

Inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services

Warrington Council

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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 three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two inspectors from the Care Quality Commission. The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004.

2. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:

- a range of existing evidence and reports 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 any evaluations of serious case reviews undertaken by Ofsted in accordance with 'Working Together To Safeguard Children', 2006
- a review of 47 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 and recording undertaken
- the report of the most recent annual unannounced inspection of local authority contact, assessment and referral arrangements undertaken in June 2009
- discussions with or observations of 47 children and young people receiving services, 39 parents and carers, front line managers, senior officers including the Chief Executive, Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, elected members and a range of community representatives.

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 borough of Warrington covers 182 square kilometres and lies at the centre of the North West region's communications network. Warrington is a borough of contrasts and includes rural villages as well as larger towns such as Warrington itself, which is the largest and most densely populated. The population has risen rapidly over the last 30 years with the development of Warrington town. Within a total population of 195,200 people living in Warrington there are 48,200 children and young people under the age of 19 years. This represents 24.6% of the total population of which 6.2% are from minority ethnic groups including Polish, Pakistani and Indian. There are 3% (680) children for whom English is the second language and in total there are 51 different first languages spoken by children and young people. There is a marked difference in prosperity and the quality of life between the inner wards and the outer suburbs and villages. Eighteen specific neighbourhoods, mostly concentrated around the town centre and housing around 28,100 residents (of whom 25% are children and young people), are amongst the most deprived areas in the country.

5. A number of strategic partnerships exist, including the Children's Trust, the Warrington Safeguarding Children Board and the Warrington Local Strategic Partnership. The Warrington Children's Trust Board was set up in April 2008 which was developed from the previously established Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. The Trust board includes representation from the Local Authority, NHS Warrington Primary Care Trust (PCT), the 5 Boroughs Health Partnership, Warrington Police Authority, the Learning and Skills Council, Halton and Warrington Youth Offending Service, the associations of primary and secondary headteachers, NSPCC and the voluntary sector forum.

6. Children's social care services are delivered through one Access to Social Care team (ASC), one Out of Hours team, one Duty team, three Planned Intervention Teams as well as Permanency, Adoption, Fostering and Leaving Care teams for looked after children. At the time of the inspection, there were 264 looked after children in Warrington and 121 children were subject to child protection plans. A further 230 children were receiving services on a child in need basis and 472 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 122 local authority foster carers and an additional 11 carers who provide short breaks for children with disabilities.

7. Children's centres have been developed in phases with 11 currently open and a further three due to open in 2010. All schools provide a partial extended

services programme with 86% (74 schools) meeting the full core extended service offer.

8. Education in Warrington is provided in 70 primary schools, 12 secondary schools, three special schools, one nursery school and one Pupil Referral Unit. Six schools have special units 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. Post-16 education and training is provided by one General Further Education (GFE) college, one sixth form college, seven school sixth forms and a range of work-based training providers.

9. Commissioning and planning of national health services and primary care are the responsibility of NHS Warrington Primary Care Trust (PCT). Healthcare is provided by Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, NHS Warrington – Community Services Unit and 5 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 these organisations did not contribute to this inspection.

The inspection outcomes: Safeguarding services

Overall effectiveness

Grade 4 (Inadequate)

10. The overall effectiveness of safeguarding services in Warrington is inadequate. The effectiveness of action to ensure that children and young people feel safe is variable across services and agencies. Action by children's social care services to identify and respond to safeguarding and protection needs is poor. Inadequate action is taken to ensure that initial and core assessments, child protection enquiries and child protection plans are effective. This results in poor outcomes for some children.

11. The strategic bodies responsible have not undertaken consistent monitoring and quality assurance of service delivery. The Warrington Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB) has recognised that systems and capacity for audit and performance monitoring are weak. Lack of scrutiny by the Board has led to insufficient awareness of serious weaknesses in social care services and insufficient challenge. Some staff from a range of agencies informed inspectors that concerns had been reported to senior managers but no discernable action had resulted. The new Executive Director and social care management team have a clear understanding of the scale of change required.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 4 (Inadequate)

12. Capacity for improvement is inadequate. The new Executive Director and the interim social care senior management team understand the weaknesses and are leading the necessary changes. Impressive early action has already been taken, including approval of additional resources. There has been a deterioration in both the quality and performance of some services, notably in social care, since the Joint Area Review (JAR) undertaken in 2007. Little progress had been made in relation to some areas for development identified in the JAR. These include the quality of information systems in social care, inconsistencies in performance management, the quality of assessments and the transfer of cases to and from family support. In addition, there has been slow progress in addressing gaps in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and in the development of joint PCT and local authority commissioning arrangements. Performance in some key aspects of safeguarding services, such as the timeliness of assessments and the proportion of core assessments undertaken, has worsened.

