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**West Berkshire Quality Assurance Framework**

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**Quality Assurance & Audit Framework**

**Version 2.0**

**WEST BERKSHIRE CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICE**



**QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK**

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**West Berkshire Quality Assurance & Audit Framework**

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**1. Introduction – Principles and Purpose:**

'The only sensible measure of how well the system is performing is the measure of how effectively it is helping children, young people and their families.' (Munro, 2012)

This framework sets out the principles that underpin quality assurance and learning which are informed by the Restorative and Family Safeguarding strengths based approach to practice that has been adopted across West Berkshire Children and Family Service. The overall aim of the framework is to support colleagues across the service to achieve better outcomes for children and to understand what constitutes ‘Good’ social work practice.

The framework reflects the key principles that inform the Children and Family Service’s social work practice in that it is expected that all Quality Assurance activity will be:

* **Child centred**: the focus of quality assurance will be on the experience, progress and outcomes achieved for children who come into contact with our services and in identifying what difference it has made to a child’s life to inform whole service learning;
* **Strengths based**: quality assurance will have a high focus upon strengths whilst identifying where practice can be improved. It will seek to offer high support and high challenge in line with the principles of Restorative Practice;
* **Evidence based**: quality assurance will provide a clear rationale for decisions made when considering practice. Quality assurance must be transparent and fair to those whose practice is being assured;
* **Outcome Focused**: whilst attention will be given to the identification of evidence of processes and procedures being adhered to, the proper focus of quality assurance will remain upon outcomes achieved for the child;
* **Positive**: our approach to quality assurance will seek to inform and encourage improvement and support the development of staff and services;
* **Reflective**: our Quality Assurance framework encourages the use of reflective practice and shared learning;
* **Contribute to the learning of the organisation as a whole**: the learning taken from our quality assurance activity will be shared and used to inform how we develop future practice and procedures across the wider service.

Outcomes for vulnerable children can always be improved upon and no service ever performs perfectly - social care services require a constantly questioning, open and honest questioning approach to ensure their continuing safety and effectiveness.

An effective approach to performance and quality assurance is characterised by four separate but related strands - **practice development, quality assurance, review and challenge and management action**; the relationship between these four factors is captured in the diagram at the end of this introduction:

* **Practice Development** - setting in place those elements which support improved practice and performance;
* **Quality Assurance** -  the elements of the service designed to measure the extent to which the practice development work is being successful, that work is meeting agreed standards and that children are being kept safe within the system;
* **Review and Challenge** - the internal and external processes and arenas which challenge the service to evidence the quality of their work and which form a key part of continual performance improvement;
* **Management Action** - the actions taken to celebrate and share good practice and to embed learning gathered through the quality assurance and review and challenge processes. Ensuring that performance improvement activities are constantly re-evaluated and remain focused upon achieving best outcomes for children.

The document sets out the **quality assurance, review and challenge and management actions** arrangements for the service. It describes the broad strategic approach to quality assurance, identifying the various processes that contribute and how they fit together. It then goes on to describe the various review and challenge functions that impact upon the service that provide the necessary level of scrutiny and inspection that is key to ensuring the service retains a consistent and robust self-awareness. It then describes the sorts of management actions that are required to ensure a timely and robust response to any vulnerability that becomes evident in the service.

Finally, the document sets out the respective roles of different staff groups in the delivery of this strategy.



**2. Practice Development and Quality Assurance**

These are areas of focus designed to check the quality and impact of the practice development drivers and whether performance and outcomes are improving. They are also designed to highlight areas where progress is not being made or not being made in a timely manner and to ensure operational managers are properly sighted on them and can take preventative and/or remedial action as necessary.

