



# **WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## **Quality Assurance Framework 2021 - 2023**

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## Document Control

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# Foreword

The central purpose of any Children's Services Quality Assurance Framework is to facilitate improvements in the day-to-day practice of staff, which will in turn improve a local authority's ability to effect positive change on the lives of children and young people. At Wokingham, we are acutely aware that the outcomes of the families we work with have the potential to "rise and fall" with the quality of our practice, which is why we have committed to strengthening all aspects of our quality assurance work as part of our Service's wider improvement journey.

Over the last two years, Wokingham has made significant strides in improving its work in this area. A key milestone in this journey was the publication of a new and revised Quality Assurance Framework in November 2019. That document set out a lot of our initial thinking on the building blocks that we felt were required to achieve a well-functioning and effective framework, as well as the overarching principals that we felt should guide us - such as keeping the voice of the child at the centre of everything we do, and prioritising opportunities for staff collaboration and joint-ownership wherever possible. Above all, it clearly stated our ambitions to produce better quality information about our practice; to improve the timeliness of our response to that information; and to target our interventions as effectively as possible in order to improve outcomes for children.

Whilst those objectives and principals remain very much the same, much of our work has now moved on - particularly in terms of the methodologies and infrastructure that we now utilise. So too has our understanding and awareness of what makes a good framework, which has in part been supported by our participation in peer-support schemes with other local authorities, as well as via our active involvement in our regional improvement partnership - the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP). This refreshed version of the Framework therefore provides a timely update on the progress we have made so far in realising those key aims and objectives, as well as also our ongoing plans and ambitions for the future.

The document has been written in an all-encompassing manner, with the intention that it will act as a reference point for anyone interested in the specifics of how our framework works. Should you have any questions or feedback, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the QA team via [impactandinspectionteam@wokingham.gov.uk](mailto:impactandinspectionteam@wokingham.gov.uk)

Kind regards,

**Rachel Oakley**

Assistant Director, Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Standards

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# Introduction

This document provides an overview of Wokingham's current Children's Services Quality Assurance Framework. It is designed as reference point for anyone (whether staff, partner agency or service-user) who is interested in how our framework works, what it consists of, and how it is governed.

**Chapter 1** introduces our QA model, describing the cycle of work that it entails. This includes details of how we measure and analyse our performance, how we seek to make changes to support improvements across our Service, and finally how we evaluate the impact this has had and re-start the process.

**Chapter 2** provides more detail on the specific types of QA work that we undertake, and the sources of information we draw upon to understand and evaluate our practice. This section provides in depth explanations of our audit work, how we source and analyse different types of data, and how we utilise feedback from children and staff.

**Chapter 3** focuses on our governance arrangements, providing a brief overview of how our QA work is scrutinised and challenged to ensure it can be as effective, targeted and efficient as possible. It provides details of the 6 core QA principals that guide everything we do, and also describes the roles and responsibilities across the system, including an explanation of how our QA Operational Group and QA Board operate.

Should you have any questions or comments about the content included within this document, please do not hesitate to contact [impactandinspectionteam@wokingham.gov.uk](mailto:impactandinspectionteam@wokingham.gov.uk).



It is important to note that the QA cycle may not always progress in a linear fashion, in that it is likely to shift as new priorities and sources of information emerge.

The remainder of this Chapter provides more details on the cycle and an explanation of its four key components.

## Setting Standards

An integral component of any system of quality assurance is to have a clear and accessible framework of practice standards or expectations. Not only do such standards promote consistency and a shared understanding of what good practice looks like, for QA purposes they also allow performance to be measured in an objective and consistent way at regular intervals.

Wokingham's Children Services Practice Standards have been carefully developed with these objectives in mind, by providing a comprehensive and detailed overview of what is expected of practitioners across different teams, specialisms and areas of practice. The document has been shaped by input from across our Service, and is constantly evolving as our ways of working change - whether that be in light of any shifts in our statutory obligations, or as our practice is informed by latest best practice examples, case reviews or research.

Importantly, our Practice Standards are also accompanied by a Signs of Safety Practitioner's Guide, which provides a much more detailed reference point for staff seeking to understand how our work should be informed by our practice model.

Along with a variety of other supporting materials - such as our Supervision Policy - these documents provide the core standards for our QA work, and have been used to design various QA materials - most notably our Core Audit Tool. In the interests of transparency, these documents are made available to all staff via our online procedure manual<sup>1</sup>, and are subjected to regular review.

## Monitoring our performance

We gather data on our performance via a busy and continuous programme of QA activity throughout the year. Detail on each component of this activity is set out in more detail in [Chapter 2- How do we evaluate our performance?](#) However, a brief overview of the types of work we undertake is as follows:

- **Listening to children and families** - this is undertaken via routine questionnaires, and by taking the opportunity to talk to children and families about their experiences wherever possible, including as part of our Core Audit process.

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<sup>1</sup> For copies of latest local policies and procedures, including our current Practice Standards and Signs of Safety Practitioners Guide, please see Wokingham's [Tri.X Practice Guidance Library](#)

- **Listening to staff** - this is achieved predominantly via annual surveys and staff engagement events, but is also facilitated by ensuring an inclusive approach to QA, which encourages feedback from colleagues wherever possible, from all levels of the Service.
- **Audit work** - this entails a regular programme of both Core and Themed Audits, with the former providing regular checks on all key aspects of our practice, and the latter providing the opportunity to investigate particular issues in more detail.
- **Practice Week** - this is our bi-annual learning event for staff, which provides opportunities to observe, audit and reflect upon our performance in a particular area of practice. Crucially, it allows staff from across Social Care and Early Help to consider a theme that is of universal relevance, in order to promote learning across the organisation.
- **Performance Data** - key performance data is collated on a variety of issues and practice elements on a regular basis - such as visits and supervisions completed. Once collated this is then distributed to management on a weekly basis to enable continuous scrutiny of our performance. It is also discussed in more detail at a monthly Performance Surgery.
- **“QAST” input** - feedback via quarterly and annual reports from our Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Team, which highlight the quality assurance function of the IRO service, Child Protection Conferences, Complaints and Allegations processes.
- **External Challenge** - this can include participation in peer-challenge work; responding to the work of our Safeguarding Children Partnership (including multi-agency audits, Safeguarding Practice Reviews, and the Independent Scrutiny and Impact Group); as well as developing responses to Ofsted inspections - all of which help shape our priorities across the QA programme

