

West Berkshire Council

Re-inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

Inspection date: 8 May 2017 to 19 May 2017

Report published: 7 July 2017

| Children's services in West Berkshire are good | |
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| 1. Children who need help and protection | Requires improvement |
| 2. Children looked after and achieving permanence | Good |
| 2.1 Adoption performance | Good |
| 2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers | Good |
| 3. Leadership, management and governance | Good |

Executive summary

The experiences of vulnerable children have improved markedly since the last inspection in 2015, when children's services in West Berkshire were found to be inadequate overall. Leaders in the local authority have worked proactively and successfully with partners, first to address critical weaknesses and, more recently, to deliver the changes needed to provide a consistently good service. Success in building a more stable workforce, better-quality assurance processes and an ambition to innovate and learn from others have hastened the pace of change.

Children looked after, care leavers and children with a plan for adoption now benefit from a good service. Further improvements are needed before the experiences of children who need help or protection can be judged good.

The recently established multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and the contact, advice and assessment service (CAAS) are effective in ensuring that, when children are referred to children's social care, risks and needs are quickly considered and good decisions are made about what families need. Drift and delay are rarely evident, and in the vast majority of cases children are helped quickly. Children benefit from helpful early help services, but the coordination and evaluation of early and targeted support are an area for development. Senior managers are already addressing this.

Children who are at risk of harm are considered through mostly timely child protection strategy discussions. Managers make good decisions about what should happen next. However, health representatives are not always present to share information and to contribute to the analysis of risk. Decisions, including whether a child protection enquiry, conference or plan is needed, are sound. Child protection enquiries, an important part of this process, are particularly comprehensive.

Assessments are purposeful and explain children's histories and experiences well. The feelings and daily lives of children and their carers are central to the analysis of what children need. Important contextual information about children's diverse backgrounds is not always explored in assessments. Child in need and child protection plans address children's needs well. They are comprehensive and provide a clear steer to professionals, but actions and desired outcomes are not always clear enough to ensure that parents and children can understand what needs to change.

Leaders must give more attention to children who go missing from home or care, or who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Although strategic arrangements are clear, and inspectors saw good examples of work to engage and safeguard children, the low take-up of return home interviews means that many are not seen or not seen quickly enough after they return. Those at risk of sexual exploitation are appropriately considered through a multi-agency process, but the analysis of these risks is not robust enough.

Leaders demonstrate their care for children looked after through thoughtful attention to improving the services that help them and through listening to what children tell

them it is like to be in care. These children enjoy stable, warm and helpful relationships with their social workers and foster carers. The consistency of social work relationships with children and families has improved considerably since the last inspection. This reflects the strides made in securing a much more stable workforce that is loyal to West Berkshire and well trained and supported by managers.

Children looked after now benefit from timely health assessments. The creative use of the Emotional Health Academy ensures that children's emerging mental health needs are met. Focused work is needed to secure reliable and timely specialist emotional support for children looked after who have higher-level needs. The professionals supporting children looked after often do not have the benefit of an up-to-date reassessment that takes full account of children's changing needs and circumstances.

Early consideration is given to whether children who cannot live with their parents should be adopted or placed in another permanent care arrangement. When the plan is adoption, children are found the right families in good time. The adoption support that families receive is helpful and is highly valued by adoptive parents.

When children leave care, they are helped to make good decisions and to do well in their education or chosen career. Personal advisers, social workers, carers and senior and political leaders encourage young people to achieve all they can and congratulate them when they do well. However, staff are not making best use of pathway plans to help young people to realise all of their goals.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Executive summary | 2 |
| The local authority | 5 |
| Recommendations | 7 |
| Summary for children and young people | 7 |
| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection | 8 |
| The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence | 11 |
| Leadership, management and governance | 17 |
| Information about this inspection | 20 |

The local authority

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates one children's home, which was judged to be good in its most recent Ofsted inspection.
- The last inspection report for the local authority's children's services was published in May 2015. The judgements for the local authority were:
 - overall effectiveness: inadequate
 - children who need help and protection: inadequate
 - children looked after and achieving permanence: requires improvement
 - adoption performance: requires improvement
 - the experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement
 - leadership, management and governance: requires improvement.

