

# Wokingham Borough Council

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 3 June 2019 to 14 June 2019**

**Lead inspector: Nigel Parkes**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Last summer, Wokingham children's social care services experienced a rapid rise in demand for services, which, combined with instability at the leadership level, and a high turnover of social care staff, led to a deterioration in the quality of services for children. The duty, triage and assessment team was at breaking point. Elsewhere in Wokingham, children and families were experiencing multiple changes of social workers and there was extensive evidence of drift and delay. A focused visit in November 2018 concluded that at that stage, while new senior leaders had developed a clearer understanding of areas for improvement and had redesigned the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), the situation remained fragile.

Six months on, the position has improved. Senior leaders have managed to achieve a degree of stability. There is a sense of renewed optimism among managers and staff. However, the quality of social work practice is still too variable. Too many children and families are still not getting the right level of help and protection, care and support they need when they need it. This is particularly true of disabled children and their families. Additionally, the experiences and progress of children in care are variable. Those whose cases are held by the social workers in the disabled

children's team or one of the three long-term teams generally fare less well than those who are supported by social workers in Here4U, the local authority's children in care and care leavers team.

## **What needs to improve**

- The stability of the workforce in the disabled children's team and the three long-term teams.
- The effectiveness of child in need and child protection plans.
- The quality and effectiveness of the social work support that disabled children and their families receive.
- The level of critical scrutiny, and quality of supervision, provided by frontline managers.
- The oversight and impact of the corporate parenting board.

## **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Requires improvement to be good**

1. Early help is not fully developed. While early help is making a positive difference for some children and families, they do not always get the support they need quickly enough. There is little evidence of other agencies completing early help assessments (EHAs). This is placing an additional burden on the local authority's early help teams, which are struggling under the weight of competing demands and unfilled vacancies. However, when needs and/or risks increase, cases are stepped up promptly from early help to children's social care.
2. When needs and risks begin to emerge, other agencies are quick to contact children's social care. Good engagement with schools is helping to improve children's experiences and progress. However, the quality of referrals received from partner agencies is variable. Some partner agencies do not fully understand, or consistently apply, the thresholds. There is more to do to ensure that partners, particularly the police, routinely provide the right level of information. On occasions, their failure to do this wastes duty workers' time and makes good decision-making difficult.
3. The duty, triage and assessment (DTA) team is more effective than it was at the time of Ofsted's focused visit in October 2018. Most contacts are filtered and screened appropriately. Staff in the duty team take good account of the child's and family's history. The issue of parental consent is given due weight and consideration. Co-location with police and health partners facilitates the effective sharing of information. Where applicable, comprehensive checks are completed quickly by the MASH. Throughput is timely.
4. However, the re-referral rate has increased and is high. This indicates that the local authority is still not always getting it right first time. This is not solely due to what happens at the front door. It reflects the pressure that early help and children's social care are, and have been, under and which has led to some cases being closed before sustainable change has been achieved.
5. Two-way communication with the emergency duty team has improved since the focused visit. This is helping to ensure an effective response to children in need of help and protection outside of normal office hours.
6. Prompt action is taken to protect children who are at immediate risk of significant harm. Strategy meetings are better managed and recorded now than at the time of the focused visit. The balance between strategy meetings and telephone strategy discussions is also better. These improvements are, however, more evident at the front door, where the local authority's preferred method of social work is being used to great effect to develop a shared understanding, with partners, of children's experiences. Elsewhere, strategy discussions are still more likely to take the form of a telephone conversation involving only children's social

care and the police. This inevitably limits the richness of the information exchanged.