## Analysing and tracking the data

Given the significant time and effort that our staff invest in our programme of QA activity, it is essential that we conduct the analysis of the data that it generates in a timely and robust fashion. Although the specifics of how we go about this task will inevitably depend on the type of QA activity in hand, the key question of *“are children better off as a consequence of our work”* will always be at the heart of our analysis.

Once data is analysed, the findings from our QA Activity are recorded and tracked centrally as part of a **QA Learning Log**. The Learning Log is maintained by the QA Officer, but is monitored and discussed as a standing item at QA Operational Group Meetings (see [Chapter 3](#) on Governance for more details). The log provides a record of the issues that QA activities have identified, and then where appropriate allocates a lead member of staff, usually a Service Manager, with responsibility for developing an action plan in response.

Tracking our findings and proposed actions in this way allows us to:

- Ensure that any proposals or remedial actions are seen through to completion, with clear accountability for those responsible for taking them forward.
- Review our findings and actions in the context of previous QA work.
- Set clear timescales to return to, and evaluate any progress made.



## Making changes to our standards and processes

QA work can lead to variety of responses of varying scales but will very often see us making adjustments to our practices, our policies and our training offer. These changes are recorded clearly within our reports, and (as mentioned above) are tracked and monitored thereafter via the QA Learning Log.

In the interests of transparency and inclusivity, this output is regularly communicated to staff via a quarterly communication - the **QA Bulletin**. The bulletin is distributed to all Social Care and Early Help Staff, providing a concise and accessible overview of our latest QA work, what it found and what we plan to do in response. The Bulletin also emphasises opportunities for staff to submit feedback, get involved and shape the QA agenda.

## Evaluating our impact and repeating the cycle

Having undertaken this series of work, it is then crucial that we evaluate the impact of our response. We do this firstly by tracking the completion of proposed actions, to ensure first and foremost that our responses are seen through to completion in a timely and effective way. This could be the delivery of new training, the re-writing of a practice standard or a policy, or various other structural adjustments that create changes in our Service's way of doing things. The second part of this process is to then return to the issue in the future, to evaluate whether our efforts have made any difference to the lives of children. This is usually achieved by setting a date in the diary for a further audit, or a commitment to review progress via a separate method - such as Signs of Safety Scorecard data, or a bespoke update report being presented to the QA Board (see [Chapter 3](#) on Governance for more details). By returning to the issue, we are able to identify whether any learning identified previously has been embedded and whether this is making a difference to the work we do with children.

The following measures are some of the guidelines we use to help us understand if what we are doing is making a difference and whether the outcomes for children are improving:

<b>Areas of Impact:</b>	Timely intervention informed by child's views
	Evidence of understanding and analysis of the child's lived experience
<b>Evidence of Impact:</b>	Timely analytical assessments with the child at the heart
	Direct work tools inform evidence based practice
	Plans are SMART, reviewed timely and enable change
<b>Evidence of Outcomes:</b>	Child's lived experience is understood
	We know from what children and families tell us that we have made a positive difference

Having undertaken this process of evaluation, we are then in a process to “repeat the cycle” in a well-informed and targeted manner, using the QA tools that are at our disposal to examine new and existing areas of concern.

## Chapter 2: How do we evaluate our performance?

As noted in Chapter 1, we gather data on our performance via a busy and continuous programme of QA activity which runs throughout the year, and draws on a number of different sources. **Diagram 2 - How do we know?** provides an overview of some of the principal methods we use. This chapter then provides a more detailed look at each in turn.



**Diagram 2: How do we know?**

## Listening to Children and Families

Our aim at Wokingham is to seek feedback in a consistent way that engages children and their families meaningfully. It is our ambition to make the collection of this feedback an integral part of all of our quality assurance activity, and to develop systems which can collate it in one place. To this end, we use a variety of tools and mediums in which to secure feedback from families, including through questionnaires and conversations, as well as more in-depth approaches such as appreciative inquiry. Some key examples of our work in this area include:

- **Audits:** we have made seeking feedback from families a routine aspect of our auditing process. Notably, our Core Audit Tool has a dedicated section on family feedback, which instructs the auditor to contact at least one parent or carer (where it is appropriate and possible to do so) in order to obtain their views on our work with them. In addition, many Themed Audits take the opportunity to consult with children and families when it is felt opportune to do so. A good example of this was the approach we took to auditing our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This work was organised alongside a Voice of the Child exercise, which saw 64 interviews completed with children and young people. These findings were used to shape our overall analysis and subsequent response to the audit.
- **Performance Data:** our Performance Team track and collate various data streams that are relevant to capturing the child's voice - such as the average rating provided by children in relation to Early Help interventions, or whether a child above four years of age has been seen alone. Notably, the attendance of children and young people within Child in Care Reviews and Child Protection Conferences is also recorded and then included as part of monthly data reports. Whilst not a recording of the child's voice itself, this provides us with a good indication of the extent to which children and young people are being represented in key meetings and forums.
- **Everyday practice:** Various parts of our Social Care and Early service seek to capture feedback as part of their day-to-day interaction with children and families. A good example of this is within our Early Help Service, where workers complete feedback forms with families during their final session. This feedback provides part of the reflective review of where the family were when our work with them started, and what they are doing now as a result of our Early Help input.
- **Complaints:** Reports on complaints are produced on a quarterly and annual basis, which collate the complaints we have received from families, and draw out key themes. Analysis of complaints focuses on understanding how disputes or grievances have come about, and whether they indicate that changes are needed to wider working practices. This work provides an important link to the voice of the service-user, and is a useful barometer for our overall performance.
- **Compliments:** the compliments we receive from children and families, as well from our multi-agency partners, are recorded and summarised in annual reports. The compliments

we receive often provide a rich source of information about what families and partners have found helpful and helps to provide assurance about what is working well. Where these compliments point towards instances of best practice, efforts are also made to distribute these amongst teams, or to signpost them in other communications.

