

Inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children

Wokingham Borough Council

Inspection dates: 12 – 21 November 2012
Lead inspector: Karen McKeown HMI

Age group: All

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Inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children

The inspection judgements and what they mean

1. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding	a service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good	a service that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate	a service that meets minimum requirements
Inadequate	a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

2. The overall effectiveness of the arrangements to protect children in Wokingham Borough Council is judged to be adequate.

Areas for improvement

3. In order to improve the quality of help and protection given to children and young people in Wokingham Borough Council, the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

Immediately

- ensure that the terms of reference and the membership of the new Children's Partnership are established so that they properly reflect its key role in ensuring high quality and responsive children's services within Wokingham.

Within three months:

- improve the quality of policies and procedures relating to recruitment and retention of staff and workforce development so that they specifically address the distinct problems within the area in recruiting and sustaining a qualified and experienced workforce
- ensure that a comprehensive induction programme is in place for all staff so that they understand and work within the local policies and procedures of Wokingham
- ensure that the outcomes of audit activity are properly reviewed so that improvements proposed are addressed in a timely manner and changes in practice are monitored to ensure their sustainability

- ensure that levels of support to families is commensurate to the assessed risk of harm to children and young people and procedures for enhancing or reducing support through 'step up and step down' procedures are clear
- improve the consideration of the impact of equality and diversity, as part of all strategic planning processes and in direct work with children, young people and their families
- ensure that the views of children and young people are fully elicited and reflected in all assessments and planning processes and, wherever possible, are supported in attending meetings that discuss their well-being and plans for their future
- improve the quality of chronologies so that they are up to date and contain the most relevant information to understand the journey of the child
- ensure effective and timely consultation processes are in place between the probation service and children's social care about plans for offenders who have significant access to children
- improve all assessments to ensure that the individual needs of children are properly addressed, with proper consideration of ethnicity, culture, age and maturity
- improve information-gathering systems to ensure that the reasons for individual children going missing from education and home are understood and appropriate support is provided, when necessary.

Within six months:

- implement systems to collect the views of children and young people and their parents and carers about the services that they received and use this to develop services
- ensure that systems for disseminating learning derived from complaints and compliments made about the work of children's social care are improved to ensure that they are understood by all levels of the authority.

About this inspection

4. This inspection was unannounced.
5. This inspection considered key aspects of a child's journey through the child protection system, focusing on the experiences of the child or young person, and the effectiveness of the help and protection that they are offered. Inspectors have scrutinised case files, observed practice and discussed the help and protection given to these children and young people with social workers, managers and other professionals including members of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Wherever possible, they have talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have analysed performance data, reports and management information that the local authority holds to inform its work with children and young people.
6. This inspection focused on the effectiveness of multi-agency arrangements for identifying children who are suffering, or likely to suffer, harm from abuse or neglect; and for the provision of early help where it is needed. It also considered the effectiveness of the local authority and its partners in protecting these children if the risk remains or intensifies.
7. The inspection team consisted of five of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI).
8. This inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Service information

9. Wokingham Borough Council has approximately 37,300 children and young people under the age of 19 years. This is 24% of the total population. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 23% of the total under-19 population, compared with 25% in the country as a whole. The largest minority ethnic groups are White Other, Asian Indian and Asian Pakistani. At the time of the inspection, there were just over 500 cases open to children's social care services and 77 children were on child protection plans.
10. Early support is provided by a range of services, including eight children's centres and a mobile unit serving more rural communities. A parent support service underpins the early intervention offer. The youth service and community warden service have been increasingly refocused towards more targeted interventions.
11. Initial contacts with children's social care are taken by a central referral and assessment team. Children and young people requiring social care support are then referred to social work teams in two neighbourhood offices, which are co-located with early intervention teams.