13. Leaders and managers within children's social care had not taken effective action to address significant weaknesses in the quality of services and in the capacity of social care staff to manage their caseloads and respond to children's needs in a timely fashion. There has been a lack of stated partnership ambition, vision and strategic priorities for children in need of safeguarding, particularly for those in need of protection. A workforce strategy is at a very early stage of

development. Staff and managers within council safeguarding services have been transferred to other posts in response to identified service deficiencies as a short term solution rather than as part of a clear staff development strategy, resulting in gaps in skills and capacity. The newly appointed Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services and interim head of safeguarding services have been in post since early September 2009. Appointments to four interim service management posts within children's social care services have been made recently on a temporary basis but there is clear evidence of the council's actions to progress recruitment to these posts through a national external recruitment campaign.

Areas for improvement

14. 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:

- Ensure that all referrals of likely significant harm are followed up by immediate and thorough investigation of risk.
- Ensure that all assessments are progressed in a timely way and contain a robust assessment of risk.
- Ensure that outcome-focused child protection plans are completed for all children who are the subject of a child protection plan.
- Ensure that outcome-focused child in need plans are completed following assessment and are progressed in a timely fashion.
- Ensure all management decisions about individual cases are clearly recorded.

Within three months:

- Ensure partnership boards develop and implement effective performance management and quality assurance systems.
- Ensure that leadership of the Children's Trust Board and Local Safeguarding Children Board is effective and takes action to promote good outcomes both for children in need of safeguarding and for children who are looked after.

Within six months:

- Develop a coherent workforce strategy to secure a suitably skilled and capable workforce, including sufficient skilled and suitably experienced social workers.

Outcomes for children and young people

The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe **Grade 4 (Inadequate)**

15. There are substantial weaknesses in the safeguarding of children and young people in need of protection and this makes the effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe inadequate overall. Weaknesses remain in the application of thresholds and in the timeliness and quality of assessments including assessment of risk.

Recording is poor overall and planning is weak.

16. Multi-agency arrangements to respond to missing children are robust. Good processes are in place to track children missing from education, including systematic monitoring of the whereabouts of those who leave the area and active use of police service intelligence. The 'Talk Don't Walk' project provides a good service to children and their parents, including counselling and family mediation, and the project demonstrates improved outcomes. Agencies are actively engaged in supporting older vulnerable young people including those at risk of becoming homeless. There is an appropriate range of provision for homeless young people but the supply is insufficient. The absence of a joint protocol between housing and social care services leads to a lack of clarity regarding their respective roles in assessing need.

17. Overall safeguarding provision is judged as good or better in the majority of school inspections. Effective multi-agency partnership working between children's centres, the voluntary and community sectors, schools and health professionals is resulting in improved outcomes. The safeguarding needs of those children receiving early intervention services are recognised and appropriate action is taken, for example, in the Family Pathfinder Project working with families with complex needs.

18. Partnership working to safeguard children from domestic abuse is satisfactory and staff across agencies are aware of the risks to children. Early intervention work includes a good focus on the needs of victims and children. The police system for identifying the impact of domestic abuse on children is robust. Referrals are prioritised and appropriately directed to social care services. Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferencing (MARAC) arrangements for children affected by domestic abuse are well-established. A range of specialist resources are delivered by statutory and voluntary partners including group work for children and for perpetrators. Agencies who are working to prevent harm from domestic abuse have identified gaps in current provision, for example in the availability of therapeutic support for children. In the absence of a clear commissioning framework there is a lack of clarity about how issues identified will be progressed.

The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people feel safe. Grade 3 (Adequate)

19. Inspectors were able to meet over 20 children and young people including young people who had committed offences, young carers and young people with learning disabilities. The majority reported that they are listened to and their views are respected. They were able to explain how services have helped improve their lives. Some have clearly benefited from consistent support, focused on their needs, over a number of years. Others, including young people with learning disabilities, are actively engaged in improving services. All explained how a range of services has helped them to be safe in their communities, on line and from bullies.

