

Inspection of Wokingham Borough Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 6 to 17 March 2023

Lead inspector: Tom Anthony, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

The interim director of children's services, appointed in December 2021, together with the lead member for children's services, have provided a renewed focus on improving support for children and families in the borough. Some aspects of practice, such as social work support to children in care and to disabled children and their families, have improved significantly. However, several key areas identified at the previous inspection, in 2019, still require improvement. These include the effectiveness of child-in-need and child protection plans, as well as the quality of supervision provided by frontline managers.

The conditions for consistent and impactful practice to support children are not fully in place. The quality of support provided to children and their families is too variable. Insufficient oversight and challenge by managers limit the impact for some children on their progress and experiences.

What needs to improve?

- The timeliness of assessments of children’s needs.
- The quality, clarity and timeliness of child-in-need, child protection and pathway plans.
- The quality and impact of frontline supervision and management oversight at all levels.
- The timeliness, accuracy and accessibility of children’s records.
- The response to children who are vulnerable to exploitation.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Consistent and reliable initial screening of contacts ensures that concerns about children receive an appropriate response. Stable, long-standing managers and staff in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) make appropriate decisions about the level of support or intervention that is needed for children. For most children at immediate risk of harm, swift action is taken to protect them. However, when information suggests that children are at lower levels of risk, the pace of progress of contacts and subsequent decision-making is often slow. Leaders have already identified this delay and are recruiting an additional worker to improve timeliness. In the MASH, written case direction by managers at the point of allocation is minimal. Staff are not provided with clarity about what activity is required or timescales for the completion of information-gathering. Once checks with other agencies are completed, there is thorough management recording on children’s records. This management oversight includes a clear rationale for the longer-term response provided to children.
2. Practitioners gain parental consent if appropriate and routinely try to engage with absent parents. They signpost parents to support services and, if necessary, refer to the early help hub, which provides a useful multi-agency forum in which to consider needs and allocate the right support. The current early help offer is being developed and, at present, services are not sufficient to meet recent increases in demand. New initiatives have been implemented to support partners to work collectively to meet need.
3. Many strategy meetings are convened swiftly and are mostly timely when children are at immediate risk of harm. However, there are delays in arranging these meetings for some children, both in the MASH and in the assessment service. Constructive and effective relationships with health and police partners in the MASH have a positive impact on the quality of strategy discussions and decision-making. Child protection concerns are explored through effective discussions in strategy meetings, which are well recorded.
4. Children who need an urgent response out of hours receive an effective service that ensures their needs are met. The commissioned emergency duty service

provides a next-day account of their work so that further action to safeguard children can be taken forward.

5. Assessments are mostly detailed and consider histories, vulnerabilities and strengths for all children in each household. Many assessments are not completed swiftly enough. This delays decision-making and subsequent support. Children are seen and spoken with as part of assessments and their views inform the analysis used to determine the best way of supporting them.
6. Children are seen regularly by their social workers, both at home and at school. Workers build positive relationships which allow children to talk about their experiences and feelings. Some children benefit from a variety of direct-work tools which enable them to explore their experiences, share their thoughts and feelings and make sense of their circumstances. However, the quality of direct work with children and families is not consistent.
7. For a small number of children, despite long-term involvement, their situations have not improved. For these children, there is an over-reliance on the accounts and assurances given by adults, despite historic patterns of substance misuse and neglect. Planning, intervention, case direction and management oversight are not effective in improving the experiences of these children. There is not a clear approach or use of tools to assist social workers in identifying and fully understanding the impact of long-term neglect on children.
8. Child-in-need and child protection plans are variable in quality. Senior leaders acknowledge that their intention to establish a clearer, simpler format for plans is taking longer to achieve than they anticipated. Many child-in-need and child protection plans are very long. They contain numerous objectives and the most important concerns are not sufficiently clear. This makes them less effective in directing efforts to support progress for children.
9. Plans are reviewed regularly, with good engagement from families and other agencies at both child-in-need reviews and core group meetings. An appropriate variety of services are provided to support children and families. When circumstances improve and risk reduces, there is effective consideration of step-down from child protection to child-in-need plans.
10. The local authority commissions an effective service which supports families in exploring and addressing the impact of domestic abuse and substance misuse. The service offers support and intervention for victims and their children, as well as work with perpetrators. There are high demands on this service and children and families experience delays in accessing the right service at the right time. Leaders are aware of this, and funding has been secured to enhance the capacity of the service.
11. Good use is made of legal advice and there is appropriate escalation to pre-proceedings arrangements under the Public Law Outline. Once in this arena, there is good oversight and direction provided to practitioners. Enhanced

support and intervention have been effective in diverting some children from entering care. However, pre-proceedings letters are not sufficiently clear in enabling parents to fully understand the concerns.

