

Inspection of West Berkshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 September 2025

Lead inspector: Rodica Cobarzan, His 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the previous inspection in 2022, there have been changes in the local authority's corporate, political and children's services senior leadership. These changes in 2023, compounded by financial pressures and insufficient strategic and political focus on children's services, had acted as a brake on progress and led to the quality of services in some areas of practice declining. The appointment of a director of children's services at the end of 2023, replacing the previous combined role of director of children's and adults' services, along with the establishment of a strong and stable leadership team, have acted as a catalyst for the local authority to refocus on delivering high-quality services for children and families. This is also leading to strengthening focus on implementing the social care reforms. Progress has been made in improving kinship care options for children, but in other areas, such as family help, implementation of the reform is at an early stage.

This reinvigorated focus on getting the right support for children has led to strengthened practice in several areas, including the multi-agency 'front door', work to tackle extra-familial harm and permanence planning. For a very small number of children experiencing the cumulative impact of neglect or domestic abuse, their needs are not always recognised or acted on quickly enough. In other areas, such as early help, plans are promising but are at too early a stage to demonstrate a sustained impact for children and families.

What needs to improve?¹

- The effectiveness of practice with children who may be experiencing cumulative harm from neglect and/or domestic abuse, including those subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. (Outcome 1, national framework)
- The consistency of contingency planning for children being supported through child protection and child-in-need plans. (Outcome 3, national framework)
- The pace of work by the local authority, together with its partner agencies, to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to provide timely and effective early help to all children and families who need it. (Outcome 1, national framework)

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

1. Early help for children and families is underdeveloped because there is not currently sufficient resource to meet need, which means that not all children receive support as early as they could. When children do receive early help, they benefit from effective services. When concerns for children who are open to early help escalate, they are swiftly stepped up for a statutory assessment. But when children could step down from assessments, there is insufficient resource to provide them with ongoing targeted family support from the early help team. This means that for some children, they receive statutory support for longer than they may need. Leaders are aware of this shortfall and are working with partner agencies to develop a new strategy and to increase the capacity for support.
2. When children are referred to the Contact, Advice and Assessment Service (CAAS), they receive a prompt and effective service. Thresholds are well understood and consistently applied. There is careful consideration of children's experiences, including the impact of domestic abuse, which is well understood. Workers engage well with families to explain how and why information about their children is shared, including when it is necessary to do this without their agreement. Management oversight is sound, with very clear direction and rationale for decision-making.
3. Children and families receive a swift response when concerns are raised outside of the normal working hours. The team takes appropriate actions to safeguard children, and there is proactive information-sharing between the daytime and emergency duty social workers.
4. Arrangements to manage allegations against adults who work with children are effective. The local authority designated officer (LADO) ensures that a prompt

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

and comprehensive response is taken to allegations and that safeguarding children is always paramount.

5. Most assessments are thorough, consider each child individually and are informed by a broad range of partnership information. Children's and parents' views inform the findings from assessments. Most children and families receive appropriate and effective support during the assessments, which results in their circumstances improving or starting to improve.
6. The quality and effectiveness of support and safeguarding for disabled children has improved notably. This means that disabled children are now better supported by workers who generally know them well and understand their needs. They receive a range of effective services and packages of support that help children make progress.
7. Children at risk of exploitation benefit from a strong and coordinated multi-agency response. Regular meetings are held to analyse data and information, mapping risks and patterns that can help professionals take swift actions. Children who go missing are offered return home conversations, and efforts are consistently made to get alongside children to build relationships and understand why they went missing. This means that many children are well supported through this work.
8. The number of children identified as young carers has increased significantly, due to improved identification processes. However, a small number of children are still awaiting an assessment due to limited capacity. The accessibility of support varies slightly across the local area, which means that some young carers struggle to attend or fully engage with the support.
9. Visits to children are regular and include both announced and unannounced visits. Most visits are purposeful, and social workers have meaningful conversations with children to understand their wishes and feelings. For most children, these relationships are often strengthened through a range of direct work that takes place in the family home or school, and this provides valuable insights for assessment and planning.
10. When there are potential risks of significant harm, child protection strategy meetings are held promptly, with attendance from appropriate partner agencies. Interim safety plans are put in place to address children's immediate safety, and children are seen without delay. Child protection enquiries build on information shared at strategy meetings, with information from family members adding additional insight. Enquiries are timely, child focused and lead to proportionate actions. This includes progression to child protection conferences, when necessary.
11. Children's family networks are explored during social work interventions. Some children and families are not offered a family network meeting when this would have been appropriate. This means they may miss out on benefiting from a

structured support plan involving their kinship and wider support network, which could have helped to facilitate progress. Leaders have a plan to extend the offer, and training provided to staff to support this is underway.