20. The Tellus survey indicates that the percentage of children reporting that they experienced bullying during the last school year is lower than the national percentage. Multi-agency action to prevent and respond to bullying is good. There are a number of initiatives to combat bullying, some targeted at hard to reach groups. These include the use of peer mentoring approaches and support in the development of anti-bullying strategies. The majority of schools have Healthy School status. Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) is well embedded and is making a significant contribution to anti-bullying work.

21. Arrangements are in place for children and young people to contribute to the reviews of their support or protection plans and young people are actively encouraged to contribute to family support meetings. Children's social care staff generally see children alone during assessments but their wishes and feelings are not consistently reflected in records of interviews or core group meetings. Participation of children in the child protection planning process is also variable. There are good examples of individual support and advocacy arrangements, but these are not sufficiently available to all children in need or those subject to protection plans.

22. There are positive examples of individual initiatives to engage children and young people in service development, such as in the development of extended schools and in some voluntary and community sector services. However, the involvement of children and young people in the strategic development of family support and child protection provision is not systematic.

The quality of provision Grade 4 (Inadequate)

23. There are substantial weaknesses in the safeguarding of children and young people most in need of protection and this makes the responsiveness of services inadequate overall. Weaknesses in the application of thresholds for children in need of protection were identified in the recent unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements. Staff from a range of partner agencies confirm that these inconsistencies remain. This has resulted in a failure to assess need or risk robustly for some children. Partner agencies report that there are early signs of improvement in the consistency of response and the rigour of initial decision making by social care services, but

the new approach is not yet embedded or consistent. In contrast, thresholds for accessing local services are clear and operate satisfactorily in relation to early intervention.

24. The quality of front line partnership working is variable, although agencies across Warrington are working well together through the CAF and family support model to engage children and families with lower levels of need. Information sharing and communication are effective at this level. However, for children requiring social care service involvement, the quality of information sharing is variable.

25. Practice in undertaking child protection enquiries is inconsistent. Children at risk of harm are referred appropriately to children's social care services by partner agencies, including health and education. However enquiries are inadequately recorded, sometimes as initial assessments. As a result, it is not sufficiently clear whether identified risks or precipitating incidents have been thoroughly investigated in a timely fashion. There are also inconsistencies in the use of strategy discussions or meetings, although recent action has been taken to ensure that strategy discussions routinely involve participants with sufficient seniority. Discussions are not always adequately recorded and minutes not always distributed in good time. Police and social care staff are always involved in meetings but the participation of other agencies is inconsistent.

26. There are unacceptable delays in undertaking and completing initial and core assessments, with the result that some children, including those on the edge of care, remain at risk. Referring agencies are not routinely informed about the progress of assessments, although there are individual examples of good practice. The number of core assessments undertaken continues to be very low in comparison with similar authorities. Some children with child protection plans have not received a core assessment of their needs. However, since the unannounced inspection took place, all assessments are now allocated to qualified social workers and complex work is no longer allocated to students. Although some assessments seen were of adequate quality, the quality of initial and core assessments is poor overall, as is confirmed by the council's own recent audit of selected cases. Assessments are narrowly focused on single issues and do not sufficiently consider wider needs, including the needs of siblings. Historical information is not adequately used to inform current action and analysis of risk is poor. Insufficient use is made of the skills and knowledge of partner agencies. Children and families are insufficiently involved in assessments and findings are not systematically shared with them.

27. Parents of disabled children report considerable delays in progressing assessments of their children's needs including for the provision of short breaks. While short break provision is viewed by parents as of good quality, there is insufficient provision to meet identified need. The dedicated team for children with disabilities was disbanded earlier in the year and parents told inspectors that they felt they were not consulted about this decision. In their experience,

this has led to a loss of skill and experience among social workers and diminished service responsiveness.

28. The assessment of the needs of vulnerable children using the CAF is good; examples of assessments seen by inspectors were at least satisfactory and many were of a good standard with a clear focus on outcomes. Children and families are engaged well by the staff. Service Allocation Meetings ensure that resources are identified from a wide range of agencies to develop creative and regularly reviewed packages of support. Children and parents are positive about the support received. The completion of CAFs is monitored by a central team but a multi-agency process for quality assuring the plans has yet to be developed.

29. Planning for individual children in need, including for children with disabilities, is too slow. Plans lack clarity and are not sufficiently focused on outcomes or the comprehensive needs of the child. For some children, there has been an unacceptable delay in identifying the need for them to become looked after. Insufficient capacity within teams has resulted in delays in reviewing plans and in the distribution of minutes of review meetings.