- **Children in Care Council (CICC):** we are fortunate to have an active and engaged CICC Council, known as 'Your Second Voice' which meets on a monthly basis to consider issues that are currently important to children and young people in care. Members of the CICC raise issues about matters which impact on children in care and with the assistance of the Children's Rights Officer feed their views into the Corporate Parenting Board, providing challenge and scrutiny. The CICC also has meetings with the Lead Member for Children Services as well as other senior offices so that there is an opportunity for the council to communicate directly to senior leadership, put forward their views and to ask questions about and the Council's commitments to Children in Care and Care Leavers.
- **The Wokingham Pledge and Survey:** the Wokingham Pledge is a document setting out our key commitments and promises to Wokingham's Children in Care and Care Leavers. It was written by the CICC in consultation with other Children in Care and Leavers. We conduct an annual survey which asks young people to let the council know how they are doing in respect of the commitments within the Pledge. This feedback is shared with the Corporate Parenting Board and senior officers, and an action plan created to address the areas children in care feel are working less well. The survey results are fed into the QA Operational Group where they are relevant and may shape future QA work.
- **Advocacy:** Wokingham has a dedicated Children's Advocate, who works with Children in Care and Care Leavers, children and young people over the age of 5 who have a Child Protection Plan and any child or young person who wishes to make a complaint or needs help with a children's rights issue. The advocate facilitates the CICC and other participation events throughout the year which are designed to create opportunities to hear from a wider group of children in care who may not attend the CICC. The Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Team has a well embedded quality assurance function and provides quarterly and annual reports ([see below](#)), which are shared with the Service and fed into QA Operational Group meetings.

With such a variety of sources of feedback available to us, the QA Operational Group plays a pivotal role in helping to collate this information, and in identifying and communicating any cross-cutting themes.

## Listening to staff

A crucial element of Quality Assurance is to obtain the views of staff on a regular basis and in a meaningful way. Ensuring that staff have the opportunity to share their views firstly improves our understanding of the challenges and opportunities that our Service is facing, and subsequently grounds any actions that we take in the realities of frontline practice. Secondly, making sure that

staff are consulted on, and have opportunities to shape our QA work also promotes joint-ownership of the framework, and thus promotes buy-in and take-up when we seek to take forward any changes to our ways of working.

To this end, we will continue to seek feedback from practitioners via a range of methods, and also commit to communicating with staff at all levels of the Service regularly on our latest priorities and initiatives.

Some examples of our work in this area include:

- **The Annual LGA Social Work Health check** this survey allows us to learn specifically about the experiences of those working within Children's Social Care.
- **The Wokingham Borough Council annual staff survey:** we administer an all staff survey annually during the months of December January. This seeks to understand the experiences of all staff across the Directorate, and is designed to help the Children's Services Leadership Team understand staff ideas on where things are working well and where things can be changed or improved. Whilst the focus of the survey is broader than just Social Care and Early Help, relevant findings are fed into our QA Operational Group.
- **Core Audits:** our Core Audit process is collaborative in nature, in that the auditor must meet with the allocated worker and discuss the case with them in detail before finalising their report. The outcome and any resulting actions from Core Audits are also communicated to allocated workers and their supervisors promptly and clearly, to ensure the process and our thinking behind the grading is understood.
- **The Principal Social Worker:** our Principal Social Worker conducts regular engagement with staff from across Social Care and Early Hep, which provides a firm link of communication between senior management and frontline practice. This engagement includes leading on the delivery of shared learning events during Practice Week, as well as conducting regular feedback sessions with particular groups - such as ASYE social workers. This wide-ranging work is also collated and summarised in a monthly PSW Newsletter, further strengthening communication with staff. The Principal Social Worker provides regular input and expertise into our QA processes as a member of the QA Operational Groups, but also as chair of the Core Audit Moderation Panel.
- **The QA Bulletin:** this bulletin is a new communication that is distributed to all Social Work and Early Help staff on a quarterly basis. The communication provides an overview of current and future QA work, including links to easy-to-read reports and summaries. The bulletin also invites staff to put forward comments and ideas for future projects. One of the primary aims of the bulletin is to ensure that those who contribute to QA work during the year are given updates on any subsequent analysis and action plans that are taken forward.

## Performance Data

The performance cycle plays an integral part in the Quality Assurance framework, both in terms of identifying areas where focus may be necessary, as well as illustrating the effects of any action taken on previously identified areas of concern.

The Performance Team undertake the running of management information packs on a weekly basis and disseminates this information to team managers. A weekly report suite covering the broader scope of all social work teams is also made available to Team and Service Managers. This enables managers and practitioners to identify data recording gaps and areas where timescales may be in jeopardy, and also allows for more effective worker supervision.

Following this, monthly performance information is produced - the quality of which is directly impacted by the actions managers take with regard to their understanding of management information - which aims to highlight how the service is performing across a broad spectrum of key performance indicators. Alongside this, Team Managers are provided with a priority theme which will be the focus of that month's discussion at the Performance Surgery.