In West Berkshire, the QA function is carried out through seven key strands:

1. **Data Analysis** - the provision of data is key to understanding current performance; highlighting areas of weakness and in helping to measure the extent to which remedial activities are effective in improving performance. There are three types of information that are regularly and readily available to operational staff:
	* **Performance Information summarised in the monthly data zone:** this is data that tells the viewer something about how well the service is doing and will ordinarily measure either service outputs or outcomes for children. Many of these are nationally set and reported upon. Statistical neighbour and best performing authorities benchmarking data is available and are used to drive performance in West Berkshire. There is a monthly performance board meeting which is attended by all managers to scrutinise data within the Data Zone after each update;
	* **Activity Data:**  essentially contextual data, this will set out the demands on the service and how they are changing over time. This will allow for an analysis to be made of performance changes in the light of changing demands. Importantly, looking at activity data allows us to understand the journey of the child through our system through the analysis of conversion rates - e.g. how many referrals become assessments, how many Section 47 investigations lead to child protection plans, what's the route of children into the care system etc. There are not necessarily targets attached to this data, but managers need to be very aware whether there are any variations (either over time or between areas or in comparison to other local authorities) that require further exploration; this data is also in the Data Zone. We are also members of the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme that allows us to monitor our trends in relation to other authorities in the region;
	* **Management Information:** this is information primarily aimed at and essential to front line managers charged with the daily running of the service. This is information that enables them to track children through their part of the service and to ensure that the work of their teams is timely and of a good standard. Ordinarily, this data is only helpful to front-line managers - senior managers do not need to see it but do need to be assured it is available and being well-used. There are a range of automated reports set up to go out to team managers on a daily/weekly basis in order to allow them to monitor throughput and activity. There is also ability run reports at any time through the Care Director system.
2. **Case File Audits** - this work is crucial to add some qualitative information to data analysis. Case file audits normally fall into one of four categories:
	* **Monthly full case file learning audits:** the service completes a system of monthly audits, carried out by operational managers across the service. This is a crucial process in ensuring the safety and effectiveness of services to individual children and to pick up any practice themes that need attention. The process is now entirely consistent with the location of responsibility for service improvement with operational teams. The results of these audits are collated, analysed and disseminated back across the service;
	* **Themed Audits:** these audits are commissioned by individual Service areas, the Performance Board Meeting or Children and Families Leadership Team and may be undertaken for a number of reasons; to test the impact of a new change in the service to be assured it is achieving intended outcomes; in response to either emerging concerns about an area of work; to test hypotheses generated through data analysis, or to explore the particular circumstances for a group of children. Themed audits may also be identified and undertaken within individual services, although wherever possible the scope would be shared in the Performance Board Meeting to provide opportunity for others to join the audit or request additional questions;
	* **Dip audits:** Managers will run audits focused on specific service areas, staffing groups or upon specific activities to ensure they are fully sighted on the quality of work in their areas. The Manager completing the Dip Sample would also record these where there are identified actions or identified best practice on specific cases;
	* **Practice observation:** Managers will undertake observations of social workers in frontline practice and provide feedback on areas of strength and areas of development; Staff members will observe their peers as part of their induction or as part of their own learning and development.
	* **Practice Days:** Managers undertake 3 practice days a calendar year. When and where these take place are set according to their learning needs as part of their monthly supervision and annual appraisal process. Managers however also provide feedback to the Service they observed to identify areas of good practice and feed into their learning and service development. Overall learning is collated and shared across the service via the Principal Social Worker and the Performance Board Meeting.