30. Child protection planning is poor. Six of the cases reviewed by inspectors identified significant weaknesses in the management of risk and in the effectiveness of child protection planning. Child protection plans are not routinely developed or reviewed following the initial child protection conference, which is not consistent with guidance in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'. Child protection reviews are held at the required frequency, but the absence of systematic planning means that some children do not receive an appropriate level of protection.

31. Case recording, including minutes of child protection conferences, is very variable. While a few satisfactory examples were seen, too much case recording is superficial and lacks robust analysis of risk. Timely completion of recording is significantly impeded by difficulties with the current electronic recording system. Management oversight and monitoring of the effectiveness of child in need and child protection plans are ineffective and are not evidenced on case files, although some staff report that they feel well supported by accessible managers. Systematic case audits are not in place. Independent reviewing officers have a key role in reviewing practice in child protection but have not fulfilled their role effectively in terms of monitoring, quality assurance or challenge to poor practice although they have raised individual concerns. Health care records are reported to be subject to regular audit and evaluation. Health staff report that they are supported by regular and effective child protection supervision.

32. Staff are aware of their own agency complaints procedures. Social care services staff however do not routinely give information about the complaints procedure to children and young people. The learning from complaints is not

used systematically by all agencies to improve practice including learning across agencies for example through the multi-agency family support framework.

33. The role of the local authority designated officer (LADO) in managing allegations against staff and professionals is not well understood by staff in all agencies, although some groups, notably schools, do have a clear understanding. Safeguarding policies and procedures for dealing with allegations are in place through the Pan Cheshire Child Protection Procedures. Weaknesses in inter-agency risk assessment and decision-making concerning such allegations is evident in the records of strategy meeting minutes seen by inspectors.

Leadership and management **Grade 4 (Inadequate)**

34. The unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements which took place in June 2009 identified several areas for priority action and for improvement. This inspection of safeguarding and looked after children's services has confirmed the extent of the shortcomings that were then evident and that there have been significant failings in leadership in children's services. Corporately effective action has not been taken at an early enough stage to address the deficits and elected members have not held officers sufficiently to account. There has been a lack of a clear strategic overview based on audit and review of service quality. This has resulted in short term solutions to address emerging problems rather than a clear strategy for improvement. It is unclear what the priorities are within plans and there has been a lack of priority given to children in need of protection. The Warrington Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB) and Children's Trust Board have taken very recent action to strengthen leadership, for example through the appointment of an independent chair for the WSCB and a clearer focus on priorities by the Trust board following the unannounced inspection.

35. At the time of this inspection, a new Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services had recently taken up post together with a recently appointed children's social care interim management team. Elected members and agency managers express confidence in the new management team. The team has taken impressive early action to address the acknowledged deficiencies in safeguarding services. These clear proposals for addressing workforce development and capacity issues, performance management and evaluation have been approved by the council's Corporate Management Board together with significant additional funding to secure their implementation.

36. Managers and staff across the council and partners demonstrate motivation and commitment to providing quality services for children and families. They are open about aspects of services which are not good enough and are eager for clear strategic direction to support and improve practice and produce better outcomes for children.

37. Prompt action has been taken following the unannounced inspection to address the identified areas for priority action and for development in social care services. As a result, some early improvements can be evidenced. Improvements in the duty team in terms of responsiveness to contacts and referrals are now being reported by partners. Staff members within the team confirm that workloads are now manageable and that supervision is beginning to take place regularly. The newly qualified social workers scheme has been re-activated. However, within the planned intervention teams, the impact of the action taken is not yet fully evident. Some staff, including recently qualified social workers and community support workers, continue to carry large and complex caseloads which are beyond their capacity to manage effectively..

38. Local commissioning of services, including joint commissioning, is weak across the partnership and is in very early stages. There is no clear framework for commissioning or tendering processes to address identified gaps in services. Contracts are annual but some services are operating without renewed contracts. Contract monitoring and review of service quality, including a focus on safeguarding, are too limited.

39. The new management team has identified weaknesses in policy and procedures which have contributed to variations and inconsistent quality of practice across teams. Robust and prompt action is now being taken to address this.

40. Satisfactory safe recruitment practices are in place. The council has a clear policy and system for criminal records bureau (CRB) checks and has prepared for the implementation of the Independent Vetting and Barring Scheme. A more streamlined single central record is in development. However, some weaknesses were identified during this inspection in following up references and in adhering to robust recruitment processes for internal applicants. The development of the new central panel is good practice, intended to monitor and ensure consistent decision-making for positive CRB checks.