Overall effectiveness

12. The overall effectiveness of the arrangements to protect children in Wokingham is adequate. Children and young people who are at risk of harm are identified in a timely manner and protected. Performance has improved as a result of determined commitment by the council and its partners to raise the quality of services from a low baseline. Although services are now effective, the pace of improvement over the last two years has overall been too slow and inconsistent as a result of changes within the council, the absence of a stable workforce, and an under-developed performance management system.
13. A wide range of early help is available, including family and parenting support to increase resilience in families and help to protect children and young people. Children's centres, including a mobile children's centre, are located within areas of high need and are recognised by both professionals and the families as an important source of support. The common assessment framework is used well to offer additional appropriate help to children, young people and their families without recourse to referral to the local authority.
14. Agreed multi-agency thresholds for services are in place and children and young people receive the support that they need. However, the level of support offered is not always commensurate with the needs in the case. As a result, some families are subject to child protection procedures when there is no clear indication of a significant risk of harm to the child or young person. Timely assessments by children's social care services properly focus on identifying and reducing risk. Children are seen regularly and, where appropriate, seen alone and their views are recorded, although these views are not always reflected in plans. Partner agencies work effectively together to support families through well attended planning meetings which regularly include parents and carers. The 'signs of safety model' is now used for child protection conferences and ensures that parents and carers are well engaged in plans for their children. However, written agreements are not sufficiently focused to ensure that parents understand what is expected of them and the action that may be taken, should targets not be met.
15. The lack of a stable, competent and experienced workforce has had a significant impact on the capacity of the authority to offer a consistently high quality social work service. The authority has responded promptly to the high turnover in social workers and team manager posts by employing temporary staff to cover vacancies. As a result, cases are allocated and overseen by qualified and experienced social workers. However, there is too much inconsistency in work and families do not always receive a high quality response. The majority of social workers receive regular supervision from their managers which focuses on the management of their cases but does not offer sufficient challenge or consideration of

professional development. Staff at all levels have access to a high level of training but this is not sufficiently well coordinated to ensure that all staff receive the appropriate training to meet their needs.

16. Strategic planning within Wokingham appropriately recognises the importance of ensuring that children are properly protected. For example the domestic abuse strategy ensures strong links between children and adults services in the area. However, the impact of equality and diversity within the changing demography of the area is not fully considered in the planning process. The Wokingham Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB) effectively undertakes its role offering robust challenge to the council and its partners. The role of the independent Chair is used well to challenge shortcomings in services and resolve long-standing deficits in provision. Links with other nearby safeguarding children boards offer benefits in training, learning from serious case reviews and shared protocols and procedures. The strategic leadership from Wokingham Children's Trust has recently been reviewed following concerns about its effectiveness. However, these changes in structure have yet to be implemented so cannot show an impact on the strategic direction of children's services.
17. The council and its partners have recognised the importance of performance management and quality assurance in developing a high quality, sustainable service. Performance information is used appropriately at all levels of management to ensure that work is undertaken in a timely way and to address shortfalls in services. Quality assurance processes are not yet well embedded. While audits have been used extensively both within children's social care services and the wider partnership for some time, the results have not been used systematically to address the recognised deficits highlighted. However, a new performance management and quality assurance framework, introduced in May 2012, is beginning to show an impact in improving the consistency of practice across the service.
18. The authority does not routinely obtain feedback from children and young people and their parents and carers about the quality of the services they receive to inform planning for service development.

The effectiveness of the help and protection provided to children, young people, families and carers

Adequate

19. The effectiveness of help and protection provided to children and their families is adequate. Timely action is taken to protect children and young people at risk of harm. Assessments at all levels are thorough and recognise the risk and protective factors in the case and the support needed to achieve change. However, the interpretation of thresholds is inconsistent. As a result, families receive levels of services that are not

commensurate with their needs and some families are subject to child protection investigations and plans where there is no evidence of a risk of significant harm to the children and young people or where the risk of harm had reduced.