The Performance Surgery is chaired by the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help and is attended by all Team and Service Managers as well as representatives covering performance and quality assurance. The expected action on Team Managers is that they understand on a case-by-case basis the reasons behind their team's performance with regards to the chosen theme, and come prepared to highlight strengths and challenges to the group.

Where contrasting trends are observed between the Social Work Teams, the merits of their different approaches can be explored and inconsistencies of practice can be highlighted. Where consistent trends across the teams are observed, further analysis of the data can be undertaken to test any hypotheses as to the underlying causes. The Quality Assurance Operational Group will also seek to fully understand the factors at play if further analysis of the data proves inconclusive and this may lead to an audit being undertaken. An example might be where the performance information has shown a rise in re-referrals, and an audit on this topic is undertaken to identify any practice issues for individual staff or teams.

Performance information is also used to invite overview and scrutiny. Quarterly reports are provided to Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny, the Corporate Parenting Board, Executive Members and the Berkshire West Safeguarding Partnership Independent Scrutiny Group.

## The Signs of Safety Scorecard

In addition to the information collated by the Performance Team, further information by way of a 'score card' is collected by our Signs of Safety Team. This data measures compliance with core elements of our Signs of Safety Practice Framework and helps to inform the extent to which the Practice Framework is being used and embedded across our service.



Score card data is currently collated annually<sup>2</sup> via structured interviews with practitioners from the Ambleside, Brambles and Conifers Children Social Care teams, the Children with Disability Service and the Integrated Early Help Service. The majority of the forms and documents used in Here4You and the Family Placement Team have not yet been fully aligned to the Signs of Safety practice framework and further work is needed to develop a score card format that could be used to track implementation progress in these teams. The score card counts whether any of the ten key practice elements below are present on a case file. It does not take the quality of these pieces of work into consideration.

Over time the areas on the scorecard have been expanded. The ten areas currently measured are:

- The use of **group supervision**
- **Mapping** with children and the use of the Signs of Safety children's tools
- Developing a clear **timeline / trajectory** as a key component of the child's plan
- Engaging the **naturally connected network** of the child
- The **number of connected people** in the informed network
- Developing an **explanation for the child** (usually using Words and Pictures)
- Developing the **child's version of the Safety Plan**
- Involving the naturally connected network in **monitoring progress of the Safety Plan**
- Identifying and using a **safety object** for children aged 4 to 12
- Identifying a **safety / support person** from the naturally connected network for each child

In addition to the above, feedback is sought from practitioners with regards to their successes and barriers in applying the Signs of Safety practice framework and practitioners are asked for their suggestions and ideas to enhance the use of Signs of Safety and embed this further in practice.

## Audit work

Audit work makes up a substantial part of our QA programme, offering unparalleled insight into the strengths and weaknesses of our practice and its impact on children and families. In acknowledgment of this, we have committed to ensuring that at least 10% of our total case load<sup>3</sup> is audited per year. To ensure that this is met, there is an expectation that all Social Workers will have at least one of their cases audited collaboratively per year.

The audits that we undertake can be categorised into three types: **Core**, **Themed** or **Multi-Agency**. More details are set out below to explain what each consists of.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of this Framework being published, a Mosaic report was in the process of being developed to allow more regular collation and tracking of some of this data.

<sup>3</sup> This figure is estimated by tracking the number of cases that are open to us each calendar month, and then calculating a running twelve monthly average. This estimation of caseload is therefore continuously revised, which ensures we have an accurate understanding of demand on the service, and in turn a sufficient number of audits being conducted to assure ourselves of the quality of our practice.



## Core Audits

A core audit programme is designed to provide a broad focus on standards and compliance, as well as the quality of social work practice and its impact on the child. At Wokingham, we use these audits to take stock of our performance across all areas of social work intervention at regular intervals. They focus on the journey and experience of the child through services, as well as the rationale for decisions being made on their behalf. They allow us to identify if the help that has been offered is planned, purposeful and undertaken in a timely manner.

Crucially, these audits go beyond the marking of compliance, and seek to generate qualitative data about our practice, its impact on the child and the family, and how the system and organisation supports or impedes good practice. By conducting them regularly, we are also able to assess and evaluate the trajectory of our performance throughout the year in an objective manner.

Following a significant period of consultation, our Core Audit Tool was refreshed and reissued for use in November 2020. The new design focuses on providing clearer guidance notes on our practice standards and expectations, to assist auditors in taking a consistent and objective approach. Notably, the tool has also been broken down into sections of practice (e.g. Assessment and Planning, Supervision, Voice of the Child) and asks the auditor to provide individual gradings for each of these. This process helps us to improve our understanding of where our strengths and weaknesses lie as a Service. Importantly, the tool maintains the collaborative style of auditing that we have established here at Wokingham. This involves the social worker and auditor conducting a live audit of the case, which is then followed up by the auditor contacting the family to find out their experience of the help being offered.

Our latest Core Audit Tool can be seen in full via our Tri.x Procedure Manual [here](#).

We undertake core audits on a quarterly basis, with each audit period scheduled and communicated as part of our Quality Assurance Forward Plan. Each batch consists of approximately 30 cases, meaning we will aim to audit in the region of 120 Core Audits per year.

Cases are selected by the Performance Lead within the Impact and Intelligence Service, and care is taken to ensure that the samples provided offer an accurate reflection of our overall case load as a Service - with an appropriate balance of teams and types of case included. Systems are also put in place to ensure that a good mix of cases and workers are examined throughout the year.

Our Auditor Group (those selected to undertake the audits) evolves in light of current pressures and availability across the Service, but consist primarily of Service Managers, Team Managers, Assistant Team Managers, Independent Reviewing Officers, Practice Consultants and the Principal Social Worker.

Once core audits are completed, they are sent to the allocated worker and the relevant manager, so that they can work on any identified actions as soon as possible.

