

Independent Review of Leadership & Governance

Wokingham Borough Council children's services

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Introduction

In July 2015 Wokingham Borough Council commissioned an independent review of leadership and governance in their children's services department. This commission was the recommendation of an assurance review carried out by Wokingham Council earlier in 2015. The assurance review related to the publication a serious case review into child sexual exploitation in Oxfordshire County Council, and examined the role of the current Wokingham CEO when he worked in Oxfordshire as an assistant director of children's services. While the outcome of the assurance review largely exonerated the CEO, the assurance panel wished to be further assured as to the current leadership and governance arrangements of Wokingham Borough Council's children's services department and it's ability to respond appropriately to the issue to child sexual exploitation.

The relevant recommendations were as follows:

"Commission a review (Possibly via LGA) on the leadership and governance of children's safeguarding arrangements, to ensure that Wokingham draws on all the best practice available and is well prepared for this aspect when it has its next Ofsted inspection"

"To assess the response of the Council's and partners' leaders to the emerging facts and concerns regarding Child Sexual Exploitation"

Terms of reference

The terms of reference attached at appendix 1 reflect the requirement to base the review around the Ofsted leadership grade

descriptors attached at appendix 2, given the imminent Ofsted inspection of Wokingham's children's services expected later in 2015.

An integral part of the terms of reference (TOR) for this review was also to "Assess the response of the Council's and partners' leaders to the emerging facts and concerns regarding Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)"

This aspect of the TOR is within the context of CSE being a significant feature of the assurance review panel deliberations relating to the content of the Oxfordshire serious case review. CSE has also in recent times dominated the national child protection agenda, with high profile media coverage of an inquiry into Rotherham council's handling of CSE leading to further CSE inquiries being initiated and reported across the UK.

There has also been a heightened awareness of historical child abuse in the UK with the implication of high profile figures and celebrities, as well as allegations of negligence and cover up. This awareness has made many local authorities mindful in terms of how well their own child protection services are responding to the growing demand and how well child sexual abuse allegations in particular are being handled.

Leadership team

Wokingham Borough Council is a small unitary council in the South East of England with a population of 155,000 of which 45,000 are children and young people under the age of 18. It has been a unitary authority area since 1998. It consists of 54 elected councilors, elected in thirds each year, with one 'fallow' year in four. The Borough Council Offices are based at Shute End in Wokingham. Wokingham Borough Council represents a relatively affluent part of the country, but has the lowest funding per head of population in the country, with the smallest number of staff per resident of any unitary authority in England. Council membership is predominantly from the Conservative Party, with a small group of Liberal Democrats. The ruling group elects a Leader, who appoints an Executive. The current

leader has held the post for the past 18 months and appears to work very well with the CEO and his senior management team. The leader is particularly focused on the improvement and on going development in children's services in Wokingham.

The Current Chief Executive of Wokingham Borough Council has been in his current role since 2011, prior to that he held the position of Director of Children's services in Wokingham, since 2009. The CEO appears to be highly regarded in terms of the improvements he has brought to the council since taking up post. He led an improvement programme that moved the Ofsted rating from "Inadequate" to "Satisfactory" and led to the lifting of an "Improvement Direction" imposed by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (as it then was).

The current Director of Children's Services (DCS) has been in post since 2014, having previously served as assistant director of children's services in Wokingham. The DCS has an impressive track record in managing children's services and made a key contribution to the children's services improvement journey referred to above. She has also led subsequent improvement work, which has resulted in the Bridges respite facility, children's centres, and children's services inspected by Ofsted showing on going improvement.

The current lead member for children's services in Wokingham Council has also been in place since May 2012, providing sound leadership and direction in partnership with the DCS as they work together on the improvement journey. Wokingham Council has also appointed a deputy lead member for children's services to share some of the heavy burden of children's work in the council, he has been in this post since July 2014

Current Environment

Wokingham children's services are currently preparing for an imminent Ofsted inspection. The emphasis on the preparation for this inspection has created a healthy drive and pace for improvement across all of children's services in the council. The children services leadership team has indicated an interest in learning as much as possible from this independent review of leadership and governance to help them in their preparation for inspection as well as generally in terms of improvements going forward.

Methodology

The reviewer was provided with a wide range of Council documentation and had access to additional documentation on request a list of which is attached at appendix 3.