Local leadership

- The director of children's services (DCS) has been in post since March 2013.
- The DCS is also responsible for adult social care, public health and well-being.
- The chief executive has been in post since October 2005.
- The chair of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) has been in post since August 2014.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 35,631 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in West Berkshire. This is 23% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 10% of the local authority's children aged under 16 years are living in low-income families.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 7% (the national average is 15%)
 - in secondary schools is 6% (the national average is 13%).
- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 8% of all children living in the area, compared with 21% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are children of mixed ethnicity.
- The proportion of children and young people who speak English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 8.4% (the national average is 20.1%)
 - in secondary schools is 5.2% (the national average is 15.7%).

Child protection in this area

- At March 2017, 1,002 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is a reduction from 1,054 at 31 March 2016.
- At March 2017, 154 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan (a rate of 43 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 145 (41 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2016.
- At March 2017, fewer than five children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. This is a reduction from five at 31 March 2016.
- In the two years before inspection, there have been no serious incident notifications submitted to Ofsted. One serious case review has been completed.
- There were no serious case reviews ongoing at the time of the inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At March 2017, 163 children were being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 46 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 155 (44 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2016. Of this number:
 - 55 (or 34%) live outside the local authority area
 - eight live in residential children's homes, of whom five live out of the authority area
 - fewer than five live in residential special schools,¹ of whom most live out of the authority area
 - 131 live with foster families, of whom 31% live out of the authority area
 - five live with parents, of whom a minority lives out of the authority area
 - 11 children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:
 - there have been 12 adoptions
 - six children became subject of special guardianship orders
 - 78 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 2.5% subsequently returned to be looked after
 - 24 children and young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
 - 13 children and young people ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses of multiple occupation.

¹ These are residential special schools that look after children for 295 days or less per year.

The casework model used in this area

- The local authority uses 'Signs of Safety' in child protection conferences, casework supervision and targeted services. A restorative practice approach has been adopted across the service.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that strategy meetings take place within a timescale that is in accordance with procedures, and that strategy discussions include the right partners to enable the proper sharing of information and a comprehensive analysis of risk.
2. Improve the identification and recording of ethnicity and diversity. Ensure that these are fully explored to inform assessment and planning for children.
3. Ensure that plans for children include actions that are prioritised according to urgency, with clear timeframes for completion. Simplify the language in plans to increase their meaning for families.
4. Improve the response to children and young people who go missing from home or care or who are at risk from child sexual exploitation. Ensure that children are routinely seen and spoken to in good time after they return from going missing, and that these conversations are used to assess risk. Improve risk screening to better understand the risk of child sexual exploitation, and strengthen the oversight and impact of Sexually Exploited and Missing Conferences (SEMRACs). Robustly oversee the adherence to relevant procedures.
5. Establish a process of reassessment for all children looked after, to ensure that their changing needs are understood, prioritised and addressed.
6. Undertake focused work with health partners to ensure that children who have complex mental health needs can access services when they need them.
7. Work with care leavers to develop a pathway plan template that they are happy to engage with and that supports the achievement of their life goals.

Summary for children and young people

- Last time Ofsted inspected children's services in West Berkshire, inspectors found that children and families often did not receive the help and protection that they needed quickly enough.
- After the inspection, council leaders decided to work harder and more quickly to improve services for children. They talked to other people who work with children, such as local schools, the police and health professionals, and they made a good plan.

- This plan has mostly worked. In this inspection, inspectors found that families who have problems and children who are at risk of harm are helped much more quickly than they were previously. This support makes a positive difference to their lives.
- One of the things that is still not good enough is the help that children receive when they go missing from home or care, or when they are at risk of being sexually exploited. Senior managers need to make sure that the risks that these children face are properly understood, and that they are safer as a result.
- Children who cannot live with their parents are found good foster carers or adoptive parents, or they live with their aunts, uncles or grandparents. A few children live in children’s homes. They hardly ever have to move to a different placement, and this helps them to settle, make friends and do well at school.
- Senior managers and council leaders listen to what children looked after say about their experiences, and leaders are always looking for better ways to help children to share their thoughts. It would be good if the Children in Care Council (CiCC) could be helped to grow in numbers and to make even more of a difference to all children in care.
- When young people are ready to leave care, they live in nice homes and most carry on with their education or get a job. They are supported to do well in their lives.
- Social workers and personal advisers show children and young people how much they care about them by spending time with them, listening to their worries and being proud of all their achievements, big and small.

