

Clive House
70 Petty France
London
SW1H 9EX

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0300 013 1471
Direct F 020 7421 6546
CorrsSouthEast@ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Paul Senior
Director of People Services
Wokingham Borough Council

Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, South East

Sent by email to: paul.senior@wokingham.gov.uk

Dear Paul

Annual Conversation - education and social care – 19 March 2018

Thank you for meeting with Janet Fraser, Sue Mann, Lee Selby, Lisa Pascoe, Stephen Long and myself to discuss social care and education in Wokingham.

You gave us an update on contextual changes in the authority, including your arrival in an interim capacity in November of last year. Within a stable picture overall in the leadership of children's social care, you have created a new quality assurance post. Senior staffing in early years and education has seen considerable change in the last year, with a number of posts filled on an interim basis. You told us there is strong political support in the council for children's services. You noted the implementation of a service transformation plan. This includes a collaborative approach to improving education services to be called the 'Wokingham Learning Partnership'.

Social care

We were interested to hear your appraisal of the quality of practice in Wokingham and your view that you are on a secure trajectory towards good. You told us your social care workforce is increasingly stable, your reliance on agency staff is reducing and all of your team managers are now permanent members of staff. You consider you have good succession planning in place with seven students wishing to be employed who will qualify and come on to the ASYE programme.

You have seen a reduction in the number of children in need and significant increases in the number of children subject to a child protection plan or who are looked after. You cannot identify a single reason for these changes, but believe some of the increase is the result of better identification of neglect and the result of more purposeful intervention and less drift. You are satisfied that the thresholds now being applied are appropriate and children are receiving the right intervention at the right level. Caseloads have increased and now average

19 children. You are working with social workers to identify how best to support them and ensure they have sufficient time to spend with children, for example by increasing business support.

Timeliness of assessments is an area you want to improve. You told us some of your performance data does not reflect actual performance, for example your system cannot record compliance with visiting levels against the actual requirements of the child's plan. You are promoting with social workers the need for visits to be purposeful, and that children should be seen alone to complete purposeful work, not merely to comply with visiting expectations set out in their plan. You told us audit is showing this aspect of practice is improving.

You have been focusing on improving consideration of permanence at the earliest stage and no child was placed outside of the Borough last year. You told us you have an active corporate parenting board which benefits from the involvement of children in care and foster carers.

You described your new approach to quality assurance and that the second practice week, completed recently, is showing some improvement in the practice compared with that seen in the audits completed in October. An example of this improvement is the increase in management oversight on the files audited, from 50 to 75%. You consider the child protection chairs and IROs are more robust in the challenge they provide and have ready access to senior managers to escalate concerns when necessary.

We were interested to hear about the research you were involved in with Goldsmiths University. This indicated that social workers need to be confident and receive support from senior managers and legal services to equip them to work with affluent and challenging families.

You told us that if you were to receive a focused visit you would like it to look at decisions about permanence.

Education

We discussed education at each phase. Inspection outcomes in early years settings are above the national average, and this is mirrored in achievements for children where more than is seen nationally reach a good level of development. Although there were improvements last year in the attainment of disadvantaged children, the gap between them and others is understandably your main cause for concern. You mentioned that schools would like better information from early years settings about pupils who are joining them, and your staff are working on this.

You are ambitious that all schools are judged at least good at inspection, and the proportions attaining this standard are above national and regional averages in primary and secondary. As with the youngest children, pupils at primary and secondary level reach standards which are above the national and regional picture. Nevertheless, by the age of 11 and 16, it is the gap between achievement for disadvantaged pupils and others which is a concern. There has been some narrowing of the gap in primary schools, but at secondary level it remains stubbornly wide. Your team are keen to tackle this.

Outcomes at post-16 compare well with national and regional averages. Your staff noted significant movement of students into and out of other neighbouring authority areas, making it hard to measure the quality of what is provided within Wokingham. You noted this as an area your team want to look more closely at and play a more active role in.

We discussed current arrangements for school improvement. These involve a categorisation of schools into bandings based on a range of evidence, including Ofsted judgements. These are used to identify levels of support, which is then provided by staff working for the council or brokered from other schools. Given the outcomes at inspection, these arrangements are proving successful overall. However, you cited your ambition that schools make more impact on vulnerable pupils. You also want more resilience in the system as schools move toward a more school-led approach, and cope with financial stringency. The team then outlined the plan for the learning partnership. This is in the process of being set up but is intended to be the main driver for school improvement. It will be independently chaired. Up to now the one secondary academy that applied was unsuccessful in their bid to the Strategic School Improvement Fund. Further bids have been made in the current round, focusing on disadvantaged pupils.

We discussed elective home education, where you have seen a rise in numbers. You said you are monitoring closely and working with schools where issues are detected, so as to bring the figures down. This is also the case for schools where part time education is being used. We noted low fixed term exclusions, but high numbers of permanent removals. Here too you are keen to make an impact. We briefly talked about outcomes for children in care. Here you were pleased that none had been excluded in the last year, but were keen to improve the qualifications with which they left school and college.

You and the team gave us a useful update on SEND provision. A self-evaluation of area provision has been drawn up, together with a linked development plan. As with improvement work overall, you are keen to shift ownership of decisions over funding and provision planning to the sector. You noted concern over outcomes for SEND pupils and a determination that figures rise, both in formal education up to 18 and for young people up to the age of 25. Transfers of statements to EHCPs are on track in the view of the team. Nevertheless, you want to improve the quality of action planning and the specificity of pupils' targets. Your team set out a number of other goals, most notably rationalising specialist

provision and enabling better inclusion of the growing numbers of pupils with needs relating to SEMH and ASD.

You talked about the approach to the Prevent agenda, identifying it as a high priority with a regular cycle of training in education settings. You felt it can be a challenge engaging partners when there are few apparent indicators of extremist behaviour in the area. Nevertheless you noted it as being an important issue for the council and a regular feature of school reviews and contacts with leaders in all education settings.

You confirmed the arrangements for the communication of information linked to complaints about schools to the local authority team.

Thank you once again for meeting with me and I look forward to hearing about further developments in Wokingham.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read "Chris Russell".

Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, South East