The audits are then checked for quality and consistency by a Moderation Panel (see box below).

### **The Moderation Panel**

Following each audit period, all Core Audits are moderated by a Moderation Panel. This panel is made up of our Principal Social Worker and two Practice Consultants.

The panel seeks to:

- Review the consistency of gradings.
- Draw out any practice themes from cases.
- Identify any learning for auditors.
- Review suggested actions.

Should the Moderation Panel disagree with the findings of the auditor, this will be recorded on the final version of the audit document. More details on this process are available under [Appendix A - Moderation Panel Terms of Reference](#)

Once moderated, the audit outcome is uploaded to the child's file with the final judgement, the auditor's comments and the actions clearly recorded. Reports are then run periodically to examine whether actions have been acknowledged and followed up in a timely manner.

### **Themed Audits**

Themed Audits are scheduled throughout the year to compliment and expand upon our Core Audit work programme. They do this by providing opportunities to explore a particular area of our practice or Service in more detail. The focus of a themed audit may be decided upon in response to a trend that has been identified via performance data, or can often be chosen to explore concerns that have been highlighted via other audit work. They also provide us with a useful opportunity to investigate areas of practice that have been highlighted to us as potential weaknesses by external sources - such as Ofsted inspections or Peer Challenge exercises. To ensure that the process is transparent, whenever a themed audit is commissioned we always ensure that the rationale for the focus is clearly communicated to those taking part, as well as explained in full the final audit report.

In terms of scale, themed Audits can incorporate a dip sample approach, whereby a small batch of cases (typically 10-15) are looked at. This is often used as a way of checking back on our progress in a particular area in a light touch manner. However, when warranted, themed audits can also entail more substantial pieces of work being commissioned on a similar scale to a Core Audit i.e. 30 cases.

Before any themed audit is started, the Quality Assurance Operational Group (with oversight and direction from the Quality Assurance Board) will clarify the nature of the issue to be explored, as well as the methodology and approach that will be employed - including the time frame and who will undertake the work. Very often this process will involve a bespoke audit tool being created, to ensure that the auditor explores the questions and issues that we are most interested in.

Themed Audits are typically undertaken by one individual auditor, who is usually external to Wokingham Borough Council. An advantage of this is that an external auditor is more likely to take an objective and unbiased approach when looking at cases, due to them having no prior relationship or knowledge of the workers in question, nor the children or families involved.

## Multi-Agency Audits

Thematic audits are also undertaken by our safeguarding partnership – the Berkshire West Safeguarding Partnership (BWSCP). These are reported back to the Independent Scrutiny and Impact Group (ISIG), which considers how effectively safeguarding partnership arrangements are working for children and families, as well as for practitioners.

The focus of the ISG is:

- Effective analysis of performance information
- Multi-professional audit or reflective learning discussions
- Understanding the lived experience of local children and young people
- Understanding the frontline experience, strengths and challenges of frontline staff and volunteers.

More details are available here: <https://www.berkshirewestsafeguardingchildrenpartnership.org.uk/scp>

## Practice Week

Taking place once every 6 months, Practice Weeks are a unique and highly valued aspect of our Quality Assurance Framework. They entail a particular aspect of our practice being placed under the spotlight for a week, via a series of QA and learning activities. They not only allow us to explore a particular theme of practice in much greater detail than usual, but more importantly they provide us with an opportunity to come together as a Service, in order to promote shared learning and self-reflection. With this in mind, the theme chosen is always of universal relevance to all teams across Children's Social Care and Early Help.

The programme of each Practice Week will vary according to the theme in question, but they typically consist of the following components:

**Live Learning Sessions:** These sessions are organised so staff can listen to an appreciative enquiry interview, which are designed to bring out interesting examples of case learning. The sessions usually entail one or two workers presenting the background of a pre-selected case, before one of our Practice Consultants undertakes an appreciative enquiry interview to investigate the case further, with a focus on the theme for the week. The intention is to use this questioning style to look at case successes and breakthroughs, but also any challenges faced, or thoughts on retrospective learning. House rules are usually in place to limit questions and comments during the interview itself, so as to encourage participants to self-reflect, without feeling any pressure to contribute.

**Observations:** Senior leaders and managers are usually asked to take part in a series of practice observations, intended to place them at the “coal face” of our service for the week. What exactly is observed will vary depending on the theme of the week, but the schedule will typically involve senior staff sitting in on meetings that involve practitioners interacting with families or partner agencies - such as CIN Meetings, Core Group Meetings, or Social Worker Visits. Observations are always collaborative, in that the observer is asked to discuss the meeting with both the social worker and the family involved afterwards. Observations therefore not only provide a unique opportunity for senior staff to better understand the challenges that front line practitioners are

currently facing, but also provide an invaluable chance to collect feedback from the families and children involved.

**Learning materials:** In order to encourage colleagues to explore the theme of the Practice Week in more detail in their own time, our Policy Team often put together a learning resource. This will typically signpost readers to relevant articles from learning resources such as Community Care Inform; case studies from other local authorities or safeguarding partnerships; examples of relevant learning from our own audit reports; relevant Signs of Safety resources or practice tools; and links to training opportunities. The resource is usually circulated to all Social Care and Early Help staff at the start of the week.

**Audits:** Should there be capacity within the audit programme, the week may also include a series of collaborative audits that relate to the theme for the week. These are conducted in a similar way to our usual themed audits (see above) but are usually conducted with internal auditors.