41. Lines of accountability and performance management have been weak and insufficiently understood at all levels, including by members of the Children's Trust and WSCB partnerships and by elected members. This has resulted in a lack of challenge and effective scrutiny and an over-reliance on national performance indicators and the self-reporting of managers and staff. Senior officers, managers and elected members have not sufficiently assured themselves of the quality of practice and services. The commissioning board of NHS Warrington PCT has identified weaknesses in the collation of its overall performance and monitoring information which it is working to address.

42. Although staff had raised concerns about serious capacity issues within social care services, these are only now being addressed. Within the PCT, there has been a lack of capacity in the designated nurse post and only very recent action has been taken to address this. The electronic recording system in place in social care services is slow, duplicative and does not support good practice.

The new Executive Director and social care management team are taking action to address this.

43. There are some good examples of effective user engagement, including that by children's centres. Children influenced the development of extended schools. The youth parliament is well established and has demonstrated impact, for example in reduced public transport costs for young people. However, the impact of consultations which take place is not always clear or well-disseminated. Some groups, such as parents of children with learning difficulties and disabilities, have only very recently felt listened to and involved in decisions about services.

44. Partners contribute well to the delivery of multi-agency training provided through the WSCB which is well attended and highly regarded by participants. Safeguarding training within the PCT is well established. However there are weaknesses in accurately recording training activity and a central database is being developed to address this. Insufficient numbers of staff from some groups, such as general practitioners and dental practitioners, are taking up training.

45. Partnership working in children's services has been inadequate at a strategic level. There has been ineffective partnership working in respect of development of CAMHS services at tiers 1 and 2 with delays in children receiving the services they need. The WSCB and the Children's Trust as key strategic partnerships have not worked effectively, either singly or together, to achieve improved safeguarding outcomes. This has been recognised by both partnerships and an improvement plan has been developed by WSCB. There has been insufficient independence within the WSCB and action has been taken to address this. There has been a lack of focus and clarity evident in the work of the child death overview panel and no review of the work of the panel has been conducted since its instigation. No serious case reviews have been undertaken within Warrington for several years and the WSCB decision making process has been insufficiently robust.

46. Action taken to promote equality and diversity in children's services is adequate. There is a strong and established council drive to promote equality and diversity with an active strategic group to drive effective policy implementation. The council achieved Level 3 of the equality standard in March 2009. The strategy group undertakes monitoring and tracking of outcomes for vulnerable groups and there is evidence of effective action taken to address inequalities. A reduction in school exclusions for different groups of children has been achieved. There is active monitoring of racist incidents in schools. Projects to tackle inequalities have been implemented, such as the establishment of an additional school for children of Polish origin. Inspectors saw evidence of variable practice, including some examples of sensitive and effective work in response to different cultural needs. Parents of disabled children expressed dissatisfaction at the insensitivity and inappropriateness of services to meet

their children's needs, including a lack of awareness among transport services and escorts of the needs of children on the autistic spectrum.

47. Value for money is adequate. As a comparatively low funded council, Warrington compares well to similar authorities in terms of spend compared to performance. The council has an established value for money process. Some services, including contracted services, demonstrate good value for money and have included value for money savings in self-evaluation. However the value for money calculation in respect of children's social care services lacks sophistication, being based on the ratio of cost against performance measured on a small number of performance indicators without taking account of any evaluation of quality. The lack of an effective commissioning strategy undermines the achievement of good value for money.

The inspection outcomes: services for looked after children

Overall effectiveness

Grade 3 (Adequate)

48. The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children is adequate. Despite the lack of a visible and clearly expressed ambition and strategy for looked after children, outcomes are at least adequate and some outcomes are good. Effective joint working by agencies supports good outcomes in education and in economic well-being. While health outcomes are satisfactory there continues to be a gap in services to support young people with more complex emotional or behavioural needs who are looked after. Placement stability remains satisfactory for the majority of children who are looked after and Warrington has successfully recruited a good supply of foster carers who report that they are well supported. However, monitoring arrangements for the relatively small number of children who are placed out of borough are weak. While children and young people were positive overall about the support they receive, there are weaknesses in effective and timely care planning and inspectors saw examples of inadequate risk assessment and delays in decision making. The number of looked after children has risen from 200 to 264 over the last two years and the reasons for this have not been analysed or sufficiently understood. There is a lack of clarity in some policy areas, such as the response to children who are being looked after by friends and family carers.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 3 (Adequate)