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| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection | Requires improvement |
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Inspection findings

8. Since the last inspection in 2015, the identification, assessment and support provided to children in need of help or protection have improved. Overall, children are more effectively and more swiftly helped and safeguarded.
9. At the time of the inspection, senior managers were in the process of reviewing and redefining the early help offer, in order to provide more targeted services. They recognise that there is more work to be done to embed the use of early help assessments and to build partners’ confidence in taking the lead in supporting families who have lower-level needs. Although inspectors saw effective work with children and families, provided through a broad range of interventions, the overall impact of early help is not evaluated.

10. The recent development of a MASH within the CAAS has strengthened the identification of children's needs, including those of children at risk of significant harm. Social workers triage concerns about children effectively, and, in the vast majority of cases, thresholds are applied well. Decisions made by managers are timely, proportionate and well recorded, and show helpful critical reflection and challenge. For a small number of children, partners do not identify risks or refer their concerns quickly enough. For example, there have been delays in police notifying children's social care about incidents of domestic abuse.
11. Most children experience a swift multi-agency response when they have suffered, or are at risk of suffering, significant harm. When potentially serious risks are identified, strategy meetings are held. These meetings involve good multi-agency information sharing and appropriate decision-making. However, some meetings are not held soon enough after concerns are identified. This is sometimes due to the police or other agencies not being available to attend. Some telephone strategy discussions only involve the police and social care, without the engagement of health. This narrow participation means that, in some cases, decisions about risks to children are not informed by sufficiently comprehensive information. (Recommendation)
12. Assessments are timely and they explore historical factors well. Social workers ensure that the views of children and carers inform their analysis of risks and strengths. Management oversight of assessments includes a detailed account of the reasons why a decision has been reached. Overall, assessments include too much description. Some lack a sharp enough focus on each child's world. Children's ethnicity is not routinely recorded, and diversity is not sufficiently explored to ensure that plans take account of the wider context of children's lives. (Recommendation)
13. Social workers clearly understand children's lives and personalities well, and children enjoy strong relationships with their workers. Social workers see children regularly and listen to what they have to say. The quality and consistency of these relationships are a strength in West Berkshire and constitute an important change for children from the last inspection. This is enhanced by an effective advocacy service, which children use regularly.
14. Children in need of help and protection, including children who have disabilities, receive effective and well-coordinated support to keep them safe and to meet their needs. Initial child protection conferences are timely, and review conferences and core group meetings are regular. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection. Ninety-seven per cent of initial child protection conferences take place within 15 days of the strategy meeting, compared with the previous performance of 78%. This means that multi-agency plans to keep children safe are put in place more quickly after children are considered to be at risk. These meetings are well coordinated, with firm support from partners, ensuring that the right interventions and services are provided to make children safer.

15. The introduction of a child protection surgery has led to more assertive action when plans do not lead to sufficient change in children's lives. The surgery reviews all children who have been subject to a child protection plan for nine months. It considers whether a 'pre-proceedings' phase should commence, during which parents are advised that their children's welfare and future care may need to be considered by a court. The surgery promotes a sharper focus on children's welfare, outcomes and permanence.
16. The timeliness and quality of care planning have also improved since the last inspection. Child protection and child in need plans are comprehensive and include desired outcomes. This is helpful to professionals who have a clear set of goals to guide them in addressing their worries about children. However, some timescales default to the date of the next review, and it is often unclear what the most urgent actions are. The language used in plans is not always clear enough to help families to understand what needs to happen, or to understand fully the reasons for the plan. (Recommendation)
17. The response to children who go missing from home or care is underdeveloped. Inspectors saw good examples of effective information sharing with the police and persistent work by social workers and personal advisers to re-engage children and reduce the risks that they face. When they occur, return home interviews can lead to advice, information and meaningful help for children and their families. However, the overall take-up of return home interviews is low, and conversations with children do not always take place soon enough after they return. This means that, all too often, the reasons why children go missing, or the potential links with other local children or places, are not fully explored. Procedures are not consistently followed. For example, when a risk of significant harm has been identified, this is not always considered through a child protection strategy discussion. The partnership does analyse overall trends in order to understand overarching themes and patterns, but there has been insufficient drive at a senior management level to establish why so few children engage with a return home interview, and how to encourage more children to do so. (Recommendation)
18. The response to the small number of children who are at risk of child sexual exploitation is not consistent or robust enough across all service areas. Indicators of exploitation are not always identified or acted on at the earliest opportunity, and screening tools are not completed quickly enough to fully understand or address concerns. SEMRACs provide a platform to share information and to make decisions about levels of risk. However, decisions made in this forum are not always informed by an updated risk assessment, and judgements are not clearly enough linked to known information. The potential of SEMRACs is not fully utilised and, although senior managers and partners articulate a clear commitment to tackling child sexual exploitation, current arrangements do not track all children well enough. Multi-agency plans are not always properly scrutinised or reviewed to ensure that the right action is taken when new information is shared. (Recommendation)