20. Although there is no early help strategy currently in place, families and young people who need additional support appreciate help from a comprehensive range of services. Children's centres offer a good range of specialist services and family support on both group and individual basis. Parenting courses for all age groups are effective in addressing challenging behaviour. Targeted support is offered to families with low levels of need through well embedded common assessment framework (CAF) arrangements. CAF assessments are used well and the majority seen by inspectors were comprehensive and gave a clear indication of the support required. Parents and carers are routinely consulted as part of the process, but views of children and young people about the help they need are not always gathered or considered as part of the assessment. The CAF panel works well in providing appropriate advice and ensures that a lead professional is allocated to each case. There has been recent recognition by the partnership that this system is not necessary for all cases and could potentially add a delay. As a result, new screening procedures have been put in place to target the most complex cases for review by the panel. Team around the family (TAF) meetings work well and involve parents well but children and young people are less engaged in the process. Plans are in place and reviewed in meetings but are not sufficiently clear to enable professionals and parents to have a shared understanding of the outcomes of the plan.
21. Referrals made to children's social care are dealt with in a timely manner and partner agencies are increasingly confident in the advice offered by social workers and managers following a period of earlier disruption within the team. The majority of referrals result in an initial assessment to consider the needs of the family. Those that progress to long term involvement are effectively transferred to locality based teams through regular transfer meetings. However, where the needs of families do not meet the threshold for the involvement of statutory services, there are no established procedures in place to signpost families to support through CAF procedures. Other procedures are in place through established 'step up and step down' procedures for adjusting the level of support to families as their needs change. However, these processes are too complex and they are not systematically used.
22. Good processes and procedures ensure that children with disabilities receive a high quality service to respond to their needs and address risk factors in their lives. A stable multi-agency team of experienced staff has resulted in trusting and protective relationships with children and young people and their parents and carers. Considerable efforts are made to

ensure that the views of parents, carers, children and young people are obtained about the risk in their lives and the care that they receive.

23. Almost all parents seen by inspectors expressed positive views about the help that they currently receive and the quality of their relationship with the workers involved with their families. However, parents who had been involved with children's social care for some time reported historic problems in contacting social workers and accessing appropriate services because of high turnover of staff. This had undermined their confidence in the service. There are currently limited systems for children and young people and their parents and carers share their views of the services that they receive directly from the council.
24. Concerted efforts are made by social workers to ensure that families have access to reports and can discuss plans in advance of meetings so that they can offer their considered opinions at the meetings. Although written plans lack sufficient detail about the expected outcomes, parents and carers seen were clear about work that they needed to do to protect their children. The implementation of the 'signs of safety' model now used in child protection conferences was seen by them as an effective tool in helping them participate fully in plans for their children.
25. Ethnicity, culture and religion are recorded routinely on case files. However, the impact of these issues are not used effectively to understand the life of the child or young person and to appropriately focus the support needed to reduce risk to them. The significance of the age and maturity of children and young people is also not considered sufficiently in assessing risk and planning appropriate support. However, in most cases seen, issues related to mental health and learning disability are addressed appropriately.

The quality of practice

Adequate

26. The quality of practice is adequate. Responsive arrangements are in place between universal and targeted services for the promotion of early intervention. The majority of referrals to social care are appropriate and timely. Where the child has been involved in a CAF intervention, referrals contain extensive information which results in timely decision-making. However, those made directly using the multi-agency referral form (MARF) do not contain sufficient detail to understand the basis of the referral.
27. Following a turbulent period in the last year within the referral and assessment team, arrangements for receiving and managing referrals are now clear, sufficient and robust enough to enable timely decision-making. Effective work is undertaken between the daytime and out of hours services, with examples seen by inspectors of responsive, sensitive and

well communicated work by the emergency duty team (EDT) and other key agencies.

28. Rates of referral and the size of caseloads are decreasing. These reductions have been supported by the increased availability of qualified social work staff and managers for consultation about potential referrals and some improved, more focused decision-making by managers about the progress of cases. Regular network meetings for schools, which offer further support, are seen as helpful and supportive, particularly by child protection leads in schools. Improvements have been implemented to develop a more coordinated approach to domestic abuse. As a result, social workers have been trained to use the structured assessment tool to understand the level of risk to children and young people.
29. Where children are identified as being at risk of significant harm, investigations are undertaken in a timely manner. Recent cases seen of children in need of protection have been addressed robustly and with diligence, although examples were seen of more historic work where risks had been insufficiently recognised. Telephone discussions with the police are routinely undertaken prior to commencing child protection investigations but the consultations with other key agencies, through strategy meetings is limited. Assessments are undertaken by qualified social workers, most of whom are experienced, and managers show good oversight of the work of the team. The recording of the outcomes of enquiries have improved recently, with almost all decision-making clear and appropriate to identified risks.
30. Case recording is timely and includes salient information about the work undertaken. Assessments recognise risks in the case and the action taken to address them. Good use is made of information from other agencies and assessments appropriately recognise protective factors in the case. However, the quality of the analysis of information is variable, but in the majority of cases, it is sufficient to understand the action needed. Most plans appropriately identify the key general improvements and the support necessary to reduce the risk to the child or young person. However, timescales are not always clear and many plans are not sufficiently targeted on the risk to the child. Contingency arrangements within child protection plans are not sufficiently specific or proportionate to ensure that there is an effective response to the range of changes that may occur. Chronologies are variable, often excessively populated by copied entries from the case notes of the child. This often results in an unwieldy document that outlines the agency chronology rather than that of the child. As a result, important events in the child's journey are not always clear.
31. The quality of management oversight and decision-making is improving from a low base and reviews by managers are routinely recorded on case files. However, this is often still limited to confirming decision-making

