

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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



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Mr Andy Sharp
Executive Director of People
West Berkshire
West Street
Newbury
RG14 1BZ

Dear Andy,

Focused visit to West Berkshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to West Berkshire children's services on 9 June 2021. The inspectors were Tracey Scott and Maire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspectors, and Sarah Canto, Her Majesty's Inspector (designate), as a supernumerary inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children in need of protection.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 (coronavirus) context. The visit was carried out remotely, using video calls for discussions with social workers, managers, leaders and parents. Inspectors also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- social work capacity across the service to meet increasing demand
- rigorous oversight of children in need by qualified social workers.

Findings

- Strong corporate and partnership arrangements have ensured a joined-up service delivery approach to meet community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regular review of risk assessments by social workers has appropriately informed the frequency and type of visits to children during the pandemic. The most recent lifting of national restrictions has seen a sharp increase in the number of referrals, assessments and children requiring support or protection. The local authority has recently increased social work capacity in the Contact, Advice and Assessment Service to respond to this demand; however, caseloads remain too high in this part of the service.
- Skilled practitioners, creative work with children and their families, and a multi-disciplinary approach are making a real difference to children and their families in West Berkshire. A relationship- and strengths-based approach means that practitioners work alongside families. Families are clear about the changes they need to make and the support they will receive.
- A recent increase in demand has put pressure on children's services. Caseloads in some parts of the service (Contact, Advice, Assessment Service and Family Safeguarding Teams) are too high. At the time of the visit, many social workers were responsible for between 22 and 37 children. This is not currently having a significant impact on the timeliness and quality of work overall. However, some children have experienced a short delay for an assessment of their needs while waiting for a named social worker to be identified. Additional capacity has been agreed to meet the increasing demand.
- Family support workers provide intensive, child-focused, effective support to children and their families to promote change. However, they are also lead professionals with responsibility for the review of safeguarding children's welfare, progress and plans for some children in need. This routine practice is of significant concern. Regular supervision is provided by a qualified social worker, and if safeguarding concerns are identified children are allocated to social workers. However, the level of responsibility and accountability involved in this area of work lacks direct social work oversight. The local authority has accepted this and has undertaken to cease this unacceptable practice.
- Chronologies and family histories are evident on children's records. Some chronologies are system generated, and others are created individually by social workers. System-generated chronologies are not effective in helping social workers to easily understand children's histories and the impact of key events in their lives or to inform planning and decision-making. Where chronologies are bespoke to individual children, they capture this information well and effectively inform decision-making.
- Strategy meetings are timely and facilitate comprehensive information-sharing, effective risk assessment and shared decision-making regarding next steps.

- Assessments are comprehensive, balanced and analytical. Multi-agency partners contribute effectively to assessments and they provide a strong sense of children's experiences. Most children are seen frequently and in line with their level of need.
- Practitioners build positive relationships with most children. Meaningful, creative, direct work supports children's voices to be heard and risk to be reduced. Advocacy is used effectively to ensure that children's views are represented where they choose not to attend, or it is inappropriate for them to attend, key meetings.
- Most children benefit from plans that are focused on their needs, strive to reduce risk and improve their experiences. A small number of children's plans lack specificity and measurable outcomes. This means that identifying who is responsible for undertaking key actions is less clear and it is more difficult to understand the difference that plans are making for children.
- A high proportion of child protection plans are ended at the first review. Most plans end appropriately. However, a small number end without evidence of sustained change where there are longstanding concerns within the family. For some children, this means that their circumstances subsequently decline, and they experience further child protection planning. The local authority has identified this and taken steps to strengthen systems to ensure a higher level of management oversight when the ending of a plan at first review is being considered.
- Core groups and reviews take place regularly and are well attended by multi-agency partners. Most children receive timely and effective support, and their experiences improve.
- Where risks to children increase or children's circumstances do not improve, the local authority makes effective use of pre-proceedings to safeguard children. Most pre-proceedings are timely. However, a small number of children experience delay in entering pre-proceedings once this decision has been made. Clear and accessible letters before proceedings provide clarity and ensure that parents understand the local authority concerns and expectations and the support available to them. The pre-proceedings phase is used well to ensure intensive multi-disciplinary support and the completion of internal and independent assessments to consider parenting capacity to make and sustain change. Positive use is made of family group conferences, and family network meetings at an early stage prevent escalation and strengthen support networks for children and their families. Approximately one third of children in pre-proceedings processes are effectively diverted from care proceedings.
- Most parents and their children have benefited from the practice model approach in West Berkshire with timely and supportive responses from

practitioners. Although feedback from parents gathered during the visit was overwhelmingly positive, a small minority of parents felt unsupported and dissatisfied with the service they had received.

- The vast majority of practitioners benefit from regular, reflective supervision that captures the child's experience and is effective in supporting the progress of their plans. A small number would be strengthened by greater depth of exploration in helping social workers to find more creative ways to engage with children who are reluctant or resistant to engage.
- The local authority has recently developed and implemented a comprehensive quality assurance framework. This has the potential to provide strong oversight, scrutiny and assurance of practice, but this has not been realised. Compliance by managers in completing audits has been low, and the quality of audit activity is variable. The local authority is aware of this and has further plans to embed the framework and strengthen the quality of audit across the service.
- Practitioners are passionate and positive about working in West Berkshire. They feel supported, heard and appreciated by visible and accessible managers and leaders. The preferred practice model is highly regarded. Practitioners value the wider perspective, support and impact of specialist adult workers and a psychologist within the service. A comprehensive staff retention package and commitment to staff development are helping to maintain a stable, permanent workforce in West Berkshire.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Scott
Her Majesty's Inspector