The reviewer was also given access to a wide range of stakeholders a list of which is at appendix 4, both within the council authority and key partner organisations including:

- Political leadership figures
- A wide range of individuals at all levels in the organisation, corporate and professional
- External stakeholders, including the local safeguarding board chair, senior police, senior health personnel, the health and wellbeing board chair and the adult safeguarding personnel
- Parents, service users, children, volunteers

Leadership, Vision and Management

In Local Government, leadership roles and responsibilities are shared across the political and officer spectrum. The leadership head on the political side is the elected leader of the council, who in turn appoints an executive team made up of elected members, one of whom is the lead member for children's services. The leadership head on the officer side is the Chief Executive who is appointed by the leader through a recruitment process and is accountable for the day to day running of all council matters and is delegated to perform most tasks. The CEO in conjunction with the elected members then appoint a senior team of officers to develop and manage the vast range of council services they provide

In this scenario the leadership, in terms of vision, values, key objectives and a general direction of travel, is essentially shared across both political representatives and paid officers.

This independent review began with an examination of the extent to which Wokingham Council leadership both political and officer had the required sense of a shared vision, had a common value base and

were working towards an agreed set of objectives. The reviewer was also interested in how far down the organisation these elements of leadership were evident and understood. The reviewer wanted to explore how well understood the vision for Wokingham was among the staff that are employed in children's services. She looked for evidence that the council vision is well articulated and understood by all stakeholders who understand the endpoint in the planning framework. The reviewer wanted to see evidence of a clear line of sight between the individual jobholder in Wokingham council children's services and the vision as articulated by the political and officer leadership.

Political Leadership

The meetings with the political leaders in Wokingham council indicated a group of people enthusiastic and proud to represent the citizens of Wokingham with a desire to do the very best they can to represent their constituents. They are keen to ensure they develop a working environment based on openness and transparency and wish to be assured that council officers are providing sound management to staff in all services. They demonstrated in discussion that they are also very much aware of their responsibilities and accountability in the current climate of child protection enquiries and want to be assured that officers are basing their practice on the highest UK and international standards. They are also concerned that best practice from wherever it is found should be embedded into the work of Wokingham children's services department.

To help the political leadership with these objectives, Wokingham Council has developed an overall strategic plan with a clear vision statement and defined values and objectives.

The leader of the council and the lead member indicated they were both firmly signed up to this plan and the stated value base of: **Trust, Respect, and 'One Team'** working and **valuing** everyone's contribution.

However the process of arriving at a consensus across all members of the council and the paid officers as to what the vision and key priorities of the council should be was not clear to the reviewer. There was evidence of some dissatisfaction among some members as to their inclusive involvement in creating a shared vision for

Wokingham. Some members complained that the council plan was presented to them as a final document without the opportunity for full participation and contribution.

Children's Officer leadership

In meetings with the children's officers, they too demonstrated a similar passion and desire to provide high quality services to all children in the council area and in particular to the council's most vulnerable children. The senior leadership from the CEO down are very much aware of their statutory responsibilities to provide high quality services to society's most vulnerable children in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders both internal to the council and external in the wider community. Both the CEO and the DCS have many years experience working as social work practitioners and social work managers and were able to demonstrate an extensive knowledge of the issues pertinent to children's services. It was also evident during interviews and documents provided that both were working at pace to ensure that there is a real focus on the needs of children in Wokingham. They are both particularly focused on ensuring the council has a stable and skilled workforce, that the staff are innovative and improvement focused and that the administrative processes are as effective and efficient as they can be.

The CEO and the DCS also agreed that there could be more work done to bring members and officers together, as a collective leadership, to share ideas, get to know each other better and develop not only a shared cohesive vision but to better understand each other's' roles and responsibilities. They recognised the concerns of some members regarding the importance of being more inclusive when agreeing the vision and direction of travel of the council to ensure ownership from everyone with elected responsibility.

Values

An organisation's values inform and mould the style of leadership in the organisation and the behaviour of staff at all levels, to each other and to external stakeholders. Wokingham Borough Council Plan (2014-2017) identifies the values of Wokingham council as **trust and respect, pride, working as a team and being valued**. Following

through on these stated values one would expect to find senior staff and political leaders demonstrating them through their behaviour and tone. The reviewer was interested in not just managerial actions but how each person in a leadership position achieves their goals.

The behaviour and tone of interaction between the council political leadership and the officers appears to be very much in line with the council's stated values in terms of mutual respect and trust. Political leaders gave examples of how there was a growing trust between the recently appointed DCS and council members, although some did express a desire for more open and transparent communication from the officers to the council members across the council as a whole. There also appeared to be some dissatisfaction around the timely presentation of papers and reports (in relation to the Corporate Parenting Board), which left some members feeling vulnerable in terms of being able to fully digest the contents and implications of the information provided.