49. The capacity for improvement is adequate. Statutory requirements are being met by the council and partners. Most outcomes for looked after children have remained satisfactory and some have shown improvement or been consistently good, such as educational attainment, school attendance and performance in adoption services. There is evidence of appropriately targeted support to sustain good outcomes. Young people describe how they have influenced service planning and that they have good levels of satisfaction with services. Good partnership working is evident in practice. Despite the weaknesses in strategic leadership and management evident in safeguarding services, there has been greater stability in staffing and front-line management among the permanency, fostering, adoption and leaving care teams. Front line staff and managers work hard to secure best outcomes for children and young people. The new Executive Director for Children and Young People's Services and the interim social care senior management team have taken prompt action to strengthen looked after children services. Actions taken include the allocation of the necessary additional resources to support the professional development of staff and managers.

Areas for improvement

50. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for looked after children and care leavers in Warrington the local authority and its partners should take the following action:

Immediately:

- Improve the quality of care plans, reviews and recording.
- Ensure that management decisions are clearly recorded.

Within three months:

- Ensure that looked after children receive appropriate timely support from CAMHS services.
- Strengthen the accountability and independence of the reviewing officer team and set clear expectations for their performance and reporting in respect of both safeguarding and looked after children services.
- Improve systems for monitoring the quality of external placements and contracted services.

Within six months:

- Ensure that strategic partnerships demonstrate effective leadership in setting vision, ambitions and priorities for looked after children with clear performance expectations and robust monitoring of these.
- Develop systems and processes to ensure that the changing needs of looked after children are analysed and understood and that the partnership effectively commissions services to address identified gaps.
- Increase the opportunities for children and young people who are looked after to be involved in strategic planning and decision making.

Outcomes for children and young people (Adequate)

Grade 3

51. The council and partners take satisfactory action to promote good physical health outcomes for children and young people who are looked after. Children and young people receive timely annual health assessments, with agencies working together effectively to ensure that health needs are met and there is good access to appropriate health services. Children and young people are supported to participate in sports activities, have free access to leisure facilities and are thus encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles. However there remain

delays in the access looked after children and young people have to CAMHS services; this was an area for development identified in the 2007 JAR. Action taken by the Children's Trust Board partnership has not been effective in tackling this issue.

52. A designated nurse for looked after children works effectively and flexibly with young people leaving care to ensure their health needs are met. The young people are appropriately encouraged to take responsibility for their own health as they move towards independence and are supported in accessing relevant services and to manage their own health needs.

53. Arrangements to safeguard looked after children and young people are adequate. Young people spoken to during the inspection confirmed that they felt safe in their placements. Regulatory inspections of services for looked after children judge safeguarding as adequate or better. All children and young people have a suitably qualified social worker and visiting is undertaken in accordance with statutory requirements. Good multi-agency action has led to a reduction in the numbers of children who go missing from care.

54. All children and young people who are looked after have current care plans which are reviewed in accordance with statutory requirements. However, some plans seen during the inspection demonstrate weaknesses in the quality of assessment, analysis and planning, which is not always outcome focused and there has been insufficient challenge during the review process. A coordinator has been appointed to improve the quality and effectiveness of plans. Staff and managers maintain an appropriate focus on placement stability and take good action to secure this. There is a good level of success in securing suitable placements for children who are looked after on a long term basis or who are placed for adoption.

55. The impact of agencies in enabling looked after children and young people to enjoy and achieve is good overall. The educational attainment of looked after children has long been a priority for the council. Services recognise that school is a key factor in ensuring stability for children and attendance is integrated into placement planning. Transfers between schools are managed well and children and young people are supported with a transfer support payment. Comprehensive and tailored support in schools has been successfully targeted at individual children and young people. This includes effective support by designated teachers. Good and creative use is made of personal education allowances to promote good outcomes for individual young people. Children and young people have up to date personal education plans and a coordinator has been appointed to further improve the effectiveness of these.

56. The educational progress of individual children is monitored regularly and effectively by relevant managers with action taken in a timely manner. Trends in absenteeism are identified and early action is taken to improve school attendance. There has been a strategic approach to reducing exclusions and there have been no permanent exclusions of looked after children or young

people for six years. Educational attainment at Key Stages 2 and 3 has improved steadily over the past three years. Data provided by the council confirm that in the current year 22% of looked after young people have achieved five GCSEs at grades A*-C.

