also provide the focus for this case reviews:

- Is Warrington an effective corporate parent – are we ambitious enough for our children
- Is our current and planned innovations and developments to improve sufficiency of placements, including for children with complex needs appropriate
- Do the right children come into care, are our PLO processes robust and effective, do we achieve permanency timely for our children
- Our ambition is to co-produce, have we made progress in our participation strategy
- Have we maintained good services for our children during and throughout the pandemic
- How effective are leaders in driving this strategy?

Methodology

The following provides a summary of the methodology for the case review exercise:

- The case reviews commenced on the 30/05/2022 and the case reviewers were given remote access to the Council's case management system.
- Case lists that focussed on the agreed KLOEs were shared by the Council and cases selected by the LGA Peer Challenge Manager.
- The cases were selected to gather a broad overview of practice from a range of social work teams and included a mix of children in care, care leavers and adoption. There was a mix of gender, age and in terms of ethnicity, the children were predominately of White British heritage. The case review will usually focus on the last six months of practice.
- For each case selected the information held on the system was reviewed and where possible, this was supplemented with a discussion with the social worker/manager. The review took place during half term week, and this limited the availability of social workers.
- In total 16 cases were reviewed, and the breakdown of cases reviewed is as follows: 8 children in care, 4 care leavers and 4 children placed for adoption.

- Key findings from the case reviews will be verbally presented back to the Council. The completed template from each case review will also be shared with the Council.
- Key findings from the case review will be captured in a report that will be shared with the Council, the peer review team and will form an appendix of the final peer challenge report

Case review findings

Below is a table that captures the key strengths and areas for consideration from the case review.

Areas of Practice	Strengths	Areas for Consideration	Response from the LA
Identification and response to needs	<p>The needs of children and their parents are appropriately identified by social workers</p> <p>Children and parents receive support to address need e.g. No Wrong Door support, 1029511, Systemic Hub 857989, Families First 1029511</p> <p>Evidence of ongoing service provision to vulnerable children during the pandemic</p> <p>In all cases, the right children are coming into care.</p>	<p>Use of chronologies – these were not evident in most case records and those that were available needed updating. Chronologies were written as an index. By recording events and the impact upon the child there will be an enriched understanding of the child’s lived experience.</p> <p>The focus of intervention for care leavers is advice e.g. seek non molestation order 665185; how can the Local Authority provide support/befriending to care leavers so they are able to act on advice and what arrangements are in place to provide support to care leavers who become parents (771016)?</p> <p>Pathway plans for care leavers need to include prevention and support packages for mental health issues. (898333 and 665185)</p>	

<p>Assessment</p>	<p>Most case records evidence a recent child and family assessment; a small number of cases require an updated assessment e.g. 857989</p> <p>Evidence of comprehensive risk assessment in respect of sexual abuse concerns for unborn baby(1029511)</p> <p>There is evidence of pre-birth assessments resulting in placement at birth and subsequent adoption. This ensured bonding and attachment and a single placement.(10119232)</p> <p>There is evidence of health assessments for children in care</p>	<p>Some assessments reviewed could be more analytical.</p> <p>When considering Young Care Leavers it is difficult to assess Corporate parenting unless there is a comprehensive case summary. The impact of early experiences is likely to be revisited in adolescence but is often recorded as a behavioural issue without reflection or analysis.</p>	
<p>Planning and review</p>	<p>Evidence of significant change in child's plan when this is in child's best interests e.g. 1003945</p> <p>Good evidence that statutory reviews and reviews of pathway plan are taking place</p>	<p>Locating child's plan was not that easy. Is the Circle of Change document the child's plan? If so, should they be more inclusive of multi agency provision and more clearly define timescales?</p> <p>Is the IRO footprint and challenge as visible as it could be?</p>	
<p>Management oversight and supervision</p>	<p>Case records evidence regular supervision</p> <p>Workers report that they receive support from managers.</p> <p>Managers oversight is recorded on most cases and is helpful in</p>	<p>Case records suggest a task focused approach to supervision; how well are managers supported to provide reflective supervision and explore the emotional impact of work on social workers?</p>	

