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20 May 2022

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Dear Ms Watson

Focused visit to Wokingham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wokingham Borough Council children's services on 12 and 13 April 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alexander Kemp and Maire Atherton.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Wokingham was judged to require improvement to be good at the ILACS inspection in June 2019. At a focused visit in June 2021, progress had been made for children who need help and protection. Progress for children in care has been made in some areas of practice but there is still work to do. Leaders are aware of many of the areas for improvement highlighted at this focused visit. They recognise the last few months as particularly difficult because of the challenges caused by sickness absence due to COVID-19 and the pressure on services caused by unanticipated demand.

There has been a very recent significant rise in the number of children in care. This was due to the sudden arrival of a number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The local authority assessed each child's needs and swiftly found appropriate places for them to live.

There have been improvements in the regularity of visits to children in care and in ensuring meaningful direct work takes place with them. There have also been improvements in ensuring that there is greater parity in the quality of practice across the different social work teams in Wokingham, and the corporate parenting board has been strengthened. Quality assurance of practice has also improved. This work has identified shortfalls in work with children subject to placement orders, practice in

the fostering team and supervision. Leaders have achievable improvement plans in place.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The quality of direct work with non-verbal disabled children in care.
- Meeting the emotional well-being and educational needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- The offer and take-up of return home interviews for children missing from care and ensuring the aggregated learning leads to a reduction in episodes of children going missing.
- The influence of the Children in Care Council and the extent to which children's views are heard and acted upon by the corporate parenting board.
- Supervision and management oversight, so that delays are challenged and assessment and planning for children improves.

Main findings

The number of children looked after by Wokingham has risen suddenly, primarily because of the unexpected arrival very recently of a number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. These children now represent 20% of Wokingham's children in care. Herculean efforts have ensured that all of these children have somewhere appropriate to live. Social workers assessed most of the children's needs well, and their circumstances were reviewed by independent reviewing officers (IROs) shortly after their arrival in Wokingham.

The expertise of social workers in work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is increasing. All children have access to interpreters for visits and reviews. They are seen regularly by social workers and some children experience careful direct work, so that their life experiences are understood and their wishes for the future influence their care plans. Almost all are quickly supported to practice their faith if they wish and to receive legal advice so that they can make an application for asylum. Social workers understand that health assessments, dental checks and optical care are particularly important when unaccompanied asylum-seeking children enter care, as they may have urgent needs after dangerous, arduous journeys.

Not all children seeking asylum have had an assessment that fully takes into account any needs they may have in relation to their emotional well-being or mental health. In some instances, social workers, managers and IROs have not fully grasped the extent to which the prior experiences of some of these children necessitate support. Additionally, too many have generic personal education plans that are not aspirational and refer only to the provision of classes of English for speakers of other languages.

All children in care are seen regularly by their social workers and direct work is often creative and purposeful. The use of 'Words and Pictures', aligned to the preferred

practice model, is having a real impact on ensuring children feel safe enough to talk to their social workers. All children have the opportunity to spend time with people who are important to them if this is safe, and these arrangements take account of children's own wishes and feelings.

Care plans are mainly up to date but actions in most plans are too generic. Contingency planning is rare. Timescales are not always identified in children's plans, which makes it difficult to monitor progress. Assessments for children in care are usually updated by way of a system-generated form designed for another purpose, which offers little room for analysis. As a result of these shortfalls, children's progress can be too difficult to monitor between reviews of the work being undertaken with them, and they can also experience unnecessary delay.

Most disabled children in care are supported by workers in the children in care and care leavers team, Here4U, or the long-term teams. This is because only children with very complex needs are allocated to the specialist children with disabilities service. Regardless of the team involved, social workers do not always make sufficient effort to engage directly with disabled children and are too reliant on observation. This means that they do not always have a full appreciation of children's needs. They do not always identify when arrangements for them need to change so that they can make progress. This is especially the case if children are non-verbal. Social workers told inspectors that suitable training is not available to them.

When children are in care under section 20 of The Children Act 1989, with the consent of their parents, a small number experience drift in achieving permanence. Inspectors also identified a very small number of cases where parental consent was not appropriately obtained. As the local authority has arrangements to track most of these cases, some of these practice deficits were identified, but after the event.

Children live with family friends or extended family members on a temporary basis for too long, as assessments of their carers are often delayed. Management oversight does not ensure that delays or poorer quality practice is identified. Very recent work is improving and leaders attribute this to a transformation project in the fostering service.

Experienced and dedicated IROs write children's review documents directly to children, using child-friendly and sensitive language. This will be of great benefit to children later in life. The potential of this good practice for children is currently not realised, because children told inspectors that they do not always receive them from their IROs. Development work for the IRO service has slowed down in recent months because of the need to prioritise first reviews of the arrangements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who have just arrived in Wokingham. Recent performance in the timely provision of documents and plans after reviews, and evidence of IRO escalation, has declined as a result.

Senior managers regularly review the arrangements for older children living in supported accommodation to ensure they meets the children's needs. Until recently,

a small number of children in care lived with their relatives in temporary arrangements that had not received authorisation by a nominated senior officer; this has now been resolved. When children live at home with their parents and are subject to a care order, not all benefit from updates to assessments, to ensure that arrangements for them are suitable, and sufficient senior oversight of their circumstances. Very recent senior management review of these children's cases has prompted some improvement in practice.

Only a small number of children go missing from care. When this happens, over a third are not offered return home interviews and, of those offered, less than half accept. The local authority has not undertaken any analysis as to why return home interviews are not happening for all children, or what support could be provided to children to enable them to take part in these interviews. This is a missed opportunity to identify what trends, factors or patterns increase and reduce the likelihood of future episodes of children going missing.

The corporate parenting board has recently been strengthened. There is effective scrutiny and oversight by elected members. Councillors have high aspirations for Wokingham children in care and do not intend to accept mediocrity. Nevertheless, children have not had enough opportunities to speak directly to senior leaders and councillors about what services need to improve from their perspective. There is not a culture of routinely engaging children when there is an upcoming change or service development that will affect them, so that their expertise influences decision-making. Children do not attend the corporate parenting board.

The Children in Care Council only has a few active members and there have not been enough efforts to increase its influence. Inspectors met with children who said that they would relish the opportunity to meet with leaders and councillors. Most of them had not heard of 'The Pledge' that Wokingham makes to children in care and had much to say about how services could improve. These included, for example, some views expressed to inspectors about a recently designed space for children to spend time with family and friends, and how its suitability for older children could be improved.

Quality assurance of social work practice and recent investment in moderation ensures that leaders can now rely on a more accurate assessment of practice quality. Quality assurance identified, for example, some practice with children subject to placement orders that was too variable. The improvement response of leaders was swift and decisive. Feedback from social workers and parents when audits are undertaken is routine and there is a commitment to now ensuring parental feedback, in particular, influences the audit outcome. Actions identified during the audit process could be more specific, so that they have the desired impact on improving children's circumstances.

Supervision does not readily identify all weaknesses in practice and does not happen often enough to ensure that all children are receiving a good service. Records of supervision do not always demonstrate that there has been curiosity and reflection

about what could support children to make progress. Actions from supervision are not always specific enough, and timescales are not identified that could later be tracked by managers.

Workloads are manageable and social workers told inspectors that they enjoy working for Wokingham. They feel well supported by experienced managers. A stable team of senior leaders supports the new interim director of children's services on a trajectory of overall improvement that is not linear.

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

Yours sincerely

Alexander Kemp
Her Majesty's Inspector