

Inspection of West Berkshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 14 to 18 March 2022

Lead inspector: Máire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

A strong, stable and child-focused leadership team has continued to improve services for children and families in West Berkshire, despite the challenges of COVID-19 and increasing demand. Since the last inspection, an early response hub has been created in the contact advice and assessment service. The hub has developed highly effective working relationships with universal, voluntary and community services, so that children and families benefit from intervention and help at the earliest opportunity. Leaders have also put additional services in place to support children's mental health and emotional well-being. The safeguarding of children from risks outside the family has been strengthened. The collegiate approach of leaders and managers reflects the well-embedded social work model.

Practitioners articulate thoughtful, creative work with children, but this is not consistently evidenced in records. This is needed so that decisions for children are made with a full knowledge of current circumstances and children have a complete record of their care history. Some assessments for children in need lack an explicit exploration of children's ethnicity and culture. There has been some, but not enough, improvement in addressing two areas for improvement from the last visit in 2017.

West Berkshire, in common with many other local authorities, faces increasing pressure to find high-quality, affordable placements for children in care. Although work is in progress, leaders are yet to update the sufficiency strategy to deliver an increase in the availability of suitable homes locally for children in care.

What needs to improve?

- The full exploration of children's ethnicity and culture, to inform assessments.
- The quality of recording of: social work visits to children; first line management supervision and case direction, particularly for personal advisers; pathway plans.
- The update and implementation of a sufficiency strategy, to provide local homes for children in care.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children and families benefit from the investment in and development and implementation of the early response hub. The hub is instrumental in the coordination of extensive, timely and creative early help support in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. The support is informed by a targeted plan to meet the needs of children and families, with skilled practitioners delivering bespoke programmes. This reflects the social work model which is well embedded in most areas of the service and with partners, and leads to impactful preventative work with and for children and families. For example, the support of young carers, through their regular meetings, demonstrates an awareness of the needs of vulnerable children in the community, and provides them with an outlet to have fun and forget or share worries as they wish.
2. In the contact advice and assessment service (CAAS), all contacts are carefully considered by qualified social workers. A thorough triage leads to an informed analysis and appropriate recommendations for next steps. For example, contacts featuring domestic abuse lead to very prompt risk assessments by skilled practitioners and well-considered, child-centred decision-making. Curiosity and healthy professional scepticism are evident from the outset through proficient social work and scrutiny by managers. As a result, children and families are referred to the right agency and/or service at the right time.
3. Enquiries in the multi-agency safeguarding hub routinely feature information-sharing meetings between agencies, providing genuine depth and rigour to initial multi-agency risk assessments. This means that decisions are closely aligned with children's vulnerabilities, any additional needs and the children's ages.
4. Children in West Berkshire for whom there are immediate safeguarding concerns, including disabled children, benefit from a high standard of evaluation, analysis and well-evidenced decision-making. This is also the case out of hours, and a seamless handover with daytime staff prevents any delay. Consequently, children are seen quickly and any immediate risks are addressed. Actions are well targeted to ensure children are better protected during initial investigations.
5. Assessments are timely, proportionate and bolstered by strong, multi-agency partnership working, adhering to the social work practice model. Children and

carers are seen frequently and individually, providing rich insights into their lived experiences which are usually considered alongside their history. While there has been some improvement, as recommended in the 2017 inspection, it remains the case that the ethnicity and culture of some children are not always sufficiently explored in assessments and plans, which is a gap in fully understanding some children's needs.