7. Child protection enquiries are generally thorough. In the vast majority of cases, children are seen and are seen alone. Allegations against adults in a position of trust are taken seriously and are responded to effectively.
8. Most assessments are detailed, comprehensive and timely. They take good account of children's wishes and feelings as well as their, and their families', history. Social workers use the local authority's preferred method of social work well to explore risks and protective factors. The quality of analysis provided is generally good. Most worry statements and safety goals are clear and explicit. This helps to ensure that everyone understands what needs to change and why. However, diversity is not always fully considered or explored.
9. Child in need and child protection 'safety plans' are generally less impressive than the danger statements and safety goals on which they are based. It is not always easy to work out how the actions agreed relate to specific safety goals. The plans themselves are not always specific or measurable. This limits their effectiveness and is one of the issues that was highlighted during the recent practice week. Senior leaders are organising a series of workshops at the end of June to address this.
10. Most child protection conferences are well attended and well chaired. Child protection conference chairs provide an appropriate level of critical challenge. They are effective at engaging parents and carers and making sure that families understand what needs to change and why. The timeliness of initial child protection conferences has got better since last year, although there is room for further improvement.
11. The high turnover of staff has had a negative impact on the quality of help and protection provided to children. It has contributed to a lack of continuity and a loss of momentum, resulting in a kind of 'start again social work'. Too many children and families have had to cope with repeated changes of social workers, making it difficult for them to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with them. It has also contributed to drift and delay in planning for some children.
12. The high turnover of staff has also had a particularly debilitating effect on the disabled children's team (DCT). As a result, some disabled children and their families in need of statutory social work are not being well served. Senior leaders have appropriately accelerated their plans to address the team's fragility.
13. Social workers understand, and take appropriate action to negate or reduce, the risks to which children who are living with domestic abuse and/or parents who misuse drugs or alcohol and/or have mental health problems are exposed. Decisive action is taken to safeguard and protect unborn babies who are at risk.

However, there is evidence of drift and delay in a small number of children's cases involving chronic neglect.

14. Children and young people have ready access to high-quality advocacy support. This includes children who are the subject of a child protection plan as well as children in care. Over the course of a year, the children's rights and advocacy officer provides excellent support to around 130 children. Her work helps to ensure that the voice of the child is clearly heard in child protection conferences and child in care reviews.
15. Children who go missing from home or care are routinely offered good-quality return home interviews (RHIs). Based in early help, the RHI coordinator is extremely conscientious, carefully recording the offer and take-up of RHIs. Close liaison with the police helps to make sure that information about possible hotspots is shared with schools and neighbourhood wardens. The number of referrals to the exploitation and missing risk assessment conference (EMRAC) reflects a good level of awareness of risk and vulnerability. The EMRAC systematically reviews and maintains effective oversight of children and young people who are at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation.
16. The local authority's oversight of children who are missing education is effective. However, information about those on part-time timetables is not being used to best effect to ensure that all children and young people are getting the full-time education to which they are legally entitled.
17. While the local authority has maintained a list of all children who are being electively home educated (EHE), senior leaders do not have a clear understanding of those factors that may have led to children becoming EHE in the first place. This means that the local authority is not in a position to address them.
18. Senior leaders recognise that they need to strengthen their response to young people who present as homeless to ensure that the type and quality of accommodation, and the level of support provided, are always appropriate. This is one of a number of issues that are due to be picked up in the course of a cross-departmental housing summit planned for the very near future.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Requires improvement to be good**

19. The experiences and progress of children in care are variable and are partly dependent on who their social workers are and where they are based. Those whose social workers are based in Here4U, the local authority's children in care and care leavers team, are generally very positive. A largely stable staff team means that children are more likely to enjoy meaningful relationships with their social workers.
20. The experiences and progress of children in care whose social workers are based in the disabled children's team or one of the three long-term teams tend not to be quite so positive. This is largely a product of competing demands on social workers' time and, until very recently, high staff turnover. This has made it difficult for some children to get to know their social workers. In some cases, the timeliness of statutory visits has slipped. In others, there has been evidence of drift. Carers have not always been given the right level of information about the children they care for.
21. When children come into care, the local authority's commitment to helping them achieve permanence is tangible. Assisted by a comprehensive permanence tracker tool, senior leaders have a clear overview of cases that are slow to progress or that get stuck.
22. Most assessments are detailed, comprehensive and clear. Good account is taken of children's needs, wishes and feelings. However, assessments are not routinely updated when children's circumstances change.
23. Cafcass and the judiciary speak positively about the timeliness and quality of court reports and assessments provided by the local authority before, and during, legal proceedings. Despite the pressure the connected persons team is under, the viability and special guardianship assessments they undertake are generally timely, and of a high quality.
24. Care planning is thoughtful and creative. Plans, including reunification plans, are child-centred, provide a clear sense of direction, and are generally implemented within children's timescales.
25. Although placement choice is limited, most children live in stable placements that meet their needs. When children in care go to live with carers outside of the immediate area, the relevant local authority is routinely notified.
26. Good attention is paid to children's physical health and emotional well-being, irrespective of whether the child or young person is living in Wokingham or out of area. Social workers are in regular contact with the looked after children nurse. Annual health assessments, dental checks and development checks for younger children are timely. An informal arrangement between Here4U and child

and adolescent mental health services helps to ensure a timely response to children in care whose mental health or emotional well-being is a cause for concern.