19. Senior managers take allegations against professionals seriously and have strengthened systems, following lessons learned from a recent serious case review. Safeguarding concerns about adults working with children are identified and considered at the earliest opportunity, with all referrals to the designated officer channelled through the CAAS. Effective management systems are in place to track enquiries, referrals, decisions and actions.

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| The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence | Good |
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Inspection findings

20. Since the last inspection, senior leaders have worked closely with first-line managers and social workers and have made significant improvements for children looked after by West Berkshire. These children now receive consistently good services that support positive outcomes for them.
21. Children on the edge of care benefit from a range of support to help them to remain with their families. When children need to become looked after, managers appropriately consider whether this is the right decision through legal planning meetings. Managers have reviewed arrangements for all children who are looked after through a voluntary agreement with parents, to ensure that this meets the children’s need for permanence. As a result, the number of children looked after under a voluntary arrangement has reduced from 43% at the time of the last inspection, to 18%.
22. Senior managers are implementing a new system to track children who are in pre-proceedings or care proceedings. Pre-proceedings work and the use of the Public Law Outline (PLO) is generally effective. However, for some children, managers are not assertive enough in ensuring that plans are progressed quickly, for example, in identifying options for care within children’s wider families.
23. Effective support, regular reviews of plans and good management oversight help to keep children who return to live with their families safe and settled.
24. The quality of assessments and evidence presented to the court to support care proceedings is a strength. However, the reassessment of children’s changing needs once they are in long-term care is not routine. Many of these children have experienced trauma and disruption before entering care. The lack of ongoing assessment of their lives and experiences, and of how they are coming to terms with past harm, means that children’s needs are not always understood or fully reflected in their plans. For example, children looked after who go missing or who are at risk of sexual exploitation do not

consistently benefit from an up-to-date assessment and plan that considers and addresses these risks and needs. (Recommendation)

25. Once a plan for permanence is made, all children looked after are allocated to a social worker in the children in care team, which was established in September 2016. Children benefit from meaningful and close relationships with their social workers, who visit them regularly and show them care and understanding.
26. The timeliness of health assessments and dental checks was poor at the time of the last inspection. Leaders and managers have worked assertively with health partners to transform performance in this area, ensuring that relevant staff are properly trained and robust arrangements are in place for children, wherever they live. As a result, 99% of health assessments and 97% of dental checks were completed on time during the year ending 31 March 2017.
27. Senior managers and health partners have also taken action to improve the completion of strengths and difficulties questionnaires, so that 100% were completed in the year ending 31 March 2017. This identifies children who need extra help and ensures that they are supported more quickly. The introduction of the Emotional Health Academy, a creative multi-agency approach to deciding how children's emotional health needs should be met, has benefited a number of children looked after. However, more work is needed to ensure that those who have more complex difficulties have prompt access to specialist child and adolescent mental health services when they need it. (Recommendation)
28. West Berkshire supports the achievement of its children looked after well. The majority attend schools judged to be good or outstanding by Ofsted. The Looked After Children's Education Service (LACES) provides helpful targeted support to children looked after and good-quality training for designated teachers. While personal education plans (PEPs) are variable in quality, senior and virtual school leaders recognise this and are currently undertaking a review of them.
29. The local authority's children looked after strategy is now up to date and is aligned to the new sufficiency strategy. These documents would be stronger if they included more specific actions, but they provide a helpful direction of travel and a set of objectives to guide leaders as they further improve services for children looked after. Senior managers are implementing plans to address the challenges of providing enough suitable accommodation for certain groups of children, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The vast majority of children live in long-term settled placements. While a relatively high proportion of children live outside of the area, these children are well supported. Social workers are particularly aware of the potential impact on them of living a long way from their friends and families, and they are persistent in keeping in touch with them.

