

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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Beate Wagner
Corporate Director, Children and Young People
Wakefield Council
Bond Street
Wakefield
WF1 2QW

Dear Ms Wagner

Focused visit to Wakefield local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Wakefield children's services between 3 and 5 November 2020. The inspectors were Nigel Parkes, Neil Penswick, Lorna Schlechte and Tracey Scott, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) Social Care, and Jane Spilsbury, HMI Schools.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

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 context. This visit was carried out partly by remote means. While the lead inspector was primarily on site speaking to social workers, managers and leaders in local authority offices, four inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, managers and leaders. 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.

Overview

Progress made by senior leaders in addressing serious and widespread failures that had been identified previously means that firm foundations were in place, which enabled the local authority to respond robustly when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Improvements in the impact and effectiveness of partnership working are starting to make a real difference. Governance arrangements are robust. Greatly improved performance management information and a more rigorous approach to quality assurance provide a much clearer picture of the experiences and progress of

children and families. Additional investment in staffing and resources is helping not only to stabilise the workforce, but to improve the quality of social work practice. However, senior leaders are acutely aware that there is more work to do. Achieving greater consistency is now the key challenge.

While the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is well developed, the comparatively high rate of re-referrals indicates that children and families are not always getting the right help and support first time around. The recently introduced neglect toolkit is not yet fully embedded, and the local authority's response to some more complex cases, particularly those involving older children where chronic neglect is a key feature, is still too variable. When risks increase, or change takes too long, better use is being made of the pre-proceedings stage of Public Law Outline (PLO) to ensure that children are protected from significant harm. However, senior leaders know that more needs to be done to engage and work with extended families at the earliest opportunity to avoid later delays. Personal education plans (PEPs) and education, employment and training (EET) plans lack ambition, and there is a shortage of suitable accommodation for care leavers.

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

- the response to more complex cases, particularly involving older children where chronic neglect is a key feature and/or where parents are evasive or resistant
- the range, quality and availability of suitable accommodation for care leavers, including semi-independent accommodation.

Findings

- The use of a multi-agency vulnerability tracker has helped the local authority and its partners to keep in touch with children, including those who, although not the subject of child in need or child protection plans, are potentially vulnerable. This, and the fact that none of the schools were closed completely during the first national lockdown, has helped to prevent the kind of drop-off in referrals to children's social care seen elsewhere.
- The MASH has managed to withstand the challenges associated with COVID-19 without any discernible dip in performance. Cases are screened and filtered appropriately. Management oversight is readily apparent and robust. Throughput is timely. However, the re-referral rate, which had fallen significantly, has since risen again and is high compared with the national average. This indicates that children and families do not always get the right help and support first time around. Senior leaders are monitoring the situation closely and have introduced regular dip-sampling to take stock of what is happening.
- The low proportion of children referred to the MASH who go on to receive a service also suggests that some partners either do not understand the thresholds for access to children's social care or are not applying them consistently. The high volume, and occasionally poor quality, of police notifications about incidents

of domestic violence is also an issue, one which has not yet been fully, or satisfactorily, resolved.

- When children are considered to be at immediate risk of significant harm, appropriate action is taken to safeguard and protect them. Child protection strategy meetings, which are generally well attended, are timely. Information is shared effectively. Decisions taken and action agreed in strategy meetings are clearly recorded.
- Child protection enquiries are also timely. Most are thorough. Children are seen and heard, and their views are taken into account. With good management oversight, decisions about whether to proceed to an initial child protection conference are clearly recorded and are, in most cases, proportionate and appropriate.
- Although the quality of children's assessments is generally of, at the very least, an acceptable standard, the quality of children's plans is variable, ranging from exceptionally strong to weak. Safety plans are not always realistic. On occasions, there is a tendency to expect too much of vulnerable women to single-handedly protect their children in extremely challenging situations.
- During the first national lockdown, children who were the subject of child in need or child protection plans were being seen regularly. Plans are reviewed at regular intervals. Child in need review meetings, core groups and review child protection conferences are timely and, in most cases, effective in identifying risks and applying thresholds appropriately.
- Most children are being helped and protected at the right level. Cases are stepped up appropriately from early help to children's social care and from child in need to child protection, but, on occasions, are stepped down prematurely to early help.
- The local authority's response to some of the more complex cases, particularly those involving older children where chronic neglect is a key feature and/or where parents are evasive or resistant, is too variable.
- The work of the Missing/Children Vulnerable to Exploitation team is helping to reduce the number of missing episodes, the number of children who go missing and the number of children at high risk of criminal or sexual exploitation. Every child who goes missing from home or care is offered a return home interview (RHI), although the actual take-up of RHIs fluctuates.
- Headteachers have felt well supported during COVID-19 by education officers, including school improvement and attendance and inclusion officers. They acknowledge that the local authority's response to children missing education and children who are being electively home educated (EHE), and to children's attendance more widely, is robust and effective.
- Although overall school attendance is broadly in line with national averages, schools were particularly pleased with the proportion of children in care who continued to attend school throughout the first national lockdown. Headteachers also appreciate and value the multi-agency vulnerability tracker, which has helped

schools and their partners to prioritise those children who, if allowed to remain out of sight, might be at risk.