	In addition:
	* **The Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership audit programme:** commissions multi-agency audits and their findings will inevitably impact upon the work of West Berkshire Children and Family Services. West Berkshire Children and Family Services would also be likely to be one of the lead contributors to these audits.
3. **Child Protection Case Conferences and Children in Care Reviews** - these are two crucial arenas to ensure that the planning and reviewing work with some of our most vulnerable children is of sufficiently good quality and that best outcomes for children are being achieved. The Child Protection Conference Chairs and IRO's have a number of key functions in the quality assurance process:
	* As with every member of staff, they need to ensure that their own work is of a good standard, that their planning is SMART and outcome focused and that risk assessments are informed and proportionate;
	* They need to ensure that they operate smoothly and in a timely manner so meetings are held on time and minutes and plans distributed within declared timescales;
	* They have to ensure that children benefit from a plan which takes heed of their voice and is current and proportionate to their assessed needs;
	* Reviews and conferences are multi-agency meetings and provide a good insight into the working of the system beyond that of Children and Family Services and Chairs and IROs are required to report more widely through their management structure into corporate parenting arenas and the BWSCP (Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership). See [**West Berkshire Local Safeguarding Procedures Manual**](http://berks.proceduresonline.com/west_berk/index.html);
	* IROs and CP Chairs complete a Chair’s Report after every CP conference and Child in Care Review as part of their role.
	* The Quality Assurance & Safeguarding Service (QAAS), within which both services sit, has an established and detailed escalation procedure designed to raise awareness of concerns about individual cases with line managers. The starting point is always to seek to resolve those concerns at the lowest possible point in the hierarchy where appropriate, but equally the need to ensure the best outcomes for children will always override any hesitation about escalation;
	* QAAS also produces an annual IRO and child protection report which details the data and trends for the year.
	* As individuals, Chairs and IROs engage with operational and service managers on a regular basis to problem solve, offer guidance and expertise as required and to ensure that working relationships with front line staff are actively constructed to meet the best needs of children.

	(The work of the IRO and CP Chairing Service is captured in more detail in other related documentation - above is a summary of key functions only).
4. **Service User and Partner Feedback** - this is a key element in any quality assurance framework. We need to hear and respond to all feedback from service users, whether children, young people or parents/carers. Whatever investments we make, however we configure our services and regardless of different practice development activities, if the experience of service users is negative or critical then it requires a willingness to change direction. Equally if comments are positive this helps us to know we are doing the right things and to do more of this. West Berkshire Children and Family Services gathers the views of service users through a variety of processes:
	* Each Service within the Children & Family Service has a system whereby they actively encourage parents, children and professionals to provide feedback in relation to their services. This is undertaken via a variety of different methods; consultation documents, feedback documents, survey monkey and 1-1 discussion (via phone or in person). This is collated and fed back to the service and used to inform future service delivery. At times comments made may require immediate follow up and this is undertaken by the relevant Chair or line manager. Where appropriate this action would be completed by the relevant Service Manager.
	* Children and young people are routinely encouraged to contribute to, or even chair their own meetings and in relation to child in care reviews and child protection conferences .we report on and analyse their participation rates. Wherever it is possible care plans are amended to reflect their wishes and feelings.
	* Advocacy services and Independent Visitor feedback - these services are externally commissioned in West Berkshire and they provide quarterly reports, managed through the contract monitoring process, which are fed back to operational managers;
	* Children and Family Services are responsible for the construction and delivery of a Participation Strategy for Children in Care. Through both formal and informal meetings with groups of children in the Council's care, this is a crucial strategy to ensure that the service, Members and the Council in its corporate parenting capacity actively engages with Children in Care and ensures their needs are being met;
	* Feedback from complaints (and compliments) gives another crucial insight into the experiences of service users. Learning from compliments and complaints, whether within specific areas of the service responding to individual complaints, or through the annual report, adds a level of richness to our understanding of service provision;
	* Feedback from partners is another source of understanding that is valued. This feedback may come informally through joint working and networking activities; as a consequence of multi- agency case audits; via the Courts or CAFCASS and other involved bodies regarding the quality of care planning and the progress of Children in Care proceedings. Feedback is also sought via commissioned services.
5. Staff Feedback - as an organisation we are committed to hearing about and responding to the experiences of staff on the front line. Their daily experiences of practice necessarily brings them knowledge about how the system is, or is not, working and what improvements are needed to ensure children are as safe as possible and work is of a good standard. This feedback may come formally up through management lines; through attendance at staff briefings (which are diarised at regular intervals across the council and throughout the year); through the Head of Service forum; via informal and ad hoc contact with senior managers, or in response to written briefings.