The reviewer met a wide cross section of staff from within Wokingham council at all grades. Overwhelmingly staff had positive experiences to tell in terms of the culture of the organisation. Many staff reported being valued; being treated with respect and having pride in their work and the place they work. Staff described senior management up to and including the CEO as visible and approachable. However there were a number of comments in the staff survey, which may suggest that staff based in offices outside the Shute End building may not feel that senior staff across the Council is visible enough.

Staff and managers also described the lead member as someone who is passionate about children "walking the walk as well as talking the talk" They gave examples of the lead member coming to events and teams to find out what they do and take an interest in what they are achieving in terms of outcomes for children living in the council area. The lead member in conversation with the reviewer was very focused on what was working well within Wokingham children's services as well as where there was room for improvement. Such honest reflection is an important element of the continuous quality improvement cycle.

In terms of the CEO and the DCS almost everyone the reviewer spoke to recounted how things had changed for the better since the current CEO took up post. Many staff in the children's directorate identify with the CEO as someone who understands their world and their challenges given his background in children's services and his former role as the DCS in Wokingham.

Staff described the current DCS as hard working, driven to improve services and not afraid to tackle poor practice in her endeavour to drive up standards. They described how she has pioneered the innovation programme which most of the staff have enthusiastically embraced. The DCS appears to be visible, and active in visits to teams, holding 'Quality Conversations' on cases with staff as well as engaging in team development processes. Staff see her as responsible for having the hard work and foresight needed to engage with internal council partners to develop workforce strategies to stabilise the workforce in children's social care and create a stable safe environment where social workers can work effectively with children and families. They see her as a strong advocate for children, which motivates and drives her desire to improve children's services. The DCS' immediate reports are exceptionally supportive of her leadership style and the progress she has made describing her as the best DCS they have ever worked for.

But with a driven, performance management approach there can often be casualties with individuals who are not assessed as being up to the task or whose performance is not to the standard required in a busy and tightly regulated children's system. In this regard the DCS may have "ruffled a few feathers" as some poor performers have been managed out of, or chosen to leave, children's services. It is important to note that when such actions are necessary the individuals should be treated with respect and dignity in keeping with the council's values, and principles of fairness and compassion. It is also important that staff have access to grievance processes to deal with any issues they consider to be unfair. It would appear that in the recent past a previous council employee may not have felt that she was treated fairly and used the whistle-blowing process rather than the grievance process as a vehicle to vent her unhappiness. The reviewer is assured that in this case the whistle blowing policy and process was subsequently followed and all issues raised were thoroughly investigated. None of the matters raised gave any cause for concern about risk to children or the management role of the DCS

or Children's services leadership team. (The report addresses the Whistle-Blowing policy below)

Statutory guidance: leadership, management, and governance arrangements

The roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the lead member for children's services are clearly laid out in statutory guidance "Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of children's services and the lead member for children's services" attached as appendix 5. This guidance is very clear on the responsibilities of the lead member and the DCS particularly in relation to working together as a team and providing leadership to everyone concerned with providing services to children.

There is a lot of evidence of the lead member taking her leadership role extremely seriously in a wide variety of ways. These range from public endorsement of children's strategic documents such as the Wokingham Children and Young People's Plan 2014-2016, to visibility at the front line, meeting front line workers to show the support and encouragement they need when working in this difficult environment. The lead member for children's services has also demonstrated willingness within the public arena of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be held openly to account by other members in terms of the overall performance of children's services.

The DCS equally understands her role in terms of the leadership partnership required by law in children's services. She describes her relationship with the lead member as professional and courteous. To ensure compliance with statutory guidance the DCS has introduced regular formal meetings with the Lead Member and Deputy, to ensure an appropriate coherent strategic overview of children's services and support a proper strategic and policy focus. This is a correct and appropriate approach, to ensure proper governance between the DCS and Lead Member.

The DCS would also acknowledge however, that in the highly pressurised world of children's services, perhaps they both need to

take more time to sit down regularly in a less formal setting to discuss issues and concerns that might not necessarily make part of the agenda in formal meetings. Such informal meetings could help develop further the trusting relationship, which is crucial for leaders working in this highly charged environment.

Wokingham council have also created a role entitled “Deputy lead member for children’s services” The reviewer is not quite clear of the extent of delegated authority this role has conferred on the post holder and has some concerns that it may have created some ambiguity in terms of clear lines of accountability which is an imperative in children’s services. The post holder himself also expressed some concern in terms of accountability for services he felt he was not as well communicated with, as he should be and with administrative systems not as efficient as they should be. Further work is required to clarify the accountability of the deputy to the lead member who is the only person holding the statutory accountability, and they with the DCS, in order to establish working arrangements that fully comply with Government guidance.

