

16 February 2023

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Emily Spurrell, Merseyside Police and Crime Commissioner
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Dear Wirral Local Safeguarding Partnership

Joint targeted area inspection of Wirral

This letter summarises the findings of the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to children and families who need help in the Wirral.

This inspection took place from 12 to 16 December 2022. It was carried out by inspectors from Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS).

Headline findings

Children and families in the Wirral are benefiting from a broad and generally well-coordinated range of family support and early help services that make a positive difference to their lives. Strategic leaders from the police, health agencies and the local authority have a clear understanding of practice across the partnership and know themselves well, actively inviting internal and external challenge. Cohesive leadership and healthy challenge have enabled the partnership to develop a strong and effective early help offer to children and their families. The partnership has a strong, shared, and often innovative, vision for early help that has been communicated well to their own staff and in which they have also engaged community and voluntary groups, in particular through the Early Help Alliance. This work is underpinned by a commitment to 'doing with' rather than 'doing to' children and families and by a good understanding of local need. Consequently, agencies' strategic and financial investment in early help is helping to ensure that services are increasingly effective at identifying and tackling need at an early point before risk escalates for children and they need more intensive and costly intervention.

Leaders across partner agencies recognise that some of their early help services are relatively new and that there is more to do to ensure that they become embedded. Despite committed and effective work by some schools and education providers, and a strong desire on the part of the wider partnership to engage with them in the development and delivery of early help services, the join-up between schools and

education providers and the wider partnership of agencies remains weak. Not all children who receive early help services, and could benefit from a coordinated plan and an identified lead professional, benefit from having these in place. For some children, this limits the effectiveness of the support they are receiving.

What needs to improve?

- How effectively the early help offer is further developed to ensure greater consistency of access for children across the local authority area.
- The proportion of children receiving early help who benefit from a coordinated multi-agency plan to coordinate that support and to help ensure that it is as effective as possible.
- How well the early help needs of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities are met.
- The coordination of early help between education providers and the wider partnership.

Strengths

- Senior leaders in partner agencies have a shared and well-developed vision for early help in the Wirral. Staff across statutory and voluntary agencies have understood and engaged with this.
- There is a broad range of locality-based early help and family support services available to children and their families that are making a positive difference. For most children who receive services, risk is reduced and their day-to-day lives improve.
- A strong commitment to co-production and to engaging children and their families means that both the overall range of services and individual children's packages of support are increasingly well matched to the needs of children and families.
- The integrated 'front door' that receives referrals about children who may be in need, or require early help, does well in ensuring that children receive timely help and support that is well matched to their individual needs.

Main findings

The integrated front door that receives referrals about children who may be in need, or require early help, is effective. It is robustly managed and well organised. Safeguarding partners have a good understanding of thresholds and know what information to share and when. The need to gain, and in limited circumstances to override, parental consent is routinely considered and understood well by all partners. Most referrals are made at the right time for children and are screened effectively by professionals in safeguarding partner agencies, who contribute detailed information about children and their families. As a result, most children in Wirral

receive help that makes a positive difference for them. However, when the police-scheduled incident response team deals with domestic abuse, there are some delays in sharing information about children who have been affected. Subsequent support to children and families experiencing domestic abuse is comprehensive and effective; this includes perpetrator and victim programmes, as well as a community hub for victims and survivors that offers direct support and a wraparound service for all levels of risk.

Children and families benefit from a good range of services that form a continuum of early help support, including 'earliest help' from a range of community-based organisations. Early help is an ongoing offer that continues for children and their families as their needs change over time. This range covers services for children of all ages, and there is generally a good understanding across the partnership of the variety of services available. Locality and community-based provision enables families to access support as they need it. Many services are accessible without the need for a formal referral or an assessment, removing some of the barriers that prevent children and families from asking for help when they need it. This is enabling an increasing number of children and families to receive help, preventing their needs escalating to a level that needs a statutory intervention.