27. The virtual head is taking effective action to improve the coverage and quality of personal education plans (PEPs). In the last year, the number of children in care with a PEP has significantly increased. Even so, around one in three children in care still does not have a PEP. This particularly applies to older children where only half of post-16 students have a PEP. Limited data means that senior leaders do not have a clear overview of the educational progress and outcomes of children in care. As a result, improvement plans are not grounded in an accurate and comprehensive understanding of children's needs.
28. Children in care have access to a good range of social and recreational activities. They are actively encouraged to develop their interests and engage in sports and other leisure pursuits.
29. Social workers are particularly good at not letting go of, and keeping open, channels of communication with parents and families, even when there are no plans for children to return to live with them. Arrangements for children to see and spend time with members of their immediate and extended families are carefully considered and well managed.
30. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are child-centred and conscientious. Child in care reviews are timely. IROs carefully consider children's needs and systematically monitor the progress of their plans. IROs are working hard to ensure that their reports are circulated promptly. They make good use of the dispute resolution process when it is necessary to do so.
31. Children are actively encouraged to participate in their reviews. The children's rights and advocacy officer provides excellent independent advocacy support, tailored to the needs of the child. All children in care who need an independent visitor have one.
32. While there are plenty of examples of children in care and care leavers' influence on the design and development of services, the reach and influence of the children in care council are currently quite limited. This is now being addressed.
33. Foster carers talk positively about the quality and responsiveness of the support they receive from their supervising social workers. This in part helps to explain the active role played by foster carers in, for example, supporting parallel and/or reunification plans. By their actions, foster carers repeatedly demonstrate that their primary concern is the child and what matters most for her or him.
34. Fostering panel arrangements are robust, with panel members exercising an appropriate level of scrutiny over the assessment and selection of foster carers. However, the recruitment of foster carers remains problematic. The local

authority's failure to anticipate the level of interest generated by foster carers' fortnight represented a missed opportunity and led to delay in processing applications.

35. Some foster carer records are either incomplete or not up to date. Lack of management grip means that not all foster carers have completed or maintained the necessary training to ensure that they have the right level of knowledge and skills to provide the best possible care for children and young people.
36. Although the number of children being placed for adoption is small, the new assistant director clearly recognises the significance and importance of the agency decision-maker role. He has made it his business to understand, and cast a critical eye over, the systems, structures and processes involved. The adoption panel is well chaired and well managed. Decisions are child-centred and reviewed appropriately.
37. The regional adoption agency (Adoption Thames Valley) is delivering well for the small number of Wokingham children whose plan for permanence involves adoption. However, the relationship between the local authority as commissioner and the regional adoption agency as provider is currently one of high trust but low challenge.
38. The local authority is in touch with the vast majority of its care leavers, many of whom talk appreciatively of the support and encouragement their personal advisers (PAs) provide. Those care leavers who engage with the pathway planning process are equally enthusiastic about their pathway plans, particularly about the way in which they are co-produced by them and their PAs.
39. Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation. A healthy proportion of them are clearly benefiting from the local authority's approach to staying put arrangements and the financial support it provides to foster carers to make this possible. Senior leaders are taking appropriate action to tackle the shortage of semi-independent accommodation locally in order to create a more effective and graduated accommodation pathway towards independence for care leavers.
40. Care leavers are generally very positive about the eight-week independent living skills groupwork programme which personal advisers run. As well as equipping care leavers with lots of useful information and ideas, it helps them to develop their budgeting and cooking skills in a fun environment with other care leavers.
41. Care leavers are routinely informed of their rights, entitlements and health histories, although this is not always clearly recorded on their case files.

