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Helen Watson
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Dear Ms Watson

Focused visit to Wokingham Borough Council local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wokingham Borough Council local authority children's services on 20 and 21 February 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Michelle Woodward and Amanda Maxwell.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, including those children who are subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. During this visit, inspectors spoke to senior leaders, managers, social workers and other social care staff. Inspectors also looked at children's case records and local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

Senior managers have undertaken significant work to address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection in March 2023. This includes the timeliness of assessments and the quality of child-in-need and child protection plans. Each area has been carefully considered and appropriate improvement plans are now in place. Senior leaders, including the leader of the council, the lead member and the chief executive, have worked together effectively to improve the experiences and progress of children and to secure the investment required to enable the progress to continue. The quality assurance framework has been reviewed and updated, with a clear focus on improving the quality of supervision.

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

- Continue the work on improving the consistency and quality of supervision.
- Engage parents and carers more fully in direct work with their children.

Main findings

Children in Wokingham benefit from receiving the right help at the right time. Children in need and those in need of protection, including disabled children, now receive the right level of support in line with their needs. Appropriate actions are taken to address risk when progress is not being made and there is a need to escalate. Thresholds are applied effectively and the rationale for decision-making is clear. When children's risks or needs are reduced, the support to children and their families is adjusted accordingly.

Children who are at risk receive a rapid response and strategy discussions are held in a timely way. Partner agency involvement is effective, with the relevant professionals providing the required information. This supports effective decision-making for children, helping to make them safer. Assessments of risk lead to suitable plans for next steps.

The quality and timeliness of assessments of children's needs have improved. Children now benefit from assessments which are comprehensive and detailed, exploring relevant aspects of the needs of the child and their family.

Since the previous inspection, effective work has taken place with children experiencing long-standing neglect. There is now more robust action to ensure that plans do not drift and that timely decisions are made to reduce risks to children.

Children benefit from stronger plans, which have been improved and simplified in consultation with families and staff. The plans address the concerns and are proportionate to need. Children and their parents are actively involved with key partners in the timely co-production of their plans. The plans provide clarity about what needs to be achieved, by whom and by when, in order to reduce the risks to children. These are shared with children in a way in which they can understand. The plans are reviewed effectively and updated to reflect the child's changing needs.

Children are able to build trusting relationships with their social workers, who are caring and understand their complex needs. Social workers show passion and tenacity in finding ways to engage the child's family network. Most children are seen regularly by their social workers, in a variety of settings. Despite social workers' efforts, some parents are not fully engaged with their children's plans, which reduces their effectiveness in improving the progress and experiences of children.

Children and their families have social workers who ensure that they gain an understanding about the child's home life and their life outside of the home. If

concerns increase for children, social workers meet with them more frequently. Social workers are child-focused and carry out appropriate direct work to gain an understanding of children's views about their lived experiences. Parents also benefit from this and have described how the support and intervention have helped their families. Social workers and alternatively qualified workers use a variety of tools to achieve this.

Children at risk of harm through exploitation are well supported by their workers, who focus on building effective relationships with them. The strategy and practice guidance for tackling harm outside of the home have recently been updated; this has been welcomed by practitioners. Social workers make effective use of tools to fully understand and assess children's vulnerabilities and the risks that they face. Plans are formulated by the network. The plans help to reduce and minimise risk, making children safer as a result.

Social workers are very aware of the impact of domestic abuse and substance misuse on children and their families. They signpost children and families to appropriate services to address this, while continuing to support the family.

Children on the edge of care are comprehensively assessed and supported with planned intervention from a dedicated team. Children and families' relationships are improved and developed, enabling many children to remain with their families. The dedicated team includes a range of staff with a variety of skills. These staff work alongside the social workers within a clear and complementary structure. Clear intervention plans are formulated which effect positive change for families.

Leaders and managers in Wokingham have sharpened their focus on developing the consistency, impact, quality and effectiveness of their management oversight and supervision. Management oversight is mostly robust and is evident within case work, including signing off reports for children and providing clarity about next steps.

The quality of supervision continues to be variable. Senior leaders know this and it is an ongoing area of focus for improvement. In stronger cases, supervision provides clarity and direction for next steps through reflective discussion. However, more work is needed to achieve greater consistency and timeliness for supervision to have maximum developmental impact.

At a corporate level, there has been commitment to, and investment in, the recruitment and retention offer. Social workers have manageable caseloads, enabling them to have time for focused work with children and their families. This also enables them to attend training which helps them to reflect on their practice and develop their thinking.

Social workers access a broad range of training, learning and development opportunities, including those that support the chosen practice model. There is a progression pathway available to social workers, which is supported by learning

opportunities to become a practice educator. Other staff have access to employment pathways and programmes to enable them to become qualified social workers, for example.

Newly qualified social workers who are in their assessed and supported year of employment are provided with regular support, learning and reflective supervision. This enables them to develop and progress their knowledge and skills and equips them for their developing social work roles.

The reviewed and strengthened quality assurance framework has increased the level of audit activity, which the local authority uses well to inform the learning cycle. Audit activity demonstrates a reflective, self-critical and thoughtful approach, with a clear focus on the quality of work with children.

Social workers feel well supported by visible leaders, managers and peers. Some staff have actively chosen to work in Wokingham because they appreciate the bespoke approach that makes them feel valued.

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

Yours sincerely

Michelle Woodward
His Majesty's Inspector