Strategy for commissioning and developing services

The reviewer was given access to a number of strategies which have been developed by Wokingham council and other partners to help guide the work of all the stakeholders in Children’s services which included:

- Wokingham children and young people plan 2014-2016 (Wokingham children and young people’s partnership)
- Wokingham Children’s services Early Help and Innovation
- Wokingham children’s services Engagement strategy
- Wokingham Children’s Services Business plan 2015 -2016
- Wokingham Children’s services commissioning strategy 2015-2018
- Wokingham Children’s safeguarding Board: Terms Of Reference.

Wokingham Children and Young People’s Plan is impressive in that it demonstrates clear political leadership with endorsement from the lead member and indicates a clear commitment from all strategic partners in Wokingham to work together to improve

outcomes for children. The plan also has an appropriate focus on the need to work with and communicate with children, which complements the **Children's Services Engagement Strategy**.

While Government no longer requires councils to produce a local children and young peoples plan, there is an expectation that each local authority develops a "clear and up to date strategy for commissioning and developing services, delivered by a suitably qualified and experienced workforce, that meets the needs of local children, young people and families" There is also an expectation that other bodies such as the local safeguarding board and the health and wellbeing board publish plans reflecting an overarching strategy for meeting the health and social care needs of all children. With all this paper and bureaucracy it is important that these plans dovetail and complement one another and that they follow a similar and consistent format so that the plan they are describing from their different perspectives is consistent and joined up. This consistency format and structure was not always clear to the reviewer perusing these documents which could cause confusion among those expected to use them as a road map for the development of a coherent children's service.

Communication and visibility

Communication and visibility are important in all organisations if the leadership wish to inspire and motivate their staff. It is also important in the promotion of discipline, accountability and strategic alignment. It is the means by which the people at the top of the organisation maintain connectivity with the front line.

As referred to above there is plenty of evidence of communication and visibility of senior staff and political leaders in Wokingham, with staff describing how accessible their managers are both proactively and reactively. There is plenty of evidence of monthly newsletters and electronic communication. The CEO is described as visible and recognisable to most staff on the ground

However with most staff now organised into specialisms and many more dispersed locally throughout the borough, there may also be a need to bring senior staff from all departments together periodically

for CEO briefings to communicate directly to the leaders throughout the organisation on the key priorities and information points. Such gatherings would help break down the barriers of specialisms and enhance the communication and relationships across council departments. There should also be much more emphasis on breaking down silos and encouraging better communication across departments and professionals.

In children's services staff describe the DCS as very approachable and available to staff. They described a number of initiatives/fora where they can get access to her advice and guidance and where they can directly raise concerns and issues of importance to practice. For example the staff outlined the annual whole service days which the DCS convenes. They also referred to the quarterly social work development days for all front line social workers and managers, where they discuss practice issues with senior staff and develop learning opportunities. There was also evidence of the DCS heading up "the managers leading change forum" which is an opportunity for first line managers in children's services to take on leadership responsibilities in the improvement journey.

Safety (High quality safe and effective services)

The ultimate test of how effective the leadership and management of the organisation is, lies in their ability to provide safe and effective services. The reviewer sought evidence of this in the form of

- **Evidence of a learning culture:** learning from mistakes, supported at times of crisis, learning from best practice, peer review, constructive challenge, innovation and improvement.
- **Assurance:** clear assurance framework and committee structure including prominence for the Corporate Parenting Board and the Scrutiny and Oversight Board, efficient and effective processes.
- **Policies for raising concerns:** such as anti-bullying and whistleblowing
- **Robust performance management and monitoring:** assessment of performance against government standards
- **Child protection services:** in particular a robust and integrated response to CSE

Learning culture

Wokingham children's services department has placed a significant emphasis on being a learning organisation, which is manifested in things such as

- Partnerships with the local university providing 25 places for step up students (long standing employees) wishing to train as social workers
- Sponsoring 3 places at the open university as an alternative pathway to social work qualification.
- Quality circles and service improvement sets
- The Professor Eileen Munro Innovation programme: The introduction of the Signs of Safety approach to working with children and families, involving comprehensive training and consultancy with national leaders.
- Managers Leading Change programme for first line managers/team leaders, creating bottom up leadership at every level.
- Action Learning Sets for assistant team managers
- Systematic staff appraisal and regular quality supervision

All of the social work staff with whom the reviewer engaged described Wokingham council as a good place to work, a place they felt safe and supported and a place where they felt they could constructively challenge their managers.