12. The local authority designated officer has developed a clear system for responding to allegations about adults and has undertaken education and awareness-raising with partners. However, in a small number of cases, despite well-attended meetings to determine the appropriate response to concerns, children's needs and voices are insufficiently considered in action plans.
13. A small number of 16- and 17-year-old children present to the local authority as homeless. When this occurs, housing entitlements are considered, although there are delays for some children, and additional vulnerabilities are not always fully assessed.
14. Management oversight of children's progress and experiences is not consistently effective in enabling practitioners to address risks and concerns. For some children, their situations are not improving rapidly enough. Many supervision records are long and lack a sharp focus on the key issues for children. When there has been change in a child's situation or when concerns increase, records do not always provide a rationale for key decisions. Oversight of practice for children between child protection conferences is not consistently having an impact on the children's progress.
15. When concerns about unborn children arise, there is mostly a proactive and appropriate early response to assessing needs so that plans can be put in place to safeguard the child.
16. There is no clearly defined approach to children who are at risk from exploitation. Most children who present with the highest risk are subject to sound assessment and planning, and progress is reviewed at monthly multi-agency meetings. When children are considered to be at a lower level of risk of exploitation, the extent of their vulnerability is not always fully understood and responded to. Social workers do not have access to specialist expertise for advice and guidance. Senior managers have acknowledged that there is more to do in this area and have recently developed a multi-agency response to help reduce the risks for children who are vulnerable to exploitation.
17. Children receiving a service from the dedicated children with disabilities team receive strong support. They are visited regularly, and their needs are considered holistically in child-in-need and child protection plans, meetings and supervision. Descriptions in case records of the children in different environments, such as home and school, or with friends and parents, enable a richer understanding of their experiences.
18. Oversight of children missing education and the safeguarding of children being educated at home is rigorous. The team responsible for this work has increased

its reach into educational settings to better support leaders to reduce suspensions and to ensure that the use of part-time timetables is minimised.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

19. Children are supported to remain with their families when this is in their best interests. When children can no longer live safely with their parents, social workers consider placements within the wider family, and carry out full assessments of possible carers accordingly. Practitioners are skilled at developing and maintaining relationships with parents who are experiencing separation and loss. When children do come into care, this is mostly at the right time.
20. Most children in care live in stable homes that meet their needs. Most children are seen regularly and alone and are helped by social workers who know them well. Manageable caseloads allow workers to be creative in building relationships with children and other professionals. Direct work is used well to help children to understand their life history and to inform their care plans. Visual 'explanation for the child' direct work provides children with a clear understanding of significant events in their lives.
21. An impressive specialist team works intensively with families to help children to either remain at home or to support stability for children in care. When the plan for children is reunification with their family, this team delivers support to help this transition. Workers are knowledgeable and skilled in using their chosen model of social work. This aids their work with families in finding solutions and planning next steps for children.
22. Permanency planning is considered for most children at an early stage. All options are explored, including adoption for older children. Decision-making for permanency, however, is not clearly articulated or consistently recorded in children's records. This makes it hard to locate and understand critical decisions that have been made for children, and may cause difficulties should children wish to access their records in later years.
23. Together or apart assessments underpin planning for brother and sister groups and social workers retain a good focus on children's views about who they would like to live with. Working closely with the regional adoption agency (Adopt Thames Valley), adoption is pursued even when the size of family groups and children's ages make this more challenging to achieve. Skilfully planned transitions for children moving to prospective adopters help families to adjust to their new lives. Timely and effective assessment of prospective special guardians helps children who are unable to live with their parents move to new homes without delay.
24. Assessments underpinning decisions to place children with parents are not consistently robust or thorough. Assessments do not always include required information such as children's wishes and feelings and do not show evidence of

consultation with independent reviewing officers (IROs). When children are placed with their parents, workers visit them more frequently, which provides greater assurance and oversight.