rather than offering challenge to social workers about the progress of the case. Within the disabled children's team managerial oversight is of sustained higher quality. Professional supervision across children's social care is more regular, reliable, focused and valued by staff, although in some teams this has previously been inconsistently provided.

32. Arrangements for formal information sharing and decision-making between agencies are in place with clear and timely arrangements for child protection strategy discussions, conferences and reviews. All meetings are well attended by partner agencies. However, the quality of information-sharing with the probation service is variable. Inspectors saw examples of poor consultation by the service with children's social care, regarding plans for adult offenders who had significant contact with children and young people. Although protocols are in place to share information in complex cases which involve a number of children from different families, these are not fully understood by all practitioners and their managers.
33. Children and young people are regularly seen, and where appropriate, seen on their own. Social workers understand the importance of listening to children and establishing their views, including where these may diverge from those of their parents. However, it is not clear in many cases how these views are used within the planning process. While assessments identify the characteristics of individual children, too few plans differentiate between the individual needs of children where there are several siblings in the same family. There is some, albeit limited, use of advocacy for children with social care related plans. There is no systematic commitment to their availability, although some disabled children have advocates actively involved in undertaking work with them.

Leadership and governance

Adequate

34. The council demonstrates a strong commitment to ensuring that children are safe from harm. As a result, services to vulnerable children and young people have been largely protected, despite budgetary constraints within the authority. The strategic direction of children's services is currently in a state of transformation and transition. The former Director of Children's Services has been appointed as Chief Executive, which ensures that children's services remain high on the council's agenda. An interim Director of Children's Services was appointed in April 2012 who has a clear understanding of the needs of the service and has promoted improvements. This includes introducing more robust performance management systems and using best practice from other authorities to develop provision. The planning for a permanent Director of Children's Services is underway and has been well coordinated. The overview and scrutiny committee offers robust and knowledgeable challenge to the

performance of the service. The Lead Member for Children's Services took up this key role in May 2012 and has a growing role in holding officers to account for performance. However, as this is a new appointment, it is not yet possible to see an impact in service development. The role of the Children's Trust has been recently reviewed by the partnership, following concerns that it was no longer effective. The new structure, which establishes the trust as a sub-group of the Health and Wellbeing Board, has yet to agree terms of reference and membership and so it is not clear how the strategic direction of children's services in the area will be directed and monitored.

35. Strategic planning within the council is generally well integrated and properly recognises the links between adults and children's services. However the specific needs of the changing population of the area, in terms of equality and diversity issues, are not always properly considered in the planning process and it is not clear whether the authority effectively addresses the needs of all vulnerable children and young people. For example, a number of professionals, interviewed as part of the inspection, expressed concerns about the lack of services to address the needs of the population of families who live in isolated, temporary accommodation within the area. The children and young people's plan is appropriately focused reflecting the priorities identified by the WSCB. However, the plan has no measurable actions and it is therefore unclear as to how the priorities are measured to ensure maximum impact. The 2012-15 domestic abuse strategy is well informed by national and local perspectives and has a clear focus on the impact of domestic abuse on children, including relationships between young people. Although there is no early intervention strategy in place, this has been prioritised for completion within the current fiscal year and an incisive self-assessment and peer review has established a firm basis for the strategy.
36. Commitment to some partnerships by agencies that have pan-Berkshire responsibilities is variable but the authority works hard to address this, for example by appointing a consultant to liaise individually with partners as part of the business planning process for the WSCB. Partnership working with the police and the local authority have ensured that representation from children's services is appropriate at multi-agency public protection arrangement (MAPPA) meetings and there is increased awareness of the role of the multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) in managing cases where domestic abuse is a risk to children.
37. Arrangements are in place for the oversight of information about children who go missing and this is shared through operational and strategic groups. Systems to ensure that children and young people are seen when they return home or are offered support or for the collation of the reasons for these episodes, are not sufficiently developed. The council's approach to understanding and identifying child sexual exploitation and child

trafficking is at an early stage and has only recently been strengthened by setting up a specifically designated multi-agency group.