## Reports from the Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Team

The Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Team (known as QAST) produce several reports throughout the year, drawing on the independence and expertise of our team of Independent Reviewing Officers, Child Protection Chairs, Children's Advocate, Local Authority Designated Officer and Complaints Manager. These reports focus on the following:

- Quantitative and qualitative data in relation to all the functions which sit within QAST, which provides an overview of our activity and performance over time against national and regional benchmarks.
- How plans for children (whether that be Child Protection Plans or plans for Children in Care) are operating in practice, identifying possible deficits and areas for improvement.
- The participation of children, parents, carers and agency partners in Child in Care Reviews and Child Protection Conferences.
- The voice of the child and the views of parents, drawing in particular on issues brought to the attention of the Children's Advocate.
- Informal challenges and formal disputes from the IRO service and Child Protection Chairs, highlighting a range of themes which are impacting on plans progressing and which can in turn inform learning across the Service.
- Messages and themes arising from complaints and compliments - both of which can be seen as a barometer of the health of the organisation and how it is progressing. Analysis of complaints focuses on understanding how disputes or grievances have come about, and whether they indicate that changes are needed to wider working practices. Equally, collating and understanding the source of compliments allows the Service to learn from positive feedback, by highlighting instances of good practice and disseminating them to wider colleagues.

The QAST Service Manager also considers any cross-cutting themes from these different areas. For example, there are often parallels that can be drawn between IRO/Chair challenges and

complaints, or between themes from advocacy and allegations reports. When cross-referenced these can help determine how best to target improvements. In addition to sharing the learning from these reports within Children's Services, highlight reports are also provided to the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership Independent Scrutiny group and other committees within the council.

## **Learning and Development**

In line with the Workforce Development Strategy 2021-24, Wokingham is committed to developing and maintaining a professionally qualified, highly skilled, motivated, diverse and integrated workforce. To this end, our Learning and Development (L&D) service delivers a range of training programmes for Children and Adult Services, working to our strategic goals and aligning ourselves to the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS), Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and Local Government standards, whilst also identifying opportunities to help develop the skills and knowledge of staff to achieve best practice and personal progression.

As well as being aligned to the KSS and Professional Capabilities Framework, our L&D offer is responsive to learning needs that are identified via QA activities, particularly audits. The QA process informs the learning cycle by identifying knowledge gaps and feeding this information into a Training Record which is maintained by the L&D Lead. This enables us to react quickly to any new and emerging workforce learning needs.

The overarching L&D programme is also a regular standing item on the QA Operational Group agenda. This ensures that we capture gaps in knowledge and consider how we can change practice through learning and development opportunities. The item also provides an opportunity to evaluate all learning that has been undertaken since the last meeting of the Operational Group, and to consider impact this may have had on service delivery and practice – and whether this in turn is improving outcomes for children and young people.

## **External Challenge**

### **The Self-Evaluation**

As part of our Quality Assurance Framework we undertake a comprehensive annual self-evaluation of Social Care and Early Help services, which is subject to a mid-year review.

The self-evaluation process comprises three stages:

- Collection of evidence to support the evaluation of our services;
- Reflection by operational managers and leadership on the presented evidence alongside knowledge about current work programmes, resulting in a considered evaluation of areas of good performance and areas for improvement; and
- Identification of recommended actions based on the self-evaluation to address the areas identified for improvement.

The self-evaluation follows a prescriptive framework designed to robustly assess all areas of service delivery, focusing on the impact of services on the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

Whilst the self-evaluation is subject to formal mid-year review, the process is designed to be a dynamic one, with an improvement plan developed from the findings which is under constant review in response to evidence gathered or received during the year.

A SMART improvement plan is co-produced with leadership and Service Managers, setting out the priorities and timescales.

The Self-Evaluation is then used as the basis for the Annual Conversation that we undertake with Ofsted.

There is also quality assurance activity which relates to the monitoring and progress on any action plans arising from Ofsted inspections and the DfE Partners in Practice initiative.

### Regional partnerships

Wokingham is part of the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP), a membership group of all single/upper-tier local authorities in the South East that aims to:

- improve outcomes for children and young people across the South East
- establish a culture of honest and constructive dialogue and challenge within and between authorities
- demonstrate the capacity and capability of the sector to achieve a coherent and consistent self-improving system

As part of this we are regularly involved in peer-review exercises and challenges, and we also play an active role in the programme's ***Developing Regional Quality Assurance Capacity Project***. This project brings together QA leads from across the region to support joint working with regard to improving quality assurance capacity and capability.

## Supervision and Management Oversight

Supervision and management oversight are fundamental mechanisms for understanding and quality assuring practice and provides us with an ongoing source of QA information. Our Practice Standards set out clear expectations around the frequency and quality of supervision that our practitioners should receive - both in terms of individual, group and informal supervision processes - which have recently been codified into a stand-alone Supervision Policy.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of supervision is also reflected in our QA Framework itself. For example, our Core Audit Tool has a section devoted to the issue, allowing us to track whether supervisions are taking

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<sup>4</sup> For the latest version of our Supervision Policy, please see here:

<https://proceduresonline.com/trixcms1/wokinghamcs/doc-library/#collapse9>

place and being recorded at the required frequency, as well as gain a sense of the quality of sessions in terms of offering constructive challenge and driving progression in cases.

We have also undertaken themed audits on the subject of supervision, which have encouraged supervisors to reflect on their best examples of conducting supervision, and to consider how it could be improved.

# Chapter 3: Governance

Mechanisms for ensuring effective oversight and scrutiny are crucial elements of any QA Framework, and are components that we have considered carefully at Wokingham. When working well, governance of QA creates appropriate challenge and ownership across an organisation, helping to ensure that the overall framework remains responsive, targeted and efficient. This chapter provides an overview of the key principles that our Framework is required to adhere to, the bodies that have been created to lead on and scrutinise QA work, and finally detail on the roles and responsibilities that the Framework sets out across our organisation.

## Core principals

We have also established 6 core principals for QA at Wokingham. The QA Framework has been designed with these principals in mind, and they now inform how our QA work is scrutinised and challenged. These are as follows:

### **1) Incorporating the Voice of the Child**

Keeping children and young people at the centre of everything we do, by seeking their views and by ensuring that their feedback informs our approach.