- Recognising that parents' anxiety about COVID-19 is a major contributory factor to a reported three-fold increase in applications to educate children at home, compared to the same period last year, the local authority is now planning to review its systems and processes for dealing with such requests.
- Meanwhile, newly established inclusion panels, linked to the Wakefield Families Together locality-based cluster model, with its emphasis on early intervention, have helped to achieve a significant reduction in the number of permanent exclusions. With alternative provision no longer viewed as a destination, pupil referral units are now offering shorter-term turnaround provision in a way that is helping to keep children in school and supporting schools to meet their needs.
- The introduction of a tracker is helping the local authority to better monitor and manage its use of the PLO and pre-proceedings. Letters before proceedings, and contracts of expectations, are clear, balanced and easy to understand. Knowing that more needs to be done to explore extended family options at the earliest possible opportunity, senior leaders are taking action to further develop the use of family group conferences and network meetings. During COVID-19, the average length of care proceedings compares favourably with that in other local authorities.
- Children only come into care when it is right for them do so. Pre-birth assessments are generally of a good standard, leading, when necessary, to timely and appropriate decisions to remove children at birth. Most children in care, including those who are placed out of the local authority area, are living in settled and stable placements which meet their needs. Short- and long-term placement stability is comparatively good.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers and personal advisers (PAs) have been persistent and imaginative in trying to maintain regular contact with children in care and care leavers, although some children have talked about having too many changes of workers, making it difficult for them to build meaningful relationships with their social workers or PAs.
- Good attention is paid to the physical and mental health and emotional well-being of children in care, including children living out of the local authority area. Better use is being made of strengths and difficulties questionnaires than was the case previously. Waiting times for access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are virtually non-existent. However, access to regular dental health checks has been problematic during COVID-19.
- The local authority has worked hard during COVID-19 to make sure that children in care have still been able to enjoy time with family members. Family time has taken place virtually rather than face to face on occasions, or with social workers supervising some arrangements themselves while contact centres were closed.
- Still relatively new in post, the head of the virtual school is taking appropriate action to improve the educational experiences of children in care. Currently, education support for children in care and care leavers is a mixed picture.

Although there are plans in place to improve the quality of PEPs and EET plans, the educational content of some plans is weak. Most lack ambition or aspiration. More specifically, targeted support linked to measurable targets and timescales is required, particularly for those aged 16 or over who, without a more definite sense of purpose, direction and urgency, are in danger of missing out on education, employment and training.

- Although placement sufficiency is a challenge, better support for foster carers means that the local authority is managing not only to retain but also recruit more foster carers. For the second year running, and despite COVID-19, the local authority is on track to achieve a net increase in the number of in-house foster carers.
- The care leavers service, Next Steps, is being restructured in order to better meet the needs of care leavers. Having emerged from a difficult period, characterised by a lack of consistent leadership, an absence of coherent policies and procedures and a significant shortfall in terms of capacity, as evidenced by high caseloads, staff are feeling upbeat and optimistic about the direction of travel.
- In the short term, however, some care leavers feel that the quality of support they receive is largely dependent on the individual PA. Certainly, the transition from children in care teams to the Next Steps team takes place late, usually shortly after the young person's 17th, and sometimes just before their 18th, birthday. A shortage of suitable accommodation for care leavers is also creating a bottleneck in semi-independent accommodation, a problem that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.
- Much-improved performance management information and a developed, and developing, quality assurance system, mean that senior leaders now have a clear line of sight on frontline practice and, by extension, on the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers.
- Governance arrangements are robust and effective, with appropriate links between, for example, the Improvement Board, the Children and Young People's Partnership Board and the Wakefield Safeguarding Children Partnership Board. Interested and inquisitive elected members have continued to provide an appropriate level of critical challenge and scrutiny during COVID-19, even if, for some, that has meant having to learn how to do that virtually rather than face to face.
- Described by the lead member as previously having been 'extremely dysfunctional, almost non-existent', the partnerships that senior leaders have succeeded in building, not just with the police and health partners, but also with schools, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), the courts and unions, are now a source of real strength.
- The Wakefield Safeguarding Children Partnership (WSCP) has been visible, active and particularly effective during the pandemic. As well as leading on the vulnerability tracker, the WSCP produced and has regularly updated a directory, which describes what services are still available and how to access them in a way

designed to ensure that 'there are no cracks in the system'. In the course of the last six months, the WSCP also managed to run a 'Safeguarding is everyone's business' campaign and organise a wide-reaching virtual conference on neglect.

- During the same period, partner agencies have enthusiastically embraced the Wakefield Families Together programme, which involves a strategic and operational shift towards integrated, locality-based services. In that sense, COVID-19 appears to have provided added impetus to the direction of travel by giving partners an extra incentive to work together in clusters, with schools very much at the heart of that activity.
- The progress made in rolling out Wakefield Families Together at a time of crisis is just one example of senior leaders not allowing themselves to be distracted by COVID-19 and not taking their collective foot off the pedal of continuous improvement. Other examples include the restructuring of the care leavers' services and the work that is being done to increase the impact and effectiveness of the virtual school.
- The local authority's commitment to participation means that young people are encouraged and supported to play their part in driving improvements. Young people who are involved in the Build Our Futures Group, which came up with the idea of and organised the 'mystery shopper' exercise in the MASH, and which has also been involved in training foster carers and giving applicants for the WSCP team manager post a gentle 'grilling', are confident that they are being listened to. Their input has made, and continues to make, a difference.
- The local authority is making good progress in driving down caseloads and achieving greater workforce stability. With good wrap-around support, which goes far beyond the simple provision of equipment to make it possible for them to work remotely, staff at all levels, including newly qualified social workers doing their assisted and supported year in employment, feel and are being well supported.
- However, although there is clear evidence of increased management oversight, the quality of the advice, guidance, direction and support that social workers receive through supervision is not yet consistently good. Social workers report that supervision is reflective, although the supervision notes sometimes give the impression that the focus is on process and activity, rather than on impact and effectiveness.

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

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes
Her Majesty's Inspector