All communication from staff is actively encouraged and welcomed and it will always be responded to. It is a key role of the Principal Social Worker to represent the views and experiences of front line staff back to senior and corporate managers and members. The Social Work Health Check forms an important part of this activity alongside wider council surveys of employees. The Principal Social Worker also holds monthly forums for staff to attend and share their views.
6. **Learning from the Best and Learning from Research** – Children and Family Services is committed to constantly learning from the best. One of the key functions of our Quality Assurance Process is to expose and disseminate best practice within West Berkshire. Equally, we are committed to learning from the best regionally and nationally so Business Strategy and Support constantly 'horizon scan', reviewing other authorities KPI returns or inspection reports to identify areas of learning for the council. West Berkshire is also an active member of the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme. We will also, primarily through our membership of 'Research in Practice' ensure current and relevant research is disseminated and we are building up partnership arrangements with Universities in the area. There is access to regular bulletins from Tri-x, keeping colleagues informed about government policy and changes in legislation;
7. **The quality of the workforce** is assured via:
	* Interviews and selection;
	* Robust inductions, supervision and appraisal;
	* Performance management and capability arrangements;
	* Observations of practice;
	* Quality audits;
	* Use of performance data;
	* The learning and development framework.
8. **Practice Development Activity** – is informed by the current information from the range of sources described.

**3. Review and Challenge**

It is important that our performance is subject to regular and robust scrutiny and challenge. The preceding section has set out the range of internal processes within the service that offer that challenge.

There are a number of key management meetings held within West Berkshire, which bring together the Children Services Managers to scrutinise and evaluate performance data.

**Performance Board Meetings and Children Services Management Meetings:**

These meetings are held monthly and chaired by the Head of Children & Family Service. These meetings provide an opportunity to share information, monitor audit activity, identify areas where thematic audit may be required and to put a SMART plan in place for these to occur.

It is also an opportunity to scrutinise and evaluate performance data and to ensure that all Managers have detailed knowledge about the strengths and vulnerabilities across the service. They also ensure that the operational managers relate their performance with the services to individual children and provide a useful channel of communication between the Senior Leadership team, Service Managers and Team Managers. This approach has also helped generate a sense of ownership about and pride in the performance of each Team for the managers concerned, which contributes to improved and improving performance.

These meetings capture/consider the full range of services including each Family Safeguarding Locality area, Fostering, Adoption, Leaving Care, Quality Assurance and Safeguarding, children with disabilities services, Early Response Hub, Youth Offending Services and the Contact Advice and Assessment Service/MASH.

They also provide an opportunity for front line managers to talk about the work they are doing and to share good practice.

**The Children & Families Leadership Team (CFLT):**

The CFLT meet monthly and among other activities hold strategic oversight of all quality assurance and audit activity undertaken across the Children and Family Service and ensure it remains effective.

In addition our work is properly subject to the following external scrutiny and challenge:

**Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership (BWSCP);

The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements for West Berkshire**

Working Together 2023 disestablished the requirement for Local Safeguarding Children Boards. The three LSCBs of Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire have worked closely together for many years, with a shared Independent Chair and a number of shared sub-groups. These three LSCBs have come together to create the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership.

Details of our arrangements can be viewed here <https://www.berkshirewestccg.nhs.uk/MASA>

**Berkshire West Multi-Agency Safeguarding arrangements:** Berkshire West partners are strongly committed to the shared responsibility to safeguard and protect children and young people. Berkshire West benefits from excellent inter-agency engagement, and proactive leadership, of this shared safeguarding agenda. We commit to working as partners to ensure all children and young people can live safe, happy and positive lives, achieving their potential and being respectful to others.

**Independent Scrutiny:** Berkshire West partners have historically valued the voice of independent scrutiny and challenge of safeguarding arrangements. In the new Berkshire West Safeguarding Arrangements the role of the LSCB Independent Chair will be superseded by an Independent Scrutineer function.

Effective Independent Scrutiny relies on:

* 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.

Berkshire West partners are keen to ensure that all safeguarding partners are actively engaged in Independent Scrutiny. There is a partnership emphasis on ensuring that the scrutiny is objective, acts as a constructive critical friend and promotes reflection to drive continuous improvement. In particular, the Independent Scrutiny arrangements consider how effectively the arrangements are working for children and families as well as for practitioners, and how well the safeguarding partners are providing strong leadership and agree with the safeguarding partners how this will be reported. It is an expectation that the learning from Independent Scrutiny is published in an annual report.