12. Most initial child protection conferences (ICPCs) are held within statutory timescales and are effective. Review child protection conferences, core groups and child-in-need meetings are regular and well attended. Decisions made in meetings are appropriate, and, for most children, the assessment of risk is based on accurate evidence about parents' ability to make and sustain change.
13. Most child-in-need and child protection plans are well written, have timescales and are appropriate and proportionate to children's needs. Children receive the right support, under the right plan. However, contingency plans vary in quality, with some not sufficiently detailed to enable parents to understand what would happen should change not be secured.
14. A very small, but significant, number of children have been the subject of statutory interventions for very lengthy periods, due to neglect or domestic abuse, but without their lives improving. Chronologies are not always used well enough as a tool to identify the impact of cumulative harm over time. As a result, interventions do not always start early enough and are sometimes over-optimistic, resulting in delay for these few children. Positively, more recent practice is stronger and shows improvement in the accurate and timely identification of the cumulative negative impact on children of living with chronic neglect or domestic abuse. Managers have better oversight of child protection planning, which has contributed to a reduction in the number of children remaining on child protection plans for extended periods.
15. When risks to children escalate, most children appropriately enter the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Letters given to parents are clear and clarify concerns and support well. Managers and leaders oversee children in pre-proceedings. However, despite this level of oversight, a very small number of children have not benefited from swift or effective work, meaning that they have been in pre-proceedings for a prolonged period. As a result, positive changes for those children have not been achieved quickly enough.
16. There is a child-focused response to 16- and 17-year-old children who present as homeless. These children receive effective support, either through coming into care, if this is appropriate, or through support as children in need.
17. Privately fostered children are visited and arrangements assessed appropriately. There is an ongoing programme of awareness raising with partner agencies because the current number of identified privately fostered children is very low.
18. Effective systems are in place to ensure that children who are home educated are safeguarded. The local authority's oversight of children who are missing education is appropriate. Action is taken to help them re-engage in education as soon as possible.

19. Social workers generally benefit from regular management oversight and supervision. This helps them to reflect on and develop the effectiveness of their practice and to progress plans for children.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

20. When children come into care, it is for the right reasons. For many, their entry into care is planned and at a time that is right for them. However, some children enter care too late, or in an unplanned way. This means that for these children, the initial stages of coming into care can be unsettling. However, support is provided to help them settle in their new homes.
21. Permanence planning is very effective, with managers closely monitoring children's plans for permanence in its different forms from the moment they come in to care. There is an appropriate emphasis on keeping brothers and sisters together whenever possible. Social workers consider all permanence options for children and progress parallel and triple plans effectively until they identify what the right plan is for each individual child. This means that once children come into care, they almost all move to stable homes that meet their needs well and do so in a timely manner.
22. Leaders have created the right support structures for social workers to explore kinship care options for children. As a result, a high number of children achieve permanence by living in kinship arrangements. Children who cannot safely remain within their family and friends' network, and have a permanence plan of long-term fostering, are promptly and appropriately matched with their long-term carers so that they have certainty about their future care arrangements.
23. When children return to the care of their parents, assessments are completed and support provided. Care orders are discharged when it is appropriate to do so. Consequently, children are not subject to ongoing statutory involvement for any longer than they need to be.
24. A very small number of children live in unlawful, unregistered children's homes. These children are placed as a last resort and moved to suitable registered provision as soon as possible. Social workers regularly visit them to monitor their welfare and safety. Senior leaders have robust oversight of these children.
25. Children in care benefit from having consistent social workers who visit them regularly, spend time alone with them and know them well. Social workers are skilled in building relationships with children, enabling them to have a trusted adult with whom they can share their worries and aspirations. Assessments of children's needs are regularly updated to include their lived experiences and changing needs.
26. A range of direct work tools are used to ascertain children's views and to explore their understanding of their experiences. Not all children living in long-term foster care have the benefit of life-story work to provide them with a clear

and accurate narrative of their life experiences and help them to celebrate their journeys.