57. Opportunities for looked after children and young people to make a positive contribution are adequate overall. Agencies work well together to support children and young people to engage in a range of activities individually or on a group basis. These include opportunities to complete Duke of Edinburgh Awards and there is great pride taken in the establishment of a successful Leaving Care Football team. Young people are appropriately supported by integrated youth services to participate in a range of activities. However, it is recognised that there is under-representation of looked after children and young people in the youth council (Impact) and in area youth conferences. The proportion of looked after children and young people who contribute to their statutory reviews is below that found in similar council areas and is rightly identified as an area for development.

58. The participation of looked after children at a strategic level is developing. Looked after children and care leavers have contributed to the recruitment and selection of senior managers including the new Executive Director for Children and Young People's Services and to the delivery of corporate parenting training for elected members. A Children in Care Council has been recently established and is still in the early stages of development with, as yet, a small number of looked after children participating. It is too soon to measure the impact of this group.

59. The multi-agency approach to supporting looked after children who are at risk of offending or re-offending is good, including a performance group that meets fortnightly to assess looked after children and young people referred to the Youth Offending Team. The rates are in line with similar authorities. There are a number of initiatives to prevent looked after children and young people from offending and young people are supported well in contributing to the planning of activities. However, there is yet to be a sustained reduction in the rates of offending and re-offending for children and young people who are looked after.

60. Opportunities for looked after children and young people to achieve economic well-being are good. Transition planning is effective and young people report good relationships with staff from different agencies who support them and help them prepare for independence. There is good access to a range of suitable accommodation, including supported lodgings and a dispersed tenancy scheme. Good partnership working between key agencies means there is a wide range of post-16 learning opportunities for care leavers, resulting in high numbers being engaged in education and training. There have been a number of successful initiatives to support young people in gaining employment. These include a successful apprenticeship scheme for as yet a

small number of young people and a programme to support young people to learn to drive, which is currently supporting 11 young people.

The quality of provision

Grade 3 (Adequate)

61. Service responsiveness is adequate. Overall, services are of satisfactory quality and respond to the identified needs of children and young people. Satisfactory action has been taken to ensure that there is sufficient availability of appropriate placements to meet the needs of looked after children. The majority of looked after children and young people are living with local foster carers. Foster carers feel they are well supported, have good access to training and that their views are taken into account. Placements at risk of breakdown are subject to more frequent multi-agency review, with additional support provided as necessary. There are good examples of positive care and direct work by staff and carers to respond to children's needs.

62. The use of out of borough placements is monitored by a resource panel to ensure a coordinated approach to the allocation of resources for those children and young people with complex health and educational needs. However, the monitoring of quality and outcomes from external placements is insufficiently developed.

63. While looked after children and young people have access to advocacy services, take up of the service remains low. This has not been sufficiently analysed or tackled through clearer service commissioning, although the reasons are better understood in the case of young people moving towards independence. However, those who use the service receive good support as evidenced by regular monitoring of its effectiveness. The council complaints manager has responsibility for managing both children's and adults' complaints. Some delays are evident in the timely resolution of complaints. Organisational learning from complaints is not routine and there are no regular reports to the Children's Services management team, partnership boards or elected members. The engagement of elected members in corporate parenting is developing, although the impact of this is not yet sufficiently demonstrated.

64. Assessment and direct work with children are adequate. All looked after children are allocated to a suitably qualified social worker and assessments usually include the views of looked after children and carers. In some cases seen or reported during the inspection, there have been unacceptable delays in thorough and timely assessment, decision making or direct work for children on the edge of being looked after, although this is not as evident for children receiving services from the permanency, adoption or leaving care teams. While staff confirm appropriate managerial involvement and support this is not effectively or systematically recorded.

65. Case planning, reviews and recording are adequate overall. Children and young people have up to date care plans which are reviewed in accordance with statutory requirements. Their views are sought and recorded using age

appropriate methods. While most case records seen by inspectors were satisfactory, gaps in recording were evident on a small number of files. There has not been systematic management audit and oversight of case records. Independent reviewing officers (safeguarding managers) have an appropriate role in chairing meetings. However, monitoring of service effectiveness by the independent reviewing officer team has been poor. While there has been awareness of weaknesses in services, action taken to secure improvement has not been systematic or effective. No annual report has been produced by the independent reviewing officer service.