## **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Requires improvement to be good**

42. Since her appointment in November last year, the director of children's services (DCS) has succeeded in establishing a permanent senior management team in children's social care. She and her senior management team have a good understanding of strengths and areas for development, but readily admit that through their self-evaluation and audit work, they 'are still discovering things'. There are clear signs that the action taken by senior leaders is beginning to have an impact. They are certainly more in touch with and responsive to what is happening at the frontline.
43. With five DCS post-holders, three chief executives and three leaders of the council over an 18-month period, the level of turnover at a senior leadership level in Wokingham is almost unprecedented. Managers and staff have been bruised by the experience and it has undoubtedly taken its toll on practice, performance, partnerships and morale, leaving a legacy of uncertainty and mistrust.
44. Determined to transform the local authority's 'indifferent inspection history', the chief executive is open, honest and ambitious, and is committed to working collaboratively with the DCS and elected members to turn things around. In the past, a lack of transparency and a tendency towards silo working have undermined accountability and contributed to the failure of elected members to provide rigorous scrutiny and effective critical challenge. This has started to improve. Governance arrangements are more robust, but there is room for further improvement.
45. Strategic partnerships are being refreshed. The DCS has played a pivotal role in the development of the new pan-West Berkshire safeguarding arrangements. Effective lines of communication have been established with the local police force. However, while the local authority has strengthened its approach to commissioning, it is too early to evaluate the impact of the new commissioning arrangements. Sufficiency of foster placements continues to be a challenge. Limited placement and accommodation options and a shortage of foster carers are having a negative impact on the experiences and progress of some children in care and care leavers.
46. While the local authority generally acts as a responsible corporate parent, senior leaders have recognised that the corporate parenting board (CPB) needs to be overhauled. Their aim is to make it more effective, while at the same time increasing the influence and engagement of children in care and care leavers. Currently, the CPB has limited oversight of the work of the virtual school, and its interface with the children in care council is stilted.
47. Throughout all the upheaval of the last 12/18 months, the local authority's preferred method of social work has been a constant, providing a welcome

structure and a much-needed element of continuity. Its influence is evident at every level, from the strategic to the operational. It helps to shape the way in which social workers think and practise and provides a common language for use with other professionals. It continues to be used effectively to engage parents and families, helping them to understand what needs to change and why.

48. The local authority is making progress in developing a comprehensive performance culture. The chief executive recognises that, traditionally, performance management reports have included too much information and too many performance indicators, but too little commentary or analysis. While the accuracy and reliability of data are improving, there is still some way to go.
49. The accuracy and completeness of some children's case records are a cause for concern. Some case files are incomplete. Others are not up to date. This is partly a product of the level of turnover of managers as well as social workers. It also has implications for the accuracy and reliability of performance management reports. The use of two separate electronic recording systems is an added complication, making it difficult to get a clear picture, in one place, of children's experiences and progress.
50. The local authority is still in the process of strengthening its approach to quality assurance. The recently introduced practice weeks, involving everyone from senior leaders to frontline workers, are helping to develop a greater sense of ownership and understanding, underlining the message that quality is everyone's business. The case management audit tool has also been revised to make it more inclusive and easier to use.
51. Poor performance is no longer tolerated in the way it might have been a year ago when, by their own admission, some managers were 'grateful' just to have people in post. This brings its own challenges. In one team alone, 30% of the team's caseload has changed hands since March. This has significant implications for the social workers, their managers and for children and families.
52. While there is no doubt that there are some talented and able managers at the frontline, the quality of management oversight and level of critical challenge that managers provide are not consistently good. There is evidence of gaps in supervision, as well as drift and delay in some cases. Decisions taken and actions agreed are not always followed up with the rigour and discipline required.
53. Senior leaders have succeeded in reducing the size of social workers' caseloads, but the continuing turnover of staff in the disabled children's team and in two of the three long-term teams means that the benefits of having more manageable caseloads have yet to be fully realised.

54. Action has been taken to strengthen the local authority's approach to recruitment and retention, but it is too soon to fully evaluate the impact of this.
55. Staff, including agency staff, have good access to training. This includes a two-day introduction for all to the local authority's preferred method of social work, followed by an intensive five-day workshop.
56. Newly qualified staff are well supported during their assisted and supported year in employment. New recruits spoke very positively about the quality of their learning experience as student social workers in Wokingham, which persuaded them to seek permanent employment with the local authority. They value the support, supervision and training they receive.



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Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

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