27. Children's plans are regularly considered through statutory reviews, chaired by independent reviewing officers (IROs) who are consistent people in children's lives. IROs write sensitively to children following reviews, informing them of what was agreed in the meetings. They escalate any concerns on behalf of children promptly if progress against plans is not being made. This helps to ensure that agreed actions are taken in agreed timescales and that children always remain at the centre of decision-making.
28. Children's written plans are sometimes very lengthy, including those plans for disabled children. This makes it harder for children to understand exactly who will be doing what and when for them so that their needs are met.
29. Children benefit from spending time with those who are important to them, in line with their wishes and an analysis of risk. Social workers and carers support children in care to participate in a range of enriching leisure and social activities that match their interests. Talents are nurtured, and children are supported to have fun.
30. Children are supported to progress and to achieve well educationally. The virtual school knows its children well and is unrelenting in its ambition for children in care to receive the best support. Staff balance promoting children's well-being with prioritising their educational achievement. The virtual school works positively with both schools and social workers. This includes providing useful training for designated teachers to help them to understand their responsibilities. This support is beginning to have a positive impact on children's attendance and academic progress.
31. Children's health needs are prioritised, with initial and review health assessments or tuberculosis screening happening on time for most children. Children access child and adolescent mental health services with minimal delay, and, for those children who have a specific need that cannot be met by universal health services, privately sourced therapeutic support is provided.
32. Disabled children in care benefit from consistent social workers who know them well and who regularly seek their wishes and feelings through children's preferred individual communication styles. Children make good progress in their homes.
33. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children live in homes that meet their needs. Social workers help and support these children well in all aspects of their lives. As a result, they have positive experiences.
34. Children in care who are at risk of exploitation or other forms of extra-familial harm benefit from a strong, multi-agency response to both review the level of potential risk and to agree joint actions to reduce risk and disrupt the activities

of exploiters. Consequently, this means that for most children in care, risks are well managed and understood, and children are safer.

35. Fostering panels are effective and support the recruitment and retention of foster carers well. Most children in care benefit from living in good-quality, stable foster homes, where they are well cared for. Whenever possible, children live locally with foster carers, who have been well trained and well supported, including through the fostering hubs. The local authority has successfully recruited additional foster carers. They have also strengthened retention, which is an indication of the high quality of support provided to carers.
36. Children live with adopters who meet their needs. There is a strong partnership between the regional adoption agency and the local authority that supports planning for children. When adoption is the right permanence plan for children, this is achieved in a timely way. Adopters receive effective support during the adoption process and subsequently.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

37. Care leavers benefit from a stable and experienced team of social workers and personal advisers (PAs). Most young people are introduced to their PAs early enough for them to develop a relationship before PAs take over from social workers as the key person providing support to them.
38. Most care leavers have positive and productive relationships with their PAs. PAs speak with empathy and warmth about their care leavers and recognise the unique challenges they face. Equally, the care leavers inspectors met with are positive about their relationships with their PAs and the impact they have on their lives. Care leavers are visited in accordance with their needs.
39. The health needs of care leavers, including emotional and mental health needs, are regularly reviewed and promoted. PAs support care leavers to manage their own health needs, ensuring that they have access to their health information and are registered with the relevant services. PAs are proactively referred to specialist services when necessary. For some care leavers with acute or specific health needs, the local authority has mitigated deficits in health services by funding private therapy or counselling to support these young people.
40. PAs encourage care leavers to lead fit and active lives, with many being supported to access sports and other activities in line with their interests. The 16+ service facilitates a series of creative and purposeful workshops such as music, drama and cooking, which have a positive impact on young people's lives.
41. Care leavers can share their views about the effectiveness of the support they receive and how services should be shaped going forwards through their access to the 'R:Vue' forum and 'community club'. These groups have had some impact in shaping discrete areas of practice across the service. The peer

mentoring scheme is highly valued by those delivering and receiving mentorship.

42. The local offer has been revised and co-produced with care leavers. It is presented in a format which is clear and accessible. Most care leavers are aware of their rights and entitlements. They are supported by PAs in securing relevant documents to help them transition to independence. Care leavers know how to make a complaint, and when this happens, staff are receptive and committed to learning from the experience.
43. Young people over the age of 21 who want or need ongoing support continue to have good access to this from their PAs. They know how to reach out, and when they want help or advice, PAs are responsive, and their work is impactful.
44. Pathway plans are completed in partnership with young people. Plans are mostly focused on key issues and identified needs. Actions are appropriate and most have clear review dates. While there is some variability in the quality of written records, including how effectively PAs evidence their high aspirations for care leavers, most pathway plans are being used well to support young people to make progress.
45. The response to care leavers who were former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is strong. Skilled PAs support young people with culturally matched mentoring schemes, to benefit from purposeful and engaging activities and to access education, and with community integration. While PAs understand and promote the identity needs of care leavers, these are not often explicitly recorded in pathway plans. These plans therefore do not always fully reflect the positive work completed by PAs.
46. Care leavers in custody receive regular, purposeful support from their PAs, including support to plan their return to the community and maintain links with their families and friendship networks.
47. Most care leavers who are young parents are well supported. They receive appropriate emotional and practical support from their PAs and via the young parent group. One young person inspectors met spoke about the positive and profound impact her PA's support had on her life.
48. Care leavers have access to support from a broad range of services, and professionals maintain frequent contact with them to help them to make safer choices and to navigate the risks and challenges of adult life. For most, risks are closely monitored, and when risks increase, responses are swift and effective. A small number of young people with complex risks are not as robustly supported into adulthood.
49. Most care leavers are successfully engaged in education, employment or training. Strong partnership working and personalised guidance raise the aspirations of care leavers. This empowers them to develop confidence and skills to access purposeful work and educational opportunities. The local

