



Report to Cabinet

Date:	Thursday 4 January 2024
Title:	Children's Services Update
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services
Author and/or contact officer:	John Macilwraith, Corporate Director Children's Services
Ward (s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	For Cabinet to note the national and local developments across the Children's Services Directorate.
Reason for recommendation:	<i>Paper is for information only</i>

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides:

- an update on the national and local developments across the Children's Services Directorate in Buckinghamshire. The document covers the key policy changes relating to safeguarding, school attendance, and the social work workforce.
- a summary of the progress of the Children's Services Transformation programme, which aims to streamline the service delivery across Early Help and Social Care, reduce handoffs and prioritise the development of supportive and enabling relationships between families and professionals.
- an overview of the increasing demand and financial pressures on the services for children with SEND, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and placements for children in care, as well as the actions the service is taking to mitigate the pressures.

- feedback received from Ofsted and the DfE on the performance and improvement of the services and the areas that require further attention and support.

2. National Context

2.1 The following section gives an overview of the key national policy developments relating to Children's Services.

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023

2.2 Working Together to Safeguard Children is the statutory guidance that sets out how organisations and individuals should work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

2.3 The draft guidance for the [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 \(WTTSC\)](#) consultation was released in the middle of 2023, paving the way for substantial changes in child protection and safeguarding practices in England. The final document is expected to be released in early to mid-2024.

2.4 The revisions to the statutory guidance are based on the first phase of the government's policy paper, [Stable Homes, Built on Love](#), published in February 2023. In this paper, the government sets out its vision for reforming children's social care.

2.5 The WTTSC 2023 consultation has expanded the title of the proposed guidance to 'Working Together to Safeguard Children: A Guide to Multi-Agency Working to Help, Safeguard, Protect, and Promote the Welfare of Children'. This new title tries to include the consultation's broader scope and highlights the importance of multi-agency collaboration in child protection. In addition, the introduction of an annual review is also noteworthy. These annual reviews will ensure the guidance remains flexible, adapting to emerging safeguarding challenges as they come along such as online bullying, knife crime and other forms of safeguarding concerns.

2.6 The consultation focuses on enhancing five major areas:

- i. A **shared endeavour** proposes a rename of the guidance and introduces expectations for effective
- ii. **Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements** clarifies roles and responsibilities, introduces partnership chair and deepens accountability and transparency.
- iii. **Help and support for children and their families** includes stronger expectations on Early Help and family networks, clarifies permissions on working with children under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and emphasises support for disabled children.

- iv. **Decisive multi-agency child protection** introduces new national multi-agency child protection standards for practitioners and approaches to harm 4 outside the home.
 - v. **Learning from Serious Incidents** involving children who were in local authority care.
- 2.7 The new version of the guidance will present both opportunities and challenges for the agencies and professionals who have a role in safeguarding children, and will require a collective and concerted effort to ensure that the changes are implemented and embedded in a smooth and successful manner.

Working Together to Improve School Attendance

- 2.8 The government's [working together to improve school attendance](#) document is a policy paper that outlines the vision, principles, and actions for enhancing the collaboration and coordination among different agencies and stakeholders to reduce school absenteeism and improve educational outcomes. The document aims to provide a clear and consistent framework for all parties involved in supporting children and young people to attend school regularly and achieve their full potential. Children with poor school attendance are at significant risk of underachieving, being victims of harm, exploitation or radicalisation and becoming not in education, employment, or training (NEET) later in life.
- 2.9 The significant school attendance changes include:
- i. **Clarity of expectations:** Schools, trusts and local authorities will all have clearly defined statutory roles for the first time, set out in a clear table of responsibilities.
 - ii. **Earlier intervention:** Schools will have legal responsibilities to proactively improve attendance for the first time (beyond existing requirements to record accurately) underpinned by timelier sharing of attendance data.
 - iii. **Support first:** All pupils and parents no matter where they live in the country will have clear expectations from their school, be informed about their child's attendance and have access to early intervention and support first before any legal action if it becomes problematic.
 - iv. **Targeted whole family support:** Local authority attendance teams will work in tandem with early help to provide a whole-family response with a single assessment, plan, and lead practitioner.
 - v. **Independent schools:** Data will be collected for the first time, and will receive the same support from local authorities.