* **Overview and Scrutiny Manager Commission** is a Member group, chaired by council members and attended by key West Berkshire Officers, which ensures there is regular and detailed scrutiny of service improvement;
* **Corporate Performance Monitoring** - this is undertaken by the Children's Social Care and Health portfolio leads who review quarterly performance dashboards.  Additionally a subset of this information is reviewed quarterly by Cabinet as part of the council-wide public review of performance;
* **External National Inspection Regimes** - the service is subject to regular inspections from Ofsted and in addition inspections carried out on other services, such as those by CQC or HMIP will inevitably comment on the quality of partnership working in the area and will therefore be of relevance and value to West Berkshire Council.

**4. Management Action**

Performance monitoring must lead to management action. Even in excellently performing service areas, there will always be scope for further improvements and there will always be individual children who could have experienced a higher quality service. Performance monitoring must never lead to complacency - the best services are characterised by a management culture which is constantly self-critical and self-aware and that has a continued focus on the experiences of service users and in achieving best outcomes for children.

Generally, management action that follows monitoring activity may fall into one of the following areas:

* A need to review and amend one or more of the performance improvement drivers if they are not delivering the improvements expected;
* A need to review and/or stretch a performance target;
* A need to separately address the needs of a particular group of children and their families where it becomes clear there are some thematic failings in service delivery;
* A need to address the circumstances of individual children - for example, file audits might reveal service provision to a particular child is inadequate or even dangerous and management intervention is required;
* A need to address the performance of an individual manager or staff member, whether through supervision, personal appraisal processes or formal HR procedures.
* Identifying and sharing good practice and learning across the wider organisation.

**5. Roles and Responsibilities**

The Framework is designed to be inclusive, working 'with' staff, rather than doing 'to' them. Front line social work staff are best placed to assess the quality of what they do, the constraints they experience in delivering quality, and to learn from an inclusive process which enables them to reflect and improve their practice. Equally, operational managers have the direct responsibility for assuring the work of their teams, services and area. This framework sets out the role of the operational managers and the range of information they will need to be familiar with if they are to do that comprehensively.

The Service Manager of the Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Service (QAAS) will have oversight and ownership of this Framework. This post is responsible for its implementation across the Council, to update and modernise it as needed and to ensure all service capacity is well-focused in its delivery;

Operational staff need both support and challenge if they are to take the lead responsibility for quality assurance and performance improvement. In order to make sure there is increased auditing capacity all service managers, team managers and assistant team managers are responsible for file auditing; practice observation and for feeding into ideas for the provision of staff development workshops; individual coaching to staff; the identification of good practice examples to disseminate; team data analysis to aid management understanding of current practice trends and any other work as needed and in agreement with the Children and Families Leadership Team;

As far as logistically possible, both CP Conference Chairs and IROs are aligned to specific teams. This is to enable a growing familiarity with the quality of work locally and to enable chairs and IROs to actively contribute to service improvement in localities and to strengthen their working relationship with operational managers;

The Principal Performance, Research and Information Officer supports the collation and analysis of data.

Elected members have a particular role in overseeing and scrutinising front line service delivery.

*“The Lead Member for Children and Family Services, as a member of the council executive, has political responsibility for the leadership, strategy and effectiveness of local authority Children's Services. The Lead Member is also democratically accountable to local communities and has a key role in defining the local vision and setting political priorities for Children's Services within the broader political context of the council.*

*The Lead Member is responsible for ensuring that the needs of all children and young people, including the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, and their families and carers, are addressed. In doing so, the Lead Member will work closely with other local partners to improve the outcomes and wellbeing of children and young people. The Lead Member should have regard to the UNCRC and ensure that children and young people are involved in the development and delivery of local services. As politicians, Lead Member's should not get drawn into the detailed day-to-day operational management of Children and Family Services. They should, however, provide strong, strategic leadership and support and challenge to the DCS and relevant members of their senior team as appropriate.”* (DfE Guidance issued April 2012).