25. Children benefit from regular IRO oversight, and their plans and progress are regularly monitored. When children's needs are not being met or concerns arise, IROs successfully achieve a resolution for the child, most often through informal escalation. Children are encouraged to attend their reviews and are consulted by their IROs before reviews so that they can ask questions, share their views and talk about how their review will be carried out. After reviews, child-friendly letters are written to children, explaining the outcome and why decisions have been made.
26. Health assessments for children who come into care are undertaken promptly and there is clear consideration of wider health needs to ensure that these are met. Equally, as they prepare to leave care, they are given a health history letter so that they are well informed for the future.
27. Although there are long waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), a new CAMHS post for children in care has started to make a difference to children, enabling more timely assessment and help for children's mental health needs, including diagnoses for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorders.
28. Children who go missing from care are offered return home interviews by their allocated workers. Many children do not take up this offer, and this limits the opportunity to understand their experiences and to develop safety plans that respond to their individual circumstances.
29. Children are supported to see their family and friends and to enjoy a variety of activities, such as youth clubs and football. Carers promote children's education. The virtual school provides good support to children in care. Personal education plans are improving due to a more rigorous quality assurance process.
30. Social workers work effectively with carers and the network of professionals, including for those children who are placed out of area, to ensure that children are safeguarded and that risks are reduced.
31. A well-equipped, child-friendly contact centre is valued by families, who find it a safe and non-judgmental place to be. It enables a diverse range of families to enjoy time together. Specialist staff supervise contact, which can contribute to assessments to help inform longer-term plans for children.
32. Foster carers are well prepared and assessed for the role they will undertake, and they receive appropriate training and support. There have been delays in the completion of these assessments, which is partially reflected in the lower numbers of foster carers approved over recent months. Supervision of carers is variable, and it is not always clear that supervising social workers have spoken

with children during their visits to foster carers. This means that, for some children, an understanding of their experiences may be limited.

33. The number of children who have been adopted over recent years has decreased. Adoption numbers are now returning to pre-pandemic levels. Children and their adopters are well supported and prepared for their new life together by skilled and knowledgeable adoption workers. Adopt Thames Valley is involved at the early stages of assessment and planning, which enables early permanence planning for children. Children's post-adoption support plans are detailed and ensure that all aspects of need are considered and planned for.
34. Bespoke support provided to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is effective and well organised. Numbers have increased significantly in recent years. Despite sometimes having short notification of arrival, workers take swift action to identify suitable homes, such as foster care or supported living, to provide children with carers who can meet their needs. Their social, religious and cultural needs are carefully considered, as is the impact of trauma in their country of origin or during their journey to this country.
35. A very small number of children with highly complex needs are placed in unregistered children's homes. Attempts are regularly made to identify suitable registered homes. Managers maintain regular oversight of these children and make sure that the frequency of visits to them is increased. Managers work closely with providers and proactively encourage them to register with Ofsted.
36. Social workers ensure that children are supported to have the necessary documents, such as a passport and other forms of ID, before they become a care leaver.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good

37. The level of support provided to care leavers is too variable. Most care leavers do well, achieving and making progress in their lives, but some of the most vulnerable young people with the most complex needs are not well supported.
38. By the age of 17, most children in care have a personal adviser who works alongside them and complements the work of social workers. Children build strong relationships with their advisers, making the transition to leaving care much easier. Checks are undertaken to ensure that core information and documents, including passports, bank accounts and health passports, are provided to children as they leave care.
39. Although personal advisers have relatively high caseloads, most young people have regular contact with them. A few young people do not have regular contact, nor have they been provided with sufficient cover in the absence of their allocated workers. Leaders are appointing an additional personal adviser so that each adviser will support fewer young people.