Assurance

In terms of assurance, the reviewer was given access to the council's assurance framework/committee structure. While the key elements for effective controls assurance were present, it was not sufficiently clear in terms of lines of accountability and would probably benefit from some further work on such things as terms of reference, purpose and membership. It would also be important that the council's corporate parenting board appeared as part of the corporate assurance structure. A similar observation was made of the assurance framework within the children's department, which

could also benefit from a review of the terms of reference of each committee/ meeting.

An issue, which did emerge, was the timely provision of reports and papers prior to the meetings. Some members complained of important documents being tabled on the day in some meetings, which is unacceptable practice and which doesn't lend itself to openness and accountability.

The reviewer had the opportunity to attend a scrutiny and oversight committee meeting as part of the review. This meeting was conducted in public with several members of the public in attendance. Some members of the public were permitted to ask questions at the start of the proceedings. The meeting was chaired by a council member and attended by the accountable officer (DCS), the lead member and the deputy lead member. The conduct of the meeting was most professional with a respectful tone and approach. The papers were in order and easy to follow. The challenge function of the members in attendance was robust and fair. The content of the meeting was appropriate with the required amount of detail in each paper to allow the committee to scrutinise the performance of children's services and to focus on appropriate priority items

Performance management

One of the papers considered during the scrutiny and oversight committee was the children's services performance indicators covering the year to March 2015. All performance indicators had a RAG rating of green indicating an achievement of the targets in each area reported. While such indicators have limitations in terms of analysis of long-term outcomes for children they do have some merit in terms of an analysis of how well a council is meeting nationally agreed standards of performance.

In addition the DCS has also submitted a full annual report on children's social care, providing a clear analysis of strengths and areas for further improvement, to the LSCB, the Health & Wellbeing Board and to the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee. This report demonstrates good practice provides evidence an open and transparent approach to performance management.

Whistleblowing

The reviewer had access to the council's whistle blowing policy of November 2014 which is hard copy and on the council's intranet site. There is also a confidential email address for any employee wishing to raise a concern.

The policy aims to:

- encourage employees to raise concerns about malpractice within the organisation without fear of reprisal
- reassure employees that concerns will be taken seriously
- provide employees with information about how to raise a concern and how the council will respond

During the course of the review the reviewer had access to a wide cross section of staff in the organisation. All employees spoken to indicated they were aware of the whistleblowing policy but none indicated they had ever cause to use it. Most staff indicated that they felt able to challenge management on any issues of concern that they had and in fact saw it a part of their professional code of conduct to raise concerns if they were worried about the quality and safety of the service.

A phenomenon that emerged during the review, from a small number of middle managers interviewed, was of a service under high pressure to achieve and improve, an agenda owned by all, but where the pressure of the job and the demands could have an inhibiting impact on a manager's confidence to raise a concern.

Child protection and CSE

Most of the activities that we now call child sexual exploitation are not new, however advances in technology and social media have exposed more children and young people to them. Child protection systems need to be geared to identifying and responding to new and emerging threats. Adults need to become as skilled in social media as children, young people and abusers. In recent years, there has been

an increase in awareness of child sexual exploitation across the UK and its relationship with trafficking. Law and policy around trafficking emphasize the need to avoid blaming the victim and instead reinforce that children and young people who are at risk of CSE should be listened to and supported rather than seeing them as problem children requiring behavior modification. There is also a growing recognition of the need for social services and law enforcement agencies such as police and border control to work closely to disrupt, detect and prosecute offenders who commit such deplorable crimes against children.

The terms of reference of this current review included a requirement to

“To assess the response of the Council’s and partners’ leaders to the emerging facts and concerns regarding Child Sexual Exploitation”

The reviewer had access to information from a number of sources including:

- Child Sexual exploitation Strategy (Wokingham Safeguarding Children Board)
- Front door response to referrals
- Plans for the development of a MASH
- Training plans relating to child protection and CSE

CSE is very much on the agenda of the local safeguarding board, as it requires a multiagency response. The WSCB is currently running challenge sessions involving all agencies to explore how effectively the various partners are responding to this issue. The reviewer had the opportunity to attend a challenge session involving a number of statutory partners. The reviewer was impressed by the openness and transparency of the process and the willingness of all participants to present their service response to CSE. The reviewer was also impressed by the partner’s willingness to accept challenge and suggestions for improvement from others. The reviewer considers this to be a concrete way of developing robust relationships and improved collaborative working. It also provides a forum for sharing best practice from across Berkshire given that some of the

participants including the chair attend a number of safeguarding Boards. The challenge session was courteous and professional and focused on how each agency can improve in their response to the growing problem of CSE without losing sight of the fact that this is essentially a child protection issue which should follow the child protection policy and procedure pathway.