	understanding the decision-making process.		
Direct work and participation	<p>Statutory visits to children in care are taking place as required</p> <p>Case recording affectionately describes children including their likes/dislikes</p> <p>Social workers who were spoken know “their” children and want to make the best decision for children</p> <p>Consistent evidence of PAs keeping on contact with care leavers.</p> <p>There is evidence of direct work with parents after adoption (1020729). The worker showed compassion and understanding for parents with learning difficulties who did not understand the needs of their child. Similarly in 1029511, worker is acutely aware of mother’s vulnerabilities.</p>	Consider use of case summaries; they could be used to succinctly describe the child’s needs, views and plan.	
Permanence	<p>Case records evidence that achieving permanency underpins social work intervention</p> <p>There is evidence of case tracking on case records</p>	<p>PLO – delay is a feature in some cases e.g. initiating pre proceedings in 1015534, Court timetable e.g.1007749 and clarity as to which children family assessments were completed on 1007749 . How well is case tracking and IRO oversight reducing delay?</p> <p>Achieving permanency - are there some legacy issues in the system e.g.</p>	

		857989 was made subject to Care Order in October 2013 aged 16 months.	
Coordination and work between agencies	<p>There is evidence of coordination of work within Children's Services and across the partnership</p> <p>Case files illustrate that good relationships are built with foster parents and adoptive parents which facilitate the implementation of care plans</p>	<p>Mental health support to children in care/care leavers including those placed out of area. 1023497 evidences that there was no ongoing specialist mental health support once placed out of area and for care leaver, 665185, it is not clear what role adult mental health services are playing in supporting this vulnerable young person who is currently unable to work due to mental health.</p> <p>To what extent is the Council and its partners achieving their ambition to secure good educational/employment outcomes for children in care and care leavers? 665185 and 771016 are both NEET. What are plans to secure education/employment for these young people?</p>	
Outcomes	<p>Children are safeguarded/not exposed to ongoing harm due to parental care</p> <p>Social workers build positive relationships with children in care and knows their views and needs.</p> <p>The PA system is seen to be working well for those over eighteen care leavers. The PAs show</p>	<p>Consider arrangements to support women post adoption to reduce likelihood of any future children being removed from parental care.</p> <p>Consider more reflective work on the impact of loss for Looked After children.</p>	

	caring and sensitive insight into the young people and an ability to keep going even when rejected.		
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There were no safeguarding concerns identified by the reviewers that needed to be escalated to the Council for further consideration.

Conclusion

The case reviewers received a warm virtual welcome from Warrington children’s social care staff and their colleagues in IT and Mosaic Support were helpful and responsive to any queries raised by the reviewers. Conversations took place with only a small number of social workers; this was due to the short time between cases being selected and the case review exercise being completed. In addition, the case review exercise took place during half term which impacted on the availability of staff. The social workers who the reviewers met spoke with warmth and confidence about the children they work with and clearly conveyed that they are working to achieve the best plan for these children. In terms of strengths, the case review found that the right children are coming into care and a range of services are provided to meet the needs of children and parents. The decision to bring children into care prevents them from ongoing exposure to significant harm. There is good evidence that statutory visits and reviews are taking place. Supervision and case tracking are also commonplace and securing permanency underpins social work intervention.

In terms of areas for consideration, the case review found delay to be a feature in some cases and the Council may therefore wish to consider how case tracking and IRO oversight could be better used to mitigate any such delay. Another consideration is whether timescales could be more clearly defined in the child’s plan. Chronologies could be used in a more positive way to show the development of the child and the impact of life events. This may be the only record the child has of a period in their life when they look back and have no one with whom they can compare memories. In relation to improving outcomes for looked after children and care leavers, the case review has identified two key areas for the Council and its partners to consider: the provision of emotional health/mental health support to children in care and care leavers including for children placed out of area and the extent to which educational and employment outcomes are achieved for this group of children. Finally, the review of cases has identified the emotionally demanding nature of working with children and young people who are not able to live with their parents and the Local Authority may wish to consider the extent to which supervision provides the opportunity for reflection as well as personal support.

Helen Kenward and Liz Murphy,
LGA Associates
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