30. Senior managers have taken steps to strengthen permanency planning for children. While long-term plans are not always settled by the time of children's second looked-after review, careful thinking about their permanent care is evident. A matching matrix helps social workers and managers to identify the most suitable placements, and family finding strategies are informed by children's needs and experiences. For most children, this results in decisive action to find the best possible family for them.
31. Children are well matched to long-term foster care placements, and these are always approved by the fostering panel. Foster carers demonstrate a strong commitment to, and sensitive understanding of, the children placed with them. Foster carers benefit from effective recruitment, timely and careful assessments, extensive training and good supervision. They feel part of the improvement work in West Berkshire and several carers are involved in task and finish groups aimed at further strengthening fostering services.
32. Senior managers recognise that life story work has been slow to start for a number of children in long-term care placements. Inspectors found that recent training is beginning to have a positive impact, with an increasingly therapeutic approach taken to help children to make sense of their journeys in a sensitive and child-centred way.
33. All children looked after are allocated to an independent reviewing officer (IRO) who comes to know them well. Children benefit from good access to advocates. Sensitivity is shown to parents, alongside a commitment to ensuring close involvement of family members in children's lives. Reviews are held and recorded in good time and, in most cases, IROs are proactive in ensuring that actions and care plans are progressed. Inspectors saw evidence of IROs challenging and appropriately escalating their concerns.
34. Senior and political leaders work well in partnership with children looked after; indeed, their views are listened to at all levels of the organisation. The CiCC worked closely with senior managers to co-produce the Pledge. However, despite the enthusiasm of children, the council is not sufficiently helped to influence services and developments for all children looked after. Senior leaders, including the corporate parenting board, recognise the importance of maintaining the ongoing momentum of the group and have explored other ways of working with children, such as a young ambassador scheme and the recent introduction of 'Mind of my own', (MOMO) to capture feedback from children.

The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is good

Inspection findings

35. Adoption performance was judged at the last inspection to require improvement, as too few children were able to leave care through adoption, and life story work to support them to understand their earlier lives was weak. Improvement has been secured in both areas.
36. A stronger emphasis on achieving permanence for children across children's social care is evident, with proactive intervention, parallel planning and options being pursued for children when they cannot return home, including 'foster to adopt' placements. This has increased the number of children leaving care through adoption. In 2014–15, the year up to the last inspection, six children were adopted and seven were matched, a total of 13. At the time of this inspection, this has risen to 18 children in the process, with 10 of these children adopted in the last 12 months.
37. Good use is made of regional consortium arrangements. Regular liaison with managers from the commissioned adoption service ensures an early start to finding families for children who are unable to return home. The service appropriately prioritises the recruitment of adopters for children whose needs are likely to make finding a family more difficult. Prospective adopters are promptly allocated a named worker, and most are assessed within expected timescales and are considered at the first available adoption panel. Appropriate training and relevant information ensure that applicants are realistic about the challenges as well as the rewards of adoption.
38. This purposeful approach means that approved adopters do not have to wait too long for a match. Performance against the three-year scorecard performance measures is slightly behind the national thresholds. However, over the past year, children have experienced swift progression from being looked after to permanency through adoption.
39. The quality of prospective adopter reports is good, but child permanence reports are more variable, and the overall standard requires further improvement. The adoption panel is effective and well run. Minutes show careful consideration of children's needs and clearly explain the reasons for the panel's decisions and recommendations.
40. Social workers and foster carers understand the importance of children of all ages having memory boxes. Life story work is completed more promptly than at the time of the previous inspection, and some children have a life story book before they move to live with their new families. For other children, this is received shortly after their move. Life story books are attractive and child-friendly, explaining family history appropriately. Later life letters are also well

written and are likely to be helpful to children in understanding their earlier lives when they are old enough to read them.

41. Post-adoption support is effective and is provided by skilled and experienced specialist staff, alongside the LACES team. Families can quickly access help when they need it. The service would benefit from the systematic gathering of views from families about the impact of this support. The effectiveness of these services means that very low numbers of children experience disruption after being placed with their adoptive family, and no children have experienced disruption after an adoption order has been granted in the past four years.