6. A wide range of targeted interventions are introduced at the earliest opportunity, often while the assessment is being undertaken. This supports focused and time-limited statutory involvement where this is appropriate. As a result, families feel worked with, not 'done to'. For example, cautious and measured early pre-birth planning and assessment is a risk-aware approach, which gives mothers a carefully managed window to demonstrate their parenting capacity when their baby is born.
7. An increase in referrals in the last six months has placed additional demands on CAAS, which have been managed well. The family safeguarding teams have also experienced increased demand, compounded by some vacant posts. Children have been appropriately protected by practitioners, despite the number and complexity of families that practitioners are working with, but the quality of some recording has suffered as a result.
8. The quality of planning is variable. Stronger plans are outcome-focused, rigorously reviewed by the range of agencies involved in core groups and child in need meetings, and appropriately concluded. They are also concise and easy to understand. A minority of child protection plans are unwieldy in the breadth of issues that are being addressed at any one time. This can be overwhelming for families, as the plans are not easy to understand on first reading.
9. Social work recording of visits can vary, but overall are well recorded, purposeful and show observations of, or direct work with, children. Direct work undertaken with children shows that most workers think carefully and creatively about how to elicit the views and experiences of children of all ages and abilities. This work is then summarised and used as a basis for effective multi-agency case supervision meetings.
10. Strong pre-proceedings practice ensures parents are aware of what is expected of them. Some impactful work results in parents improving their parenting, allowing them to safely exit pre-proceedings. Senior managers closely monitor this work. Care proceedings are instigated without delay if concerns about children's safety escalate. Proactive early initial viability assessments of potential family/friend placements are carried out to try and reduce delays in the event that care proceedings are subsequently initiated. The designated family judge and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service are both complimentary about social work practice, including court statements and care planning for children.
11. Effective and timely multi-agency intelligence-sharing and use of a screening tool for children at risk of exploitation or who go missing provides a helpful explanation of risk factors. This supports the identification of the emerging and potential risks arising from exploitation and informs thorough exploration and

work at an early stage with children. The sharing of these findings with parents helps them to understand the extent of the issues and encourages more working together and engagement, which is in children's best interests. It is further kept up to date by information obtained from prompt return home interviews that explore missing episodes with children. Information gained from all sources is mapped and used through multi-agency working to target disruption activity to safeguard children from those who wish them harm.

12. West Berkshire has a secure system for tracking children who are removed from school, leave the area or go missing. The local authority has clear expectations of all schools about the information required when a child is not in school in these circumstances. This promotes the safety and well-being of children. The local authority is successfully promoting and supporting schools with therapeutic approaches to inclusion and children's mental health needs. This is having a positive impact on rates of fixed-term and permanent exclusion of children.
13. The local authority endeavours to keep lines of communication open with parents who wish to educate their children at home. Leaders know how many children are educated at home and collect information about parents' reasons for home education. A clear protocol is in place to check the quality of home education and identify any welfare concerns about children.
14. West Berkshire has a grip on the use of reduced school timetables. The message that a reduced timetable is time limited and an intervention rather than a provision is made clear to all schools, so that children benefit from full-time education as soon as possible.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: good

15. Children come into care when they need to. Effective parent and child assessments are part of this timely decision-making process when necessary for children. Children who return home from care experience carefully planned and staged returns, often under the umbrella of care proceedings, so that a supervision order is granted as the local authority's preferred option. This work ensures that children can return to live with their families when safe to do so.
16. Children are mostly seen regularly and alone by their social workers. However, a small minority of visits are not made at the required frequency, and records of some visits are delayed. Children who have the same social worker for a longer period, as most have, experience stronger, continuous relationships which provide the platform for more imaginative direct work with children and more informed placement matches and work with carers.
17. Social workers record basic, essential information which provides some indication of children's voices and experiences, but this is not consistently strong. Life-history work is completed for many, but not all, children. This means that some children will not have as full an account of their life memories

and histories as children who receive later life letters. These letters convey this history and capture memories comprehensively and sensitively.