Some of the most vulnerable children in Wirral, such as those born to families where mental ill-health, domestic abuse or substance misuse are a factor, or those who do not access education for a variety of reasons, are now benefiting from a range of timely, and typically well-attended, multi-agency meetings to discuss their needs. There are regular single and multi-agency meetings to manage escalating and unmet needs in and across mental health services. Daily multi-agency risk assessment conferences, to consider the risk to children from domestic abuse, and daily multi-agency meetings to consider information about possible exploitation, work well to reduce risk for these vulnerable groups of children by providing them with effective and timely early support. This is further strengthened by a 'dynamic support database' that provides information that supports the triaging of children and young people's needs and decision-making in meetings that are a gateway to more targeted services. Children and families and professionals alike are particularly positive about the 'cradle to career' service that allows easy access to support across a wide range of multi-disciplinary services. Taken together, these measures are having a positive impact on ensuring that children's needs are addressed better and sooner.

Leaders have redesigned some services to more effectively support children and their families while they wait for a more formal or targeted intervention. For example, the care navigator role is linked to the core child and adolescent mental health services and supports children and their families while they wait for a service. Inspectors saw positive examples of the wider support needs of families being identified and met, for

example through referrals for housing support and fuel and food vouchers, while they were waiting for more specialist mental health support.

Early help workers' support to children and their families is highly effective. They are skilled, insightful and knowledgeable. They know and understand the needs of children and families well. Workers offer a wide range of suitable interventions and activities to support children. The focus is on work with the whole family to ensure the greatest impact. The quality of the relationships and direct work is strong. It is child-led and delivered in their own time and space. Interventions are tailored for each family and delivered flexibly according to their individual needs.

While the majority of children are making progress, not all children benefit from a coordinated multi-agency early help plan with a clear lead professional. For many children, plans are well matched to need and are used well to monitor progress. However, this is not the case for all children. Early help work is sometimes delivered without being fully coordinated with partner agencies. This increases the risk of duplication or gaps in support and sometimes limits how effectively agencies work together to identify children's changing needs. For a small number of children, there is a lack of professional curiosity and an over focus on parents' needs. This limits a full understanding of these children's experiences and needs and increases the likelihood of risks being minimised.

Children with special educational needs do not always have their needs identified or met. The early help response can sometimes concentrate on the presenting behaviour, rather than the underlying need. Children's education, health and care assessments and plans are not always aligned with early help and child in need plans. This leads to gaps in clear understanding of who does what in children's plans. It can be confusing for children and parents and can risk limiting their effectiveness.

For many children and their families, their voices are sought, heard and responded to by agencies. Their daily lived experience is known and understood. Practitioners are child-led and creative in their approach to direct work with children. Children and their parents or carers benefit from trusted and consistent relationships with individual practitioners. Some children's fathers are not well considered in assessments, plans and subsequent interventions. This limits the understanding of the child's circumstances and needs and reduces the effectiveness and planning for some children.

The majority of children receiving early help are making positive progress and their day-to-day experiences are improving. Many parents spoke positively to inspectors about the support they received from the children's centres, the adolescent response team, and the family matters service. Parents described practitioners as 'a magic key' to achieving improvements in their children's lived experiences. They feel that practitioners are invested in them and show genuine warmth and care. This helps to

build trusting and empowering relationships that effect genuine improvements in their confidence as parents.

Families can continue to access support when their needs reduce. For example, the 'cradle to career' service allows easy access to support across a wide range of multidisciplinary services. When children's needs escalate to the point that they need a statutory social work intervention, early help workers continue working with them to help ensure continuity in the support that children and their families receive. This is a model that starts with a good understanding of the community's needs and how best to engage them. The wide range of effective services are leading to improved outcomes for many children and families.

The majority of children are able to access a wide range of services across the continuum of support from universal services through to child protection planning. For most children, this supports effective step-up and step-down when concerns escalate or reduce, as the early help worker provides consistency and ongoing involvement. There have been some repeated interventions with some older children, meaning they step up and down through services too frequently. As a result, for some children support can be disjointed and consequently less effective. The partnership has identified this as an area for improvement and is working to tackle this.

Schools and other education providers are committed to supporting local children and have developed a range of early help and support services, typically based within individual schools and settings. However, these services are not consistently joined up with the wider multi-agency early help offer. Conversely, partner agencies are not sufficiently involved in decision-making to inform the identification of appropriate educational provision for individual children. Plans are in place to develop an education sub-group through the safeguarding partnership to improve this; however, this is not yet in place.

Staff across the partnership are well trained and well supported. This has included helpful and challenging supervision or management direction that has a positive impact on the work undertaken with children.