Leadership and management **Grade 4 (Inadequate)**

66. There has been a lack of visible strategic leadership and management of services for looked after children. The priorities and ambitions for children who are looked after by the council are not clearly expressed. As with safeguarding services, the Children's Trust Board and WSCB have been insufficiently focused on outcomes for looked after children and have not afforded sufficient priority to this group of young people. Despite this, committed practitioners across agencies and first line managers have continued to secure adequate and sometimes good outcomes for most children and young people who are looked after on a longer term basis. Elected members demonstrate a commitment to developing their role and listen to the views of children and young people. However, the impact of corporate parenting has not been sufficiently demonstrated. There has been no effective mapping of need and commissioning arrangements are uncoordinated and inconsistent. Some contracted services are working to service level agreements which have not been formally renewed for the current year and which have not been subject to robust monitoring and reviewing arrangements.

67. Performance management, quality assurance and evaluation are weak. There is no clear shared understanding of trends in performance or of changes in the population of looked after children. Policy and procedure have remained unclear in some areas, such as children looked after by friends and family carers and asylum-seeking young people. Recently agreed proposals for restructuring and increasing capacity in safeguarding services have appropriately included planned actions to address identified deficiencies in service capacity for looked after children and young people.

68. User engagement is adequate. Young people report satisfaction with the services they receive and that they have positive and respectful relationships with the professionals who support them. Their views are usually recorded in assessments and reviews. The proportion of young people participating in their reviews remains lower than in similar areas. The leaving care service is involving care leavers well and there are examples of young people's views being taken into account in the development of services. The children in care council is in the early stages of development. It is acknowledged that young people in care are insufficiently represented in established user groups such as

the youth council or area youth forums. Foster carers feel well engaged and report high levels of satisfaction with the support they receive.

69. There are good examples of multi-agency front line working to improve outcomes for looked after children. However, strategic partnerships have been ineffective in securing commissioning and delivery of services to meet the needs of looked after children. Partnerships have not tackled long-standing delays in addressing gaps in CAMHS services.

70. The promotion of equality and diversity for looked after children is adequate. An enthusiastic equality and diversity strategy group monitors and tracks the progress of different groups including the educational outcomes for sub-groups of looked after children. Each service is required to complete an equality impact assessment with an identified action for priority, although the quality of these is variable. A lack of suitably diverse placements for looked after children from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds has been identified as a priority action within the fostering service, who are actively working to close this gap within the constraints of the population profile in Warrington. Young people are offered a choice of placement through a reciprocal arrangement with a nearby authority more diverse in terms of population. However, other priorities such as the development of a policy for young unaccompanied asylum seekers have not been achieved. There are inconsistencies in daily practice. Some individual young people report that they are well supported with attention paid to their individual needs while other examples seen by inspectors suggest a lack of attention to equality and diversity in practice.

71. Value for money is adequate. Funding for looked after children's services has been held at a low level compared to similar authorities and outcomes from these services have been adequate and in some cases good. The council has an established regular process for assessment of value for money, although in children's social care services this does not demonstrate sufficient focus on quality. Good value for money is demonstrated in residential care services where costs have been comparatively low compared to quality as judged in regulatory inspection. There is limited use of out of borough placements and the council has recruited and retained a significant pool of locally recruited foster carers providing good value for money.

Record of main findings: Warrington

Safeguarding services	
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate
Capacity for improvement	Inadequate
Outcomes for children and young people	
Children and young people are safe: effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe	Inadequate
Children and young people feel safe: effectiveness of services in helping to ensure that children and young people feel safe	Adequate
Quality of provision	
Service responsiveness including complaints	Inadequate
Assessment and direct work with children and families	Inadequate
Case planning, review and recording	Inadequate
Leadership and management	
Ambition and prioritisation	Inadequate
Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development	Inadequate
User engagement	Adequate
Partnerships	Inadequate
Equality and diversity	Adequate
Value for money	Adequate

Services for looked after children	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate
Capacity for improvement	Adequate
Outcomes for looked after children and care leavers	
Being healthy	Adequate
Staying safe	Adequate
Enjoying and achieving	Good
Making a positive contribution	Adequate
Economic well-being	Good
Quality of provision	
Service responsiveness	Adequate
Assessment and direct work with children	Adequate
Case planning, review and recording	Adequate
Leadership and management	
Ambition and prioritisation	Inadequate
Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development	Inadequate
User engagement	Adequate
Partnerships	Inadequate
Equality and diversity	Adequate
Value for money	Adequate