40. Most care leavers have access to the appropriate health services. A range of community-based services are available for those with emotional well-being needs, and for those with higher levels of need, a transitions worker is allocated to help young people to access the most appropriate adult services. For young people who are placed out of area, this presents more of a challenge, and sometimes means that there are gaps in providing the support that they require.
41. The local offer for care leavers is not sufficiently clear regarding entitlements and support. Some aspects of the offer remain underdeveloped, especially support to secure employment and apprenticeships.
42. Pathway plans written by social workers vary in quality and some do not reflect young people's circumstances and are not reviewed frequently enough. Poorer plans are very long and refer to information which is out of date. These plans do not reflect young people's lives. Better plans are regularly updated and written with young people, using language which they can understand.
43. The quality and timing of supervision are particularly variable, with some very long gaps and an absence of clear direction and oversight. Managers do not always help their workers to understand complex and new scenarios in order to ensure that each young person receives the necessary support.
44. Sensitive support is provided for young parents and parents-to-be. Parents are well supported to care for their own children, and they are signposted and encouraged to access universal services.
45. The needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are well understood and articulated in their pathway plans. Their advisers work effectively with key agencies to provide the right support. This helps them to settle and to make progress.
46. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. However, care leavers who become homeless are not always supported quickly enough to ensure that they are offered safe and appropriate accommodation. A small number live in unsuitable accommodation, including adult hostels and hotels. Because young people are not supported quickly enough to move to suitable accommodation, this leaves them vulnerable and potentially feeling unsafe.
47. Care leavers perceived to be in stable 'staying put' arrangements have little contact from their advisers. Pathway plans are not always up to date, and supervision is held less frequently. This means that managers cannot be assured that placements are meeting the young person's needs.
48. When care leavers are not in education, employment or training, monthly review meetings provide an opportunity to explore different ways of engaging them in suitable activity.

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

49. Since the last inspection, a range of developments are beginning to deliver improvements in the support that is provided. Some of these changes are still relatively recent and the impact for children and families is in its infancy. For example, recent action to develop an effective multi-agency response to help to reduce risks for children who are vulnerable to exploitation is still to be embedded.
50. Leaders know that there is more work to do to create the conditions for their workforce to deliver consistent, effective and timely support to children and their families. Work to provide more effective supervision and to develop a more concise template for child-in-need and child protection plans has not yet had a consistent impact on frontline practice. There has been slow progress to improve some cornerstones of effective practice.
51. In other areas, including the quality and effectiveness of social work support to disabled children and their families, leaders have taken appropriate action to provide clearer differentiation between levels of intervention. This has improved the quality and impact of support provided. Leaders have responded proactively to the growing numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and have ensured that they are provided with effective care and support.
52. Stakeholders, including schools, the independent scrutineer, the Designated Family Judge and Cafcass, are positive about the level of communication and joint working that leaders have established. Arrangements with Adopt Thames Valley are maturing, helping children to secure permanence through careful and effective placement planning with adoptive parents.
53. As a corporate parent, there is more work to be done to support care leavers.
54. Practitioners value the opportunity that a well-established audit programme provides to reflect on their work and to have an independent and moderated assessment of their practice.
55. A broad array of carefully planned training is readily available to staff. This is helping to embed a more systemic way of working across the organisation. Practice weeks, attended by the chief executive, lead member and senior leadership team, enhance the development of a cohesive approach to supporting children and their families by bringing the workforce together.
56. Detailed performance information, reported regularly to the chief executive and lead member, ensures that there is a line of sight to frontline practice. This, coupled with auditing, provides leaders with access to quantitative and qualitative information about the services that they provide.

57. Supervision of frontline workers is not consistently being used to oversee and challenge the quality and impact of the help and support that is provided to children. This means that, for some children, there is some drift and delay and insufficient oversight and intervention when the support that they receive is not effective in meeting their needs.
58. Children's records are not always up to date. The systems for maintaining records are not clear or consistent. There is variation in where, and how, children's records are stored. Leaders are aware of this and are taking steps to create a consistent approach to record-keeping.
59. A range of activity is being used to recruit and retain suitably qualified staff. Practitioners are highly positive about working in Wokingham, and many, including some on interim contracts, have worked in the borough for many years. This enables workers to form and sustain relationships with children, families and partner agencies. The organisational culture is characterised by high levels of support, but this is not routinely accompanied by effective challenge to ensure that children make progress.
60. Most children are supported by practitioners with reasonable workloads, but there is insufficient capacity in some parts of the service, including in early help, MASH, referral and assessment and care leavers teams. Leaders are taking steps to alleviate these pressures.
61. Children who spoke to inspectors described varying experiences of support. Some said that they know their workers well and enjoy being able to talk to them, while others were not so positive. Care leavers were complimentary about the practical and emotional support that they receive. Children in receipt of services and care leavers do not sufficiently influence the way in which services are designed and developed.

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