Like many other safeguarding boards, Wokingham LSCB refreshed their strategy with reference to best practice in early 2015. This was presented and signed off by the Board along with the annual report on work to identify and prevent CSE by the police and the Local Authority. The LSCB are working towards raising awareness of CSE as a child protection issue and treating the children involved as victims rather than complicit in this activity.

The WSCB strategy identifies 6 key strands for tackling CSE:

1. Informing/ awareness raising of the nature and impact of CSE.
2. Identifying locations and persons who may sexually exploit as well as identifying risk through early indicators
3. Preventing young people from becoming involved on continuing to be involved in sexually exploitive behaviour
4. Provide appropriate support
5. Divert, disrupt and actively pursue perpetrators
6. Prosecute perpetrators

Staff and management in Wokingham council are very much aware of the growing threat of CSE and are exploring all avenues within the child protection system to adequately deal with all aspects of this issue. Wokingham children's department are not keen to develop a separate child protection process to deal with CSE which is appropriate given it's size and the resources available. Instead they are working hard to integrate the learning from emerging research and recent enquiries into their current child protection system.

Wokingham Council children's services have developed CSE champions across every childcare team. These individuals have received specific training on all issues relating to CSE and are available to provide consultation and guidance to their team colleagues as the need arises. The DCS has also commissioned

specific CSE training, which has been developed by the University of Kent. Children's services are now working to ensure an effective and comprehensive roll out of this training across all agencies in the Borough. A multi-agency operational forum has also been set up to ensure information is effectively shared and that children's needs and risks are identified and acted upon. Children's services are also actively working with the police to develop a Multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) to build on the multi-agency front door arrangements developed over the last 12 months.

Council staff have focused their efforts, appropriately on timely sharing of information across agencies and clear pathways to either early help interventions or child protection interventions. Given the relatively recent research and learning from inquiries into CSE, Wokingham children's department are still working to adapt their child protection system and approach to cope with the emerging themes.

Children and Families

During the course of the review some children and parents were given the opportunity to provide an input into the review in terms of their experiences of Wokingham council. Given the nature of statutory intervention into families in crisis these experiences are not always positive particularly in the early days when families are traumatised and frightened. The children in care council which represents looked after children and children receiving after care services were very forthcoming in their views as to how the system could improve. The young people generally felt that the original crisis point where they were received into care was confusing and traumatic, which is not surprising as many of these children have had horrific experiences which have necessitated statutory intervention in the first place. The children were more complimentary of the system of support and guidance they subsequently received from their individual social workers, particularly within the after care system.

The key children's issues are

1. There could be more consultation and communication with them in the early stages to help them understand what is going on and why
2. There could be less people involved in the care planning process
3. Formal meetings are sometimes not very child friendly with still too much jargon used by professionals
4. Some children reported a number of changes in their social workers and personal advisors which means they have to tell their story again to a new worker
5. Pathway plans are not always shared prior to meetings

There is some evidence that these issues have been picked up by recent consultation activity and reported to the Corporate Parenting Board. There is also evidence that these issues are being addressed within the service, for example the recent activity in children's services to stabilise the workforce was primarily motivated by the desire to improve the consistency of workers with individual children. Staff have also been provided with guidance on practice issues such as pathway planning to ensure the children are fully involved in the development of the plan prior to meetings being held.

Children's services has also recently invested in improving engagement with young people:

- Consultation days with young people commissioned jointly with the LSCB
- Employment of three young commissioners (who have experience of involvement with children's services, one as a care leaver)
- Support to, and engagement with the Children in Care Council:
- The Children in Care Council holds an annual survey to test the Council's progress against its pledges to young people

The children acknowledged that some things have improved recently however, they identified a number of areas which they would like to see some further improvement.

1. Better information on how to navigate the system and understand what is happening to them.
2. More consultation and participation across a range of issues including policy development
3. A clearer move to a rights based approach so that all looked after children and care leavers are advised more of their rights and entitlements.