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it is good

Inspection findings

42. Care leavers in West Berkshire are well supported into adulthood by a stable and experienced team of social workers and personal advisers who are knowledgeable about, and committed to, the young people they support. Decisions about the timing of the transition of young people from social workers to personal assistants are thoughtfully considered, taking into account the needs of each care leaver. In some cases, young people remain allocated to social workers well past their 18th birthdays.
43. Staff develop strong relationships with young people and are tenacious in maintaining contact with them if they disengage. Workers keep in touch through third parties, liaise with other agencies and take every opportunity to visit if they become aware that a young person is in custody, or is likely to be attending appointments with agencies such as probation. The strength of these relationships is demonstrated by young people, who frequently contact their personal advisers or social workers when they need help or when they want to share good news.
44. The range of housing available to young people has increased significantly since the last inspection. More young people benefit from remaining with their foster carers after their 18th birthdays through 'staying put' arrangements. Young people are helped to obtain private tenancies, which the local authority supports by providing deposits. Others, including unaccompanied asylum seekers, appreciate the support they receive through supported lodgings. Young people spoken to during the inspection all said that they feel safe where they live and value the quality of their housing. Those who attend university receive funding for accommodation during the holidays; this was used creatively to support one young person to go travelling. Ninety-one per cent of young people are recorded as living in suitable accommodation, which is positive.

45. The quality of pathway plans is variable. They are often detailed and are regularly updated, an improvement from the last inspection, but they are not owned or valued by young people and do not represent a vibrant account of care leavers' changing lives. Pathway plan templates are not helpful because they are not user friendly. Young people often do not want to engage with pathway planning, even though they are happy to work with their personal advisers. An intuitive and young person-led pathway planning process would complement the purposeful relationships that care leavers already enjoy with their personal advisers. Managers acknowledge this and are exploring how pathway plan templates might be improved. (Recommendation)
46. Strong systems and processes support care leavers who are not in education, training or employment to access these opportunities. Effective partnerships are in place with a range of work readiness providers. The number of young people in education, employment or training has increased and is now a strength in this local authority. Seventy-eight per cent of 19–21-year olds are in education, training or employment, compared with 47% in 2015–16. This is also testament to the assertive and young person-centred work undertaken by personal advisers to support young people to achieve their goals.
47. Young people have easy access to advice on health matters, including sexual health and drug and alcohol misuse, through a drop-in session facilitated by the looked-after children's health nurse and a separate specialist service that is highly valued by young people. All young people receive helpful summaries of their health histories, which is an improvement from the previous inspection.
48. The local authority demonstrates a strong commitment to supporting young people to achieve their potential, and to celebrate and develop their talents and interests. The music studio and other bespoke activities have been effective in successfully re-engaging young people, and in supporting those who have experienced severe trauma to develop their interests. For some young people, this has led to their turning a talent into a career.
49. Young people speak highly of the support that they receive to develop their independence skills, to set up their homes and to manage their finances. Thoughtful work was seen in building the confidence of an unaccompanied asylum-seeking young person to deal with form filling and bureaucracy. An easy-to-read booklet sets out young people's entitlements clearly.
50. Young people's achievements are marked with a lively annual celebration. Birthdays and holidays, such as Eid and Christmas, are celebrated with a gift. These important gestures cement the personal relationships between young people and their personal advisers, and between care leavers, managers and senior leaders within the council. Formal participation processes are less well developed, but there are a range of events and initiatives where young people are increasingly involved in shaping services, such as piloting the MOMO 'app', interviewing staff and refreshing the Pledge.

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| Leadership, management and governance | Good |
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Inspection findings

51. Significant improvements in children’s services have been achieved since the last inspection. An effective, internal improvement programme board rigorously oversees and drives progress. Additional arrangements, such as the quality assurance and performance boards, ensure that progress is monitored in a variety of ways, for example, through data analysis, case auditing, supervision and gathering feedback from staff and service users. This enables leaders to build on the gains already established.
52. Staff stability has improved considerably since the last inspection and the workforce, including the senior management team, is now predominantly permanent. The vacancy rate has fallen from 50% at the time of the last inspection to 10%, a notable achievement that leaders are rightly proud of. The ongoing significant investment in training means that newly acquired knowledge and skills increasingly benefit children. Social workers understand the importance of relationships and direct work with children and the need for up-to-date good-quality assessments, plans, reviews and chronologies. Children’s cases generally evidence recent management oversight, and social workers feel well supported by their managers. Children and young people benefit greatly from consistency in their relationships with social workers.
53. Vulnerable children and young people are well protected and supported to achieve positive outcomes. Through processes such as the resource panel, managers listen to the recommendations of social workers and ensure that children receive packages of support appropriate to their needs. An important caveat to these findings is that the arrangements to reduce the risks for children who go missing and those at risk of sexual exploitation are not consistently robust. Focused attention from senior leaders is needed in order to secure the necessary improvements. (Recommendation)
54. Improvements in the timeliness of health assessments for children looked after demonstrate well the effectiveness of multi-agency problem solving, with remedial action taken by senior staff from different partner agencies. Good progress has also been made in ensuring that children and young people who have lower-level emotional health needs can access support via the Emotional Health Academy. However, leaders and partners have not been able to ensure that children who have complex mental health needs can access services swiftly enough.
55. The local authority understands the profile of its community well, anticipates future demand on services and uses this information to help to shape services. Some formal plans and strategies, such as the sufficiency strategy,

lack detail. However, the scale and size of the local authority, coupled with other ways of agreeing and securing services, means that children and families do not experience adverse effects as a result.