Strategically, partners have a good understanding of local needs and a robust system of monitoring and quality assuring practice. There are positive and strong professional relationships across the partnership. Leaders are outward-facing and actively invite challenge and scrutiny. There is an ambitious set of shared practice principles about self-led, self-owned support and self-empowerment for families. This has helped partners to develop a shared ownership of the early help offer that is well matched to local need. Consequently, even though some elements of this are new and are not fully embedded, they are having an increasingly positive impact for children and their families.

There is a shared and strong commitment to engage with children and families, to gather their views and to co-produce services with them. Services have been directly designed after listening to feedback from children and families. This has resulted in the recent development of the Early Help Alliance. This commissioning of a formal alliance of key community services to provide the earliest help for children is an innovative project. With a strong presence in, and engagement with, the local community and a 'no-referral' approach, this model helps to empower families to ask for the help they need. It is supported through long-term secure investment. The alliance brings a wealth of local knowledge and experience direct from, and into, the local community and is progressively helping to ensure the broadest and most accessible support for children and families.

Practice study: highly effective practice

Fifteen-year-old Sarah has been known to services since she was born. The relationship with, and support provided by, statutory services, has not been seen by the family as helpful in making a positive difference. Sarah and her family were reluctant to work further with statutory agencies. The most recent involvement followed an allegation by Sarah of physical chastisement. The family agreed to receive advice and support provided by the 'cradle to career' service. Cradle to career is a multidisciplinary, community-based open access service. Sarah and her family quickly developed a strong and trusting relationship with their early help worker. This relationship was developed at their pace and in locations that were comfortable for them.

Although concerns for Sarah did escalate, and it was necessary for her to be 'stepped up' to statutory support for a period of time, the early help worker has remained involved as the trusted, consistent person with Sarah and her family. This relationship has been key in bringing about significant change and improvements for Sarah and in ensuring that she needed a statutory level of service for a shorter period of time than may otherwise have been necessary. The family trust the early help worker and feel well supported and listened to by her. The social worker oversaw and coordinated the plans for Sarah effectively, while the multidisciplinary team wrapped around the early help worker to ensure that she had the skills, expertise and knowledge she needed to best respond to the family's needs. Concerns for Sarah have significantly reduced. She is now attending school and taking part in a number of community activities. She and her family regularly drop into the cradle to career centre and take part in community events.

Practice study: area for improvement

Thomas is 17 years old and had a social worker supporting him and his family for about 18 months before he was 'stepped down' to early help services. The decision to step down to early help was made at a time of crisis for Thomas and without meaningful consultation with his family; his parents did not agree that step down was appropriate and felt that they needed further support as a family. Wider agencies involved in supporting the family were unaware that the local authority had ended statutory social work support to Thomas and his family. The identified lead professional, whose role was to coordinate the early help support services, did not attend the final child in need meeting at the end of the local authority's statutory involvement and was unaware of their role as lead professional until they received the minutes from the meeting.

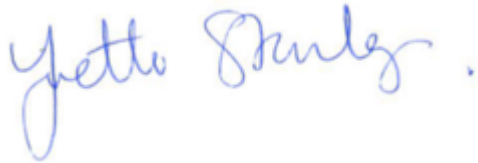
The lack of communication between agencies has meant that there is not a coordinated plan of support in place. In addition to this, the lead professional has never met Thomas or his family. The absence of an effective handover to the lead professional, of an ongoing coordinated package of support and of a consistent relationship with the family, has meant that pieces of work to support Thomas in understanding healthy relationships have not been completed, and that wider progress for Thomas has been held back by the family's trust in professionals, and consequent willingness to work with them, having been reduced.

Next steps

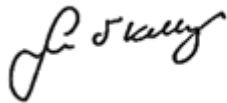
We have determined that Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council is the principal authority and should prepare a written statement of proposed action responding to the findings outlined in this letter. This should be a multi-agency response involving the individuals and agencies that this report is addressed to. The response should set out the actions for the partnership and, when appropriate, individual agencies. The local safeguarding partners should oversee implementation of the action plan through their local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council should send the written statement of action to ProtectionOfChildren@ofsted.gov.uk by 19 May 2023. This statement will inform the lines of enquiry at any future joint or single-agency activity by the inspectorates.

Yours sincerely



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Medical Services**



Wendy Williams, CBE
His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services