### **2) Responding to feedback**

Being open and receptive to the views of those we work with - including families, our staff, and our partner agencies.

### **3) Promoting continual learning**

Ensuring a commitment to a continuous “QA loop”, whereby we actively support opportunities to embed good practice, but also monitor and evaluate the impact that our response has had on children.

### **4) Ensuring an inclusive approach**

Developing a framework which is understood and owned by everyone at all levels in children’s services, with regular opportunities for staff to be involved and shape the agenda.

### **5) Offering constructive challenge**

Creating a culture of “high support, high challenge”, whereby our practice expectations are clear, and our performance scrutinised routinely, but where practitioners are also given the space and tools to reflect and learn.

### **6) Working in unison with our practice framework**

Utilising our programme to both support and challenge our Signs of Safety model – ensuring that the approach is embedded, but also providing a healthy level of scrutiny and questioning of the model, to ensure it makes a difference to the work we do with children.



## Roles and Responsibilities

We have worked to ensure that there are clear QA roles and responsibilities across our organisation, from senior managers through to front line practitioners and partners. For a full overview of these responsibilities, see [Appendix B - Who does what in QA?](#)

## Scrutinising our QA output: The Quality Assurance Board

The Quality Assurance Board meets quarterly to provide oversight of all QA processes across Social Care and Early Help. Members scrutinise the QA output from the quarter, and consider whether it is sufficiently driving improvements across our service, and thus improving outcomes for children and young people.

The Quality Assurance Board consists of the following members of staff:

- Director of Children's Services (Chair)
- Assistant Director for Social Care and Early Help
- Assistant Director for Quality Assurance and Safeguarding,
- Service Manager for Safeguarding
- Service Manager for Corporate Parenting
- Service Manager for Children with Disabilities and Early Help
- Service Manager for Quality Assurance and Safeguarding
- Service Manager for Intelligence and Impact
- Principal Social Worker
- Practice Framework Project Manager
- Quality Assurance Officer
- A representative from Commissioning
- A representative from the Continual Improvement Project

## Delivering the QA Programme: The Quality Assurance Operational Group

The Quality Assurance Operational Group meets monthly to plan and implement our QA activity. Meetings of the group provide a forum for those working in the day-to-day workings of QA to discuss progress in implementing audits and other activities, to consider latest operational challenges, and to plan accordingly for our future schedule of work.

More specifically, the group must:

- **Co-ordinate and plan themed audit activity:** including the development of audit tools, the drafting of audit scoping documents and the commissioning of external auditors.

- **Co-ordinate and plan Core Audit activity;** including making revisions to our Core Audit Tool, monitoring the quality of internal auditing (via the Moderation Panel),
- **Co-ordinate and plan Practice Week;** including the deciding of themes, and developing schedules of learning activities.
- **Produce clear and accessible QA Reports;** these reports should include a clear explanation for the rationale for our work, the methodology used, the key findings, and a summary of the actions we will take in response.
- **Maintain and monitor a QA learning log;** in particular, the group considers how actions from recent reports have progressed, the impact they have had, and whether further work is required to evaluate our progress.
- **Maintain and monitor a QA Forward plan;** ensuring sufficient and targeted scrutiny of our practice throughout the year.
- **Ensure that learning needs are discussed and communicated to key partners:** including Service Managers and the Principal Social Worker, but also leads in Learning and Development, the Practice Framework Project and Performance.
- **Co-ordinate communication of QA activities to staff:** including the dissemination of key audit findings, learning opportunities and actions plans to frontline staff via a quarterly QA communication, to ensure staff can clearly see the impact of audits and other QA activity that they support.
- **Provide a quarterly report of recent QA activity to the QA Board;** including key themes and learning which may impact on service delivery to children and young people.

The Quality Assurance Operational Group consists of the following members of staff:

- Assistant Director for Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Standards
- Service Manager for Quality Assurance and Safeguarding
- Service Manager for Impact and Intelligence
- Service Manager for Safeguarding
- Service Manager for Corporate Parenting
- Service Manager for Children with Disabilities and Early Help
- The Principal Social Worker
- The Complaints Officer
- The Signs of Safety Project Manager
- The Learning and Development Lead
- The Quality Assurance Officer
- The Policy Officer

Other operational staff or Practice Consultants may be co-opted as required.

## Core activities and forward planning

A detailed timeframe for all QA activity is set out in the QA Forward Plan, a document which is maintained by the QA Operational Group and is constantly evolving. However, an overview of our core QA activities and the frequency at which they are required to happen is as follows:



# Appendix

## Appendix A: Moderation Panel Terms of Reference

### Membership:

The Moderation Panel will consist of the Principal Social Worker and two Practice Consultants. Further senior colleagues or experienced practitioners (such as Assistant Directors, Service Managers or Independent Reviewing Officers) may be co-opted onto the panel to provide additional support as required. The Panel will need to have at least three moderators available to proceed.

### Frequency:

The Moderation Panel will meet quarterly to consider all core audits submitted within the given audit cycle/period. The meeting will usually be scheduled to follow the close of the Audit Period, so as to minimise the time between when audits are completed and when they are moderated.

### Role of the panel:

The panel will review the completed audit forms and form a judgement on the following aspects:

The Audit grading, considering:

- Whether there is evidence to support the grading provided in each section
- Whether the recommended actions follow on from the auditor's comments in the form
- Whether there is a clear analysis arising from the audit, explaining how the auditor came to their overall grading.

The quality of the audit process, considering:

- Whether any serious concerns or safeguarding issues have been escalated
- Whether there are gaps in the form or sections not completed
- Whether the audit has been undertaken collaboratively with the social worker
- Whether the views of parents/carers were obtained, and if not, whether sufficient reasoning is provided as to why this was not possible.