56. Productive relationships pan-Berkshire, as well as membership of wider forums, support children and families and the workforce. For example, the joint work undertaken with other local authorities to regionalise adoption arrangements evidences a careful and joined-up approach. Similarly, the DCS's leadership of a regional workforce network benefits the training and support of social care staff.
57. Elected members understand the responsibilities of being corporate parents and demonstrate their strong commitment through the Corporate Parenting Panel. The panel is proactive; it ensures that it receives full information about how well children are progressing and commissions suitable reports to keep up to date. Issues of concern are acted on and lead to tangible improvements for children and young people. For example, the visibility of children who have disabilities, identified as an area for development by the peer review, resulted in an inquiry involving and informed by young people who have disabilities themselves.
58. Led by the DCS and head of service, managers have developed a good understanding and grip of performance in their service areas. Data is interrogated regularly to identify potential areas of concern and ensure compliance. Managers understand the benefits of data as a tool to help improve performance. Social care services benefit from corporate support to assist with data collation and analysis, and auditing of practice. Close engagement with other local authorities in the south east region through a benchmarking group enables leaders to measure their progress and performance against that of others.
59. The auditing of casework is a key tool in the quality assurance framework. All managers are involved in auditing, and this has ensured wide acceptance of case scrutiny. Staff report that they find audits helpful in identifying strengths and weaknesses in practice. Auditing is sufficiently independent of line management and compliance is monitored closely. Case audits are generally thorough, but a few are insufficiently critical of practice.
60. Clear and productive lines of communication and accountability are in place between the local authority and the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB). Work streams, such as the quality assurance sub-group, contribute effectively to improvements within children's social care. Learning from multi-agency audits and serious case reviews is used to reshape and improve services. Topics selected for inquiry by the sub-group reflect priority areas and improvement activities in children's social care.
61. The poor-quality recording system does not support good practice. It is difficult to store and retrieve key documents on children's cases. The local

authority's focused efforts to replace this are commendable and the new system is now at the point of implementation.

62. Leaders and managers regularly seek feedback from the social care workforce, using it well to inform strategies for improvement. For example, feedback from workers has shaped the recruitment and retention strategy. Feedback on the auditing process has influenced how this works in practice. Creative engagement with children and families is instrumental to service delivery; for example, families contributed to the recent multi-agency enquiry into neglect cases. This positively affected the future direction of this work.
63. Leaders have embedded clear lines of accountability and responsibilities across the council. Children's social care services enjoy strong and consistent support from elected members, the chief executive and leaders in partner agencies. Despite financial constraints, children's social care remains sufficiently well funded to achieve its improvement targets.
64. Senior and political leaders demonstrate a commitment to innovation and learning from other local authorities to inform their improvement journey. They actively seek out opportunities to develop new ways of working, for example, through securing funding from the Department for Education (DfE) Children's Social Care Innovations Programme to implement a family safeguarding model. Leaders are ambitious to improve services further, while being rigorous about maintaining core standards.
65. Relationships with the judiciary are strong, and the designated judge reports positively on leadership in the local authority. Other strengths that he identified include the timeliness of court applications and reports, consistency of social workers, and support from line managers.
66. Senior representatives from partner agencies are very positive about a range of developments led by the council, some in partnership with others. In particular, since the introduction of the MASH, partners express increased confidence in reporting their concerns, understanding thresholds and feeling supported in these processes.
67. Social workers speak highly of the support they receive. More meaningful management support and challenge at key points of children's journeys mean that social workers feel safe in their decision-making. Although supervision is regular and often includes a detailed update on children's circumstances, this could be improved with greater reflection, challenge and analysis of the child's world to drive forward children's plans with a critical eye.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference that adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Ofsted produces this report of the inspection of local authority functions and the review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of five of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted.

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