18. Some care plans are helpfully written directly to children. Therefore, they present as their plan, demonstrating effective working with partners in education, mental health and voluntary agencies. Plans are reviewed thoroughly and the independent reviewing officers write useful review letters to children. Children's circumstances are understood well, and recommendations are specific and focus on the right things to promote children's well-being, stability and long-term permanence.
19. The quality of work with children in care who are at risk of harm is effective and multi-agency. Risks of exploitation are well understood, leading to targeted direct work with children, supplemented by strong strategic oversight. For some, this leads appropriately to a transfer to adult services to continue safeguarding young adults considered at high risk of exploitation. Not many children go missing, but when they do staff demonstrate care and commitment to children, for example, by going out to look for them. Young people who are potential victims of modern slavery are identified at an early stage, and children seeking asylum are actively helped in their immigration claims.
20. Children's physical and mental health needs are understood and met. Although there are long waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), children are helped by a range of other innovative services, such as the West Berkshire Emotional Health Academy, talking therapies and mediation, which children can access quickly to their benefit. Children's interests and hobbies are recognised and promoted by their carers and social workers, who offer children fun and enrichment.
21. The virtual school is forward-looking and is regarded highly by schools in the area, providing personalised and good-quality training for schools, including in trauma-informed practice and attachment. It has intentionally strengthened the leadership capacity and is ambitious to secure improved outcomes for children.
22. The virtual school occupies a pivotal role in leading personal educational planning for children looked after. The format of personal education plans (PEPs) has recently been revised and improved. PEPs include contributions from professionals that are created and written in a way that engages children and provides a picture of their real-life experiences, as well as evaluating their educational progress and personal development.
23. Permanence planning is mostly considered at an early stage for children. No options are discounted, including adoption for older children. Permanence planning meetings describe helpful discussions about family finding and concurrent planning, but these discussions are not always translated into action plans to ensure that timely progress is being made for all children.
24. Most children live in the home that is right for them. Family time is carefully considered and promoted to ensure it is safe and in children's best interests. A sizeable minority of children are placed outside West Berkshire, but social

workers make concerted efforts to ensure children are not disadvantaged by this.

25. There are determined and successful efforts to ensure that brothers and sisters can live together when it is appropriate. A real priority is given to trying to place children within their wider family networks under connected carer arrangements, explored in family group conferences. As a result, many children are safely and securely living with connected family members, maintaining and developing their familial cultural ties and identities.
26. Children who are unaccompanied and seeking asylum are met with kindness and are well supported when they arrive in West Berkshire. They are found accommodation that is commensurate with their needs, enabling them to begin to feel safe. Children are provided with access to an interpreter and legal advice to support their status applications. They are given opportunities to learn English, practise their religion and to develop their friendship networks. Young people attend college or training and enjoy hobbies and interests. Social workers understand the trauma that young people seeking asylum have faced and help them by building strong relationships together.
27. Rigorously approved foster carers receive effective training, supervision and support to enable them to care for children very well. Child-centred practice informs professional thinking about children's earlier attachments, and how those attachments affect children's current relationships with their carers. This work, alongside reflection on the few unplanned placement endings, helps to prevent potential placement breakdowns in future.
28. Family finding, through the regional adoption agency (Adopt Thames Valley), supports timely placements for children. Most children are placed promptly with well-matched adopters, based on comprehensive reports. The few delays are reasonably explained. Adopters enjoy positive relationships with their social workers and adoption support plans are comprehensive.
29. Children moving between social work teams for children in care, 16+ and leaving care have their needs carefully and sensitively considered to ensure that the timing of a move is right. When young people choose not to engage with social workers and personal advisers (PAs), staff carefully consider ways to overcome these hurdles and are persistent in supporting young people.
30. Most young people have positive relationships with their PAs. One young person said of his PA, 'He is not just there for me, he is there for everyone.' Another young person has been helped by their PA sticking with them through challenging times, and the young person was then helped to make some positive changes in their life.
31. Care leavers have the opportunity to engage in a welcoming and inclusive community group and enjoy well-attended participation programmes. These programmes offer a range of group and one-to-one activities, such as bowling trips, personal training sessions, boot camps and a summer mini-festival, that provide valuable social opportunities and peer support.

32. Care leavers help and mentor each other. Young people's achievements, however modest, are recognised. When young people do not want face-to-face contact, PAs maintain contact through phone calls, emails and texts. However, some of these contacts are not frequent enough to ensure that more vulnerable young people are getting the help they need.
33. Some pathway plans, although often completed with young people, are under-developed and do not consistently reflect all significant information about young people and the targeted support they need. This was an area for improvement in the 2017 inspection report. Not all written plans are sufficiently sharply focused on what needs to happen to achieve young people's goals. However, PAs and care leavers can articulate these plans and goals in detail and what achieving these will mean for them. Young people are provided with all relevant documents they need as they become more independent. This includes how to complain and who to contact when they need help.
34. The local authority works effectively to ensure that many care leavers engage in further or higher education or employment. Young people are helped with developing their independence skills and are supported to move from semi-independent lodgings or house shares when they are ready to do so. Young people benefit from a local authority revised priority banding for care leavers and are able to secure social housing more easily. A considerable proportion of care leavers continue to live with their foster carers, providing them with stability into young adulthood.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