38. The WSCB meets statutory requirements and attendance by most partners is good. Its work focuses well from a strong business plan which is appropriately outcome focused and measurable and provides robust challenge to the authority and wider partnership. Effective links are in place with neighbouring boards, with shared policies and procedures and opportunities for learning. The independent Chair of the board undertakes the role well by holding partners to account for the work of their agency, and, where necessary, escalating entrenched issues to obtain a positive resolution. The board has an accurate understanding of its effectiveness and areas for development to increase impact and it is improving its role in performance management and ensuring that the business plan is tracking in a more rigorous manner.
39. The council has a good understanding of the importance of performance management and quality assurance in improving services but information has not always been used to best effect. Performance information has been scrutinised by managers and elected members but quality issues have been less well understood. A wide range of audits of variable quality have been undertaken but these do not always lead to direct improvements in practice and a number of significant issues have been reported by subsequent audits but not addressed. However, the recent changes through the implementation of a more robust performance management and quality assurance strategy have begun to show an impact. Performance management systems are used more effectively than in the past by all levels of staff with operational managers meeting weekly to progress and address deficits. An integrated audit system, coordinated by the quality assurance team, ensures that audits are undertaken on a regular basis and outcomes are properly reported and followed up by managers at all levels. There is a more consistent level of service within children's social care and almost all work seen by inspectors was at least adequate which contrasted with more historic work reviewed.
40. Recruiting and maintaining a suitably qualified, experienced and competent workforce has been an on-going challenge for the authority. The use of high numbers of agency workers has demonstrated the council's commitment to maintaining front line services but this has had a significant impact on the lack of consistency experienced by families and partner agencies in Wokingham. The lack of robust analysis of the important data, for example from unsuccessful recruitment campaigns or from exit interviews, has reduced the ability of the council to understand its distinct problems in recruiting and retaining high quality staff. Once appointed, support given to staff is variable. No formal induction programme to children's services is in place to ensure that there is consistent understanding by new staff about the expectations of the authority and an understanding of local policies and practice. There is

currently no formal newly qualified social worker programme but plans are in place to implement this in January 2013. Supervision of individual staff, although regular and appreciated by staff, is inconsistent in quality, in part due to the turnover in first line managers. Most supervision records indicate a lack of challenge, particularly where performance issues have been recognised. Annual appraisals are not routinely evidenced on files and those seen lacked sufficient emphasis on the individual needs of the staff member. Where staff have been subject to probationary periods of employment, there is an insufficient focus on areas for improvement to ensure the social worker is supported and that work meets expected organisation standards. While a good range of training is available and a training map helps to signpost staff, the take-up is inconsistent and not monitored effectively to demonstrate its impact on improving practice. The council are aware of these deficits and have implemented a training and support programme for managers to improve the quality of supervision. Most staff who spoke to inspectors reported working in a more recent culture of support, improvement and challenge. However, the opportunities for staff to be consulted on changes in service delivery and influence the developments are limited and contact with senior managers and elected members, although improving, is not sufficient to ensure that staff concerns are properly recognised and dealt with.

41. The council has undertaken some individually focused consultation work, particularly with families who have children with disabilities and those subject to child protection plans. However, this activity is not undertaken in a planned and systematic way that ensures that the voice of children, young people and their parents and carers are routinely sought and reported so that it can improve service delivery. The management and learning from complaints and compliments to children's social care has become more focused since the recent appointment of a designated post within the service. As a result, complaints have been undertaken in a more timely manner and reporting mechanisms have improved. However the full benefit of learning to improving service delivery has yet to be achieved.

Record of main findings

Local authority arrangements for the protection of children	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate
The effectiveness of the help and protection provided to children, young people, families and carers	Adequate
The quality of practice	Adequate
Leadership and governance	Adequate