In addition, Member scrutiny is carried out through their Overview and Scrutiny functions and there is an expectation that all members take an interest in and responsibility for the outcomes for the most vulnerable children especially those for whom they are the corporate parent.

**6. Audit Process**

The purpose of audits is to:

* Identify and evidence the extent to which interventions are helping children, young people and their families to improve their lives by supporting them to make sustainable, positive changes;
* They provide assurance that children and young people within West Berkshire are receiving the help and protection they need and improve outcomes.
* Evidence, promote and cascade good practice so that there is a growing understanding of what works well;
* Ensure case file compliance and improve the quality of practice and recording;
* Provide a framework for responding to areas of concern;
* Identify potential areas of decline as early as possible.

The collation of both qualitative and quantitative data and information from all audits, when aggregated, provides a sense of any patterns or trends arising across the service and an opportunity for this to be effectively addressed in a timely way

The current audit process within Children’s Services takes place in bi-monthly cycles. Every second month managers (from the Head of Children & Family Services to ATMs) are asked to undertake a number of audits. The results of these audits are entered within an audit module which sits within each child’s case file on Care Director. A copy of the audit tool itself is stored as a file attachment on Care Director. The following guidelines for auditing are unchanged from our previous process:

* A standard audit tool is used for all FULL case file learning audits. A separate tool is used by YJS, for Care Leavers and for the Foster Carer File Audits.
* DIP audits are entered as this within the audit module on the Care Director system.
* Full case file learning audits are undertaken with the worker present following a file review by the auditor and conversation with the child and their family where appropriate to do so.
* The Service Managers are also allocated 1 full case file learning audit to complete every 2 months.
* The QAAS Service Manager, Principal Social Worker and Workforce Development Officer are allocated 1 moderation audit from the previous two-month period to moderate. This is to ensure a level of consistency in the standard of auditing. Where there is a disagreement over the grade assigned to the case, these moderators will discuss this with and feed back to the original auditor. The Foster Carer Reviewing Officer also completes 1 foster care file audit every 2 months.
* The front line Service Managers, Team Managers and ATMs all complete at least 1 practice observation every 2 months and use opportunities that arise within their work to fulfil their requirements for practice observation.
* All audit records within the audit module contain the date of the audit, the audit type (FULL, DIP, THEMATIC) and the outcome (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement & Inadequate). Recommended actions are entered and assigned to the relevant team to complete within 10 working days. These are tracked by each Service Manager for their service area.
* Service Managers are notified when a ‘Requires Improvement/Inadequate’ audit has been entered on to Care Director. They will also be sent a full list of all audits completed at the end of each bi-monthly cycle by the Principal Performance & Research Officer, this also includes an analysis of the outcomes.
* Team Managers have responsibility for follow through on all actions from the audits on cases held by the teams for which they are responsible. They have a period of 10 working days after each audit period in order to achieve this and enter each action as completed within the audit module on Care Director.
* The Principal Performance Research and Information Officer will produce a list of all audits and grades given at the end of each bi-monthly cycle, however it will remain the responsibility of the Service Managers to follow up on audits completed and address any matters arising from this information.
* All Service Managers will monitor audit compliance within supervision with team managers and provide a short overview each month for the Performance Board Meeting of all audits undertaken within their service areas over the preceding period and the learning and actions undertaken as a result.
* The design of the programme of themed audits for the year sits in the main with the Performance Board Meeting. CFLT holds strategic responsibility for overseeing the effectiveness of the whole QA programme.

**7. Conclusion**

Work to protect children is by definition complex and multi-faceted, requiring a whole system approach. The needs of the children involved are such that the system needs to ensure that 'stones are constantly overturned' and that areas of relative weakness and apparent strengths are robustly interrogated to ensure the strengths are real and embedded and that weaknesses are being effectively addressed.

This Quality Assurance Framework sets out how that exploration will take place in West Berkshire - like the system it assures; it can never stand still and will be subject to agency scrutiny via its own internal auditing.