authority successfully engages a range of agencies to help young people to prepare for adulthood.

50. Almost all care leavers live in suitable accommodation that is safe and meets their needs. Most care leavers receive tailored tenancy support, which ensures a successful transition into independent living. Similarly, care leavers who want to live with their foster carers are supported to remain in stable 'staying put' arrangements for as long as they want or need. Strong and purposeful relationships with their carers result in supportive, lifelong relationships.

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

51. West Berkshire's leaders have made children a high priority. This commitment has accelerated over the past 12 months, with increased workforce capacity, including the creation of new roles, to support social work practice. Action was also taken to address the absence of a sufficiency strategy to ensure that there are the right number and range of homes and foster carers for children who need them. This includes ongoing work with the Regional Care Cooperative, fostering hubs and the local authority's own fostering service to improve the council's ability to support children to remain within their communities. As a result, children are now benefiting from an increase in the range of homes for both children in care and care leavers.
52. Strengthened partnership relationships are now evident at all levels. Managers from key partner agencies, including the police and health services, consistently attend both strategic and operational decision-making forums, contributing to effective joint working. Partnership working is strong with most, but not all, schools, and some challenges remain in ensuring that inclusion is promoted effectively in every school.
53. Leaders are engaged and active corporate parents. A very small number of children in care and care leavers take part in the 'R:Vue' council, and, through this, they help to inform the Corporate Parenting Board's agenda. However, the influence and reach of this group is currently limited. Leaders recognise this and have plans to strengthen participation, including the recently agreed additional two participation officers. Senior leaders, including the chief executive, have also become directly involved in 'reverse mentoring' with children in care and care leavers. This provides meaningful opportunities for children's and young people's voices to be heard at the highest level in the council, with an impact already being noticeable.
54. There is ongoing work to embed the local authority's chosen model of practice across all services. The model is being applied increasingly consistently, resulting in more children and families receiving effective and relationship-based support in line with the local authority's aspirations.

55. A broad range of audit activity is now being undertaken. Learning from this is resulting in improvements in practice, although not always within the timescales that would achieve the most benefit to children and families.
56. The local authority's existing case recording and management system has proven unwieldy and inflexible and has not best supported social work practice. It is positive that leaders have recognised this and have a plan in place to implement a new system in spring 2026 aimed at strengthening case recording.
57. The local authority's ongoing efforts to improve the stability and capacity of the workforce are being successful. There has been a significant reduction in both turnover and reliance on agency staff and an improvement in the percentage of staff who are permanent. This has been supported by the very recent introduction of additional assistant team managers. While workforce stability has improved overall, there are still some areas where the level of experience of staff is limited, and this impacts on the allocation of more complex work. Nevertheless, progress over the past year has been both steady and significant, reflecting a clear and increasingly successful commitment to strengthening the workforce and improving outcomes for children and families.
58. While there is some variation across teams and services, caseloads for some practitioners remain high. Leaders are acutely aware of this and have plans in place to further increase staffing and so reduce caseloads. However, the current workloads of some staff are limiting the timeliness and quality of support they are able to provide to some children and families.
59. Staff are encouraged and supported to develop their careers in West Berkshire. There are numerous opportunities for all staff to enhance their knowledge, skills and practice so that they are well equipped to support children and families that require help, including through an academy that supports the learning and development needs of social workers, particularly those who are newly qualified.
60. Leaders have ensured that supervision is taking place regularly across most areas of the service. Children's progress is mostly well documented, and actions arising from supervision are clearly recorded. Supervision helps social workers and PAs to reflect on their practice with children and maintain a focus on their experiences.
61. The workforce within children's services is well supported. There are staff engagement forums, a positive management culture with an accessible and visible wider leadership team and there is a strong commitment from staff, many of whom told inspectors that they enjoy working for West Berkshire.

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