Parents and Carers with whom the reviewer engaged (not necessarily within the child protection service) were very positive about the help and support they received from Wokingham's children department. One parent who had been involved in the incredible years programme at the children's centre described it as "unbelievably helpful" and said " I don't think I could have coped without it"

Partnerships

It is well recognised that child protection is everyone's business and that no one agency working alone can provide the services and protection required to keep children and communities safe. Over the last decade organisations have formalised their working together arrangements into formal partnerships. The reviewer was interested in a number of partnerships in Wokingham which have been set up to protect children and vulnerable adults, to explore how well they are working and how effective they are. The reviewer was interested to know if partnerships are supported by transparent and rigorous governance arrangements, if their shared priorities are clear and resourced and if there is effective engagement. The key partnerships which the reviewer had access to governance arrangements, terms of reference, minutes and agendas included

- Children and Young people's Partnership
- Health and wellbeing board
- Local safeguarding board
- Adult safeguarding board

The reviewer also engaged with

- Trade union representatives
- Other council directorates
- Other statutory agencies particularly police and health

The chair of the Health and Wellbeing board was positive about working together arrangements around children and referred to progress being made during his first year as chair with a more appropriate focus on children's issues.

The adult safeguarding professionals believe that their partnership and integration focus is now more with health rather than children's social care with more silo working than people would like given the nature of the specialisms. This focus is reflected in the agenda of the meetings examined by the reviewer. The area causing some concern appears to be the transition period for young people leaving care with complex needs for housing and support. Staff suggested that the young people's housing strategy needs to be more proactive for what is a small but complex number of care leavers who have nowhere to live. Staff did describe a holistic approach to families where there were vulnerable adults with dependent children. Adult safeguarding staff referred specifically to improvements in communication where there are parental issues of mental illness.

The local safeguarding children's board has also just completed the first year under a new chair, who has moved the partnership forward considerably in terms of identifying clear priorities and putting more focus on the challenge function of the board. The board has also become more inclusive with the executive group being disbanded and the membership becoming more empowered and accountable. The chair indicated a need to work collectively on relationship building within the partnership to ensure further trust and mutual respect is developed.

Police and Health partners expressed great satisfaction with their working together arrangements with the children's services directorate. Senior staff from both organisations were very positive about interagency relationships at all levels. The most senior police officer interviewed described the working relationships with Wokingham as the "best across Berkshire" and gave examples of

working through issues when things go wrong to learn from mistakes and go forward. She described the current DCS as “a professional hard working director who was a pleasure to work with” The police are also very much involved with the council children’s department in the development of a Wokingham MASH which it is hoped will further enhance working together arrangements.

There is evidence of some partnership working between Wokingham council corporate directorates and the children’s directorate. There are particularly positive relationships with the human resources department and the finance department with “business partner” arrangements working quite well. The reviewer heard of quite innovative retention and recruitment strategies between the HR business partner, the finance business partner and the children’s social care management to stabilise the children’s social care workforce.

Trade union representation in Wokingham children’s directorate is not extensive by any means, however relationships between management and staff side representation are positive and progressive. It would appear that issues such as discipline and grievance are less in children’s services than other directorates, which is a positive indicator of staff satisfaction and morale.

Staff

For all organisations their most expensive and valuable resource is the staff. They are expensive to recruit and to skill up. It is therefore important that they are treated well and encouraged to remain in the organisation. Instability in the workforce can lead to reduced moral and poor productivity. In children’s social care the detrimental impact of an unstable workforce is felt very acutely by the children and families who often complain about changes in social workers and having to tell their story over and over again. There was certainly some evidence of instability in children’s social care management in the recent past, which is not uncommon in other local authorities throughout the UK.

However in Wokingham a more stable ‘front-line’ social care workforce has been built over the last year, with staff turnover at 9%, well below the national average. This positive trend appears to be the

result of the close internal partnership between the HR business partner and the DCS referred to earlier who have developed a strong workforce strategy focusing on the recruitment and retention of good quality social work/social care staff. Their retention strategy has at the heart of it valuing the contribution of all staff to the organisations goals and objectives. Using the professional capabilities framework they managed to align the staff competency and caseload complexity to the incremental pay scales focusing on payment for skills. Along side this they have worked hard to ensure staff working in this very stressful work have manageable caseloads and appropriate support and supervision. All of the staff the reviewer engaged with confirmed a systematic approach to supervision across all children's social care teams, including intensive supervision for newly qualified workers. Staff also confirmed a corporate approach to appraisal and continuous professional development.

Conclusion

This review was conducted in response to a recommendation from a previous assurance panel to

“Commission a review (Possibly via LGA) on the leadership and governance of children's safeguarding arrangements, to ensure that Wokingham draws on all the best practice available and is well prepared for this aspect when it has its next Ofsted inspection”

The terms of reference reflected the requirement to base the review around the Ofsted Grade Descriptors. The terms of reference also reflected the desire to conduct this review with particular emphasis on the council's ability to deal effectively with the CSE in Wokingham.