### Panel Decisions:

The Panel will need to decide if the overall grading provided by the original auditor is accurate, fair and sufficiently evidenced. In instances where the Panel feels that this is not the case, it may choose to adjust the grading. The panel will record the reasons for such a judgement clearly. Any disagreement that arises between individual moderators will also be recorded.

The Panel will also make a judgment on the following:

- whether there are any additional actions required.
- their grading for the quality of the audit;
- whether there are any practice themes that can be identified

### **Recording the Panel's decisions:**

For each audit that is moderated, the Panel will complete a summary sheet outlining their decisions in relation to the above judgements. The Moderation Section of the audit tool will also be completed, so that any adjustments to gradings or actions are recorded on the final audit form.

The auditor will be given feedback on their audit. If any significant changes are made to gradings or actions, feedback will also be offered to the allocated worker and/or Team Manager for the case in question.

Once moderated, the final grading and actions will be uploaded to Mosaic.

### **Additional considerations:**

The moderators will if required, make additional recommended actions with regard to:

- The case
- The quality of the auditor
- Any issues about the audit tool or process which may need to be considered prior to the next audit taking place.

### **Formulating a Core Audit Report:**

In conjunction with the Quality Assurance Officer, a panel member will support the development of a report. This will include a summary of the overall grading's, the themes emerging for practice, the quality of auditing, examples of good practice and areas for improvement. This report will be shared with and scrutinised by the QA Operational Group, before being presented to the QA Board.

## Appendix B: Who does what in the Quality Assurance Cycle?

Who does what in the Quality Assurance Cycle?		
Role	Responsibilities	Further Information
<b>Practitioners</b>	To keep the quality of their work to the highest possible standard, in adherence to WBC Practice Standards.	See <a href="#">WBC Practice Standards</a>
	To keep case files up to date and reflective of the work completed with the child and family.	See <a href="#">Recording Compliance Policy</a> ;
	To be committed to a culture of learning and continuous improvement.	
	To engage with and support QA activities when required, including engagement with collaborative audits and observations.	
<b>Team Managers &amp; Assistant Team Managers</b>	To see that quality standards are met, and to take corrective action where necessary	See <a href="#">WBC Supervision Policy</a> ;
	To use effective supervision to give staff feedback about the quality of their work, and to maintain and improve practice through support, challenge and training & development	
	To review and quality control pieces of work	
	To sign-off work in a timely manner	
	To undertake regular core audits as required	
	To follow-up on actions allocated to their supervisees, where cases within their Team have been audited	See <a href="#">Recording Compliance Policy</a>
	To check that data compliance expectations are adhered to across the team	
	To take responsibility for the validity of performance information	
	To promote the messages coming out of the QA cycle and take responsibility for engaging staff	See Performance Framework
	To hold responsibility for the QA cycle	

Service Managers and Assistant Directors	To report findings of QA activity and associated action plans to the QA Board;	
	To take responsibility for associated action plans following QA activity	
	To develop/improve service plans to take into account learning from QA activity;	
	To agree the messages that are communicated to staff and wider services following QA activity;	
	To undertake regular core audits as required;	
Director of Children’s Services	To chair the QA Board.	
Principal Social Worker	To represent the views of Social Workers to Senior Managers and the QA Operational Group	
	To Chair the Core Audit Moderation Panel	
	To bring research and alternative practice models to the attention of the Service;	
	To promote best practice	
	To link the findings of QA activity to the training offer for Social Work staff	
Training & Development Lead Officer	To promote continuous learning and professional development	
	To embed the learning from QA activity into the training offer available to staff	
Quality Assurance Officer	To maintain the QA Forward Plan	
	To Maintaining the QA Learning Log	
	To lead on the production of QA reports To review the QA Framework annually	
	To lead on the communication of messages from QA activity to staff and wider services;	

<b>Policy Officer</b>	To ensure that Practice Standards and Compliance guidance are up-to-date and relevant;	
	To ensure that all policies held on Tri-X are up-to-date and relevant	
	To ensure that Community Care Inform is promoted and used throughout the service	
<b>Complaints Manager</b>	To collate the data relating to complaints and report on this quarterly and annually.	
	To communicate emerging themes into the QA Operational Group, from both complaints and compliments.	
	To liaise with Team Managers regarding ongoing complaints to promote improvements.	
<b>Moderation Panel</b>	To check the quality of audits undertaken;	
	To feedback issues around audit quality to senior managers;	
	To support ongoing improvements to the Core Audit Tool	
	To summarise key themes from Core Audit activity and feedback to the QA Operational Group.	
<b>Practice Consultants</b>	To promote quality practice and innovation within the prescribed framework.	
	To provide mentoring and coaching to practitioners.	
	To provide practice learning opportunity for students.	
	To undertake reflective supervision.	



<b>Children in Care Council</b>	To provide a voice for Children in Care to tell us about their experiences, and for key themes to be provided to the Corporate Parenting Board and the QA Operational Group.	
<b>Corporate Parenting Board</b>	To be the corporate parent for children in care	
	To receive reports to provide greater understanding about the health education, placement choice and stability for children in care.	
	To provide scrutiny and challenge to the officers if there are deficits in the service to children in care	
	To hold discussions about improvements and development and for this feedback to be fed back to the QA Operational Group.	
<b>Performance Team</b>	To ensure that weekly management information tools are available to Team Managers, Assistant Team Managers and Service Managers	
	To produce monthly performance reports and manage their dissemination	
	To hold overall responsibility for the performance cycle	
	To challenge Team Managers and Assistant Team Managers about data quality	
	To communicate exceptional performance trends to the QA Operational Group	
	To ensure that additional KPIs deemed necessary after QA activity are monitored	
	To feedback on specific KPIs to QA Operational Group following QA activity.	