35. Leaders in West Berkshire demonstrate a strong political and corporate commitment to achieving the best outcomes for children and families. This is demonstrated by continued investment in children's social care and leaders' consistent, active interest and participation in key committees and boards. It was also shown by children's social care offices remaining open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Clear governance arrangements provide for members to hold officers to account, and vice versa. The developments in early help and funding for more social work staff in the family safeguarding teams have secured improvement in the judgement for children in need of help and protection, from requires improvement to good. The local authority's commitment to and investment in the social work practice model is strong.
36. The local authority provides effective leadership and has embedded strong work with partners. The partners work well together, with a shared understanding of the social work practice model. This extends to work with leaders in both the statutory and voluntary sector, at a strategic and operational level. This is demonstrated at an operational level by the early response hub and their development of relationships with non-statutory services that are making a real difference to the lives of children and families. At a strategic level, this is seen in the joint funding agreement reached with the

Clinical Commissioning Group to improve access to a range of alternative mental health services for children due to the CAMHS waiting lists.

37. As a committed corporate parent, the local authority has a well-developed understanding of its role and responsibilities for children in its care and steps are being taken to extend this further. An example of recent progress is the ring-fencing of 5% of social housing accommodation for care leavers. Leaders have recognised that the corporate parenting board has been overly focused on the scrutiny of performance reports and needs to do more to promote and increase the active engagement of children in care and care leavers on the board. Work has begun to progress this.
38. A stable and ambitious senior leadership team works collaboratively. Leaders communicate their vision effectively with a consistent focus on children and the services they need. Leaders have a good understanding of services, informed by effective data gathering and interrogation and performance management. However, while most of the areas identified for improvement at previous inspections have been positively responded to, this is not the case for two areas for improvement, which are repeated.
39. The collaborative working ethic informs the continual search for feedback to keep improving services. There are established systems to hear from children and families in response to their involvement, primarily in work in the CAAS team. This elicits many compliments and suggestions of areas where changes would be beneficial, which the council responds to where possible. The collaborative case audit tool, when used as intended and to its full purpose, is an effective tool to drive forward both the quality of practice and outcomes achieved by children. However, as senior leaders are aware, the tool is currently inconsistently applied and work on this is in progress.
40. The absence of a current sufficiency strategy does not enable the local authority to forward plan effectively for homes for children in need of care in the future, although it recognises the national crisis in placements for older children in care. The council has commissioned internally the production of a Market Position Statement for children's services, and has begun conversations with other bordering local authorities about opportunities for joint working which will feed into their thinking and lead to the development of a revised sufficiency strategy.
41. Senior leaders foster a professional climate for social workers, through continuous, well-targeted training and development. This enables early and impactful outcome-focused interventions and help to children and their families. Managers at all levels are hands-on and present. Regular personal and group supervisions in most teams help workers to think differently and imaginatively about their direct work, supported by embedded and accessible advice from psychologists and other specialist workers. This extensive multi-agency input fosters fertile collaboration and co-working, so social workers 'never feel alone', as they told inspectors, particularly when children are experiencing significant risks and challenges at home. However, the records of group supervision do not consistently reflect the rich detail of this discussion. Supervision of the PAs is

not as frequent as it should be and is limited to a brief update of information. It provides little challenge and reflection to ensure that all care leavers' needs are identified and met.

42. Some social workers in the safeguarding teams featuring complex child protection and care proceedings work have high workloads. Although managers work alongside social workers to manage and share work demands, joint working and helping them prioritise tasks, this does put pressure on staff to complete work to the standard they would like and should achieve. Leaders have responded to increased demand on the service by increasing the numbers in the workforce, initially by the appointment of agency staff. This increase has recently been made permanent and posts are to be advertised in a refreshed recruitment drive.
43. The service benefits from a mainly experienced and long-standing workforce with strong, professional relationships, which enables healthy challenge when there is dispute and professional difference of opinion. The generous retention policy for frontline teams makes social workers feel valued and want to repay children's social care with their long service. Social workers are complimentary about working in West Berkshire. They said that they feel valued and 'heard'.

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