“To assess the response of the Council's and partners' leaders to the emerging facts and concerns regarding Child Sexual Exploitation”

The reviewer was provided with a wide range of council documentation and had access to additional documentation on request. The reviewer was also given access to a wide range of stakeholders both within the council authority and key partner organisations. The reviewer was impressed by the openness of everyone interviewed during the course of this review and their

willingness to participate and contribute to improving the overall effectiveness of Wokingham council's children's department.

The reviewer concludes that the political and officer leadership of Wokingham Council appear to work well together in terms of corporate governance. Communication between the leader and the CEO is regular and effective. Wokingham Borough Council's plan 2014-17 reflects a shared vision and agreed objectives. There is evidence however, that the process for developing this plan does not appear to have been as inclusive among all members of the council as it could have been.

The working relationship and working arrangements between the lead member for children's services and the Director for children's services are very strong and reflect the statutory requirements of the department of education guidance. However the role of the deputy lead member for children requires clarification to avoid any ambiguity or confusion in terms of lines of accountability.

There is a strong and relatively stable officer leadership team in children's services who work well together who are passionate and driven in their work and provide effective management and leadership to the workforce. They are visible, approachable and supportive to staff at all levels.

The current DCS is very capable and is concentrated on bringing further improvement to Wokingham children's department. She has particularly strong, trust-based relationships with colleagues in the police and health services, which are essential for the leadership of an effective child protection service.

The council assurance framework contains all the important elements of controls assurance but some of the committees may require some review and up date in their terms of reference and membership.

As regards performance management the oversight and scrutiny committee provides appropriate oversight and challenge. The most recent performance indicators available for children's services are quite impressive with all performance indicators getting a RAG rating

of green indicating an achievement of the targets in each area reported.

Wokingham Council's stated values of trust, respect, pride, team working and valuing staff is evident at every level in the organisation. There is an appropriate emphasis on staff development and learning, the innovation programme work is evident throughout the organisation with Signs of Safety well embedded in the culture of the organisation.

The experience of children and families is largely positive although the young people had definite views on how things could be improved particularly in relation to stability of social workers and personal advisors. More work is also required in terms of engagement with children and families particularly on the issue of participation.

Pace of change and drive for improvement is evident and appears necessarily relentless. While the combination of a determination to deliver improving outcomes for the most vulnerable, and the pressures of the external regulation regime make this inevitable, it is important that opportunities are created to take stock of the progress made so that changes can bed down and become sustainable as more changes are introduced.

Work around the issue of CSE in Wokingham is active and on going, as the child protection system is adapted to cope with the emerging knowledge, practice and research into CSE. The council, the police, health, schools, voluntary sector and the LSCB are working together to ensure an effective response to CSE is achieved.

Partnership working both internal to the council's various departments and external in terms of the various partnership boards, while improving, requires on going attention. The LSCB and the HWBB appear to be moving in the right direction in terms of working together to protect the most vulnerable children.

Services for vulnerable young people moving into adulthood feature as an area of enduring concern, with gaps in provision evident. Care leavers and vulnerable young adults are a group requiring ruthless and integrated focus from key agencies and partnerships. Some of these young people will be at particular risk of exposure to CSE so it

is imperative that services across the Council and beyond are able properly to cohere around these transitions and to meet the needs these young people have (health, housing, training and therapeutic support).

There is an expectation that each local authority develops a clear and up to date strategy for commissioning and developing services, delivered by a suitably qualified and experienced workforce, that meets the needs of local children, young people and families. While the reviewer had access to a number of well-developed plans and strategies, improvements could be made to their format and alignment with each other so collectively they map out a clear path for those who use them for guidance.

Recommendations

1. Further work is required to ensure that the council's vision and stated objectives are co-created by all members and senior officers working together to enhance commitment and ownership.
2. The role of the deputy lead member for children requires clarification to avoid any ambiguity or confusion in terms of lines of accountability.
3. The council assurance framework contains all the important elements of controls assurance but requires review to ensure clarity around lines of accountability.
4. Some committees require review to update their terms of reference and membership.
5. The Council's Corporate Parenting Board should have greater prominence in the Corporate assurance framework
6. More work is required in terms of engagement with children and families particularly on the issue of participation.

7. The DCS and Lead Member should meet regularly with the Director of Health and Wellbeing and his Lead Member jointly to oversee progress on implementation of key joint initiatives (Transition Planning, Housing for young people and families etc.)
8. Some improvements could be made to the numerous council plans and strategies to enhance their format and alignment with each other and ensure they collectively map out a clear path for those who use them for guidance.
9. While on a rapid improvement journey it is important to ensure that key staff, including middle managers feel able to articulate concern and challenge as part of the leadership process.

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