- 2.10 Local authorities are now expected to rigorously track local attendance data and devise a strategic approach that:
- recognises the importance of attendance and understand how attendance improvement is everyone's business.
 - makes attendance a key focus of all frontline council services.
 - uses attendance data from all schools in the area to identify the pupil cohorts, schools, and neighbourhoods/towns on which to focus efforts.
 - uses this analysis to set a clear vision for improving attendance across the geographical area, underpinned by tangible short and longer term aims and priorities for improving attendance for particular cohorts of pupils identified.
 - all appropriate frontline operational staff in attendance, associated teams and local partners (including health and police) must understand their role in delivering this strategy and working together.
 - evaluate and review this strategy regularly.
- 2.11 In addition, all local authorities must have a School Attendance Support Team which works with all schools in its area, including independent schools. The School Attendance Support Team must provide every school with a named point of contact, hold a termly Targeting Support Meeting with every school to identify pupils that need to support and work jointly with all local partners to offer multi-agency support to pupils who need it. As well as work with all schools to take forward legal action where voluntary support does not work.
- 2.12 Buckinghamshire Council's school attendance function is delivered through the County Attendance Team, part of the Education Entitlement Team. The team is a small countywide service established to meet the minimum duties required of local authorities under the previous school attendance framework.
- 2.13 Prior to the release of 'Working together to improve school attendance' the school attendance team in Buckinghamshire was one the smallest when comparing establishment FTE per 10,000 pupils across other local authorities in the south-east, resulting in a challenging starting position when responding to the new burdens. As these new burdens have been introduced without additional funding from central government, the service's ability to fulfil the local authority's statutory duty will be hindered due to the capacity of the current team.

Child and Family Social Worker Workforce Consultation Response 2023

- 2.14 In October 2023, the government published its response to the consultation on the introduction of a set of national rules on the engagement of agency social work resource in local authority children's social care.
- 2.15 The consultation was launched following the publication of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in May 2022, which highlighted the workforce challenges and pressures facing the children's social care sector. The review recommended that the government should introduce national rules to regulate the use and cost of agency social workers, who play a vital role in allowing the sector to manage fluctuations in demand, fill in for staff temporarily absent, and manage crises. However, an overreliance on agency social work resource in local authority children's social care contributes to workforce instability, puts pressure on local authority budgets, and can have a negative impact on consistent relationships with children and families.
- 2.16 Overall, there were relatively high levels of support for the general principle of implementing the national rules and, as a result, the government intends to proceed with the introduction of the national rules with some minor changes. A summary of the revised national rules is set out below.
- 2.17 Local authorities should:
- i. work within their region to agree and implement agency social worker price caps that each local authority within the region should comply with.
 - ii. ensure all contractual arrangements to supply social work resource (including those described as project teams) comply with the following requirements:
 - clear identification of all constituent workers;
 - disaggregation of the worker cost component and any other service provided; and
 - governance arrangements that allow the local authority to maintain complete oversight and control of social work practice delivered via the arrangement.
 - iii. align the notice period for each agency social work assignment with the local authority's contractual notice period for substantive staff in the same or an equivalent job role.
 - iv. not engage agency social workers for a minimum period of three months after they have left a substantive role within the same region.

- v. only engage agency social workers with a minimum of three years post-qualifying experience in direct employment in a UK local authority.
 - vi. provide a detailed practice-based reference for all agency social workers on assignment, and require detailed practice-based references for agency social workers before offering an assignment.
 - vii. provide the Department for Education with quarterly survey data on the use and cost of agency social workers (including where supplied via project teams or other packaged models).
- 2.18 The government will consult on draft statutory guidance to underpin the national rules in spring 2024. Subject to this consultation, the government expects local authorities to comply with that statutory guidance in autumn 2024.
- 2.19 In the longer term, the government will review the efficacy of the national rules and carry out a further consultation prior to the introduction of any further restrictions to the use of project teams or replacement of regionally determined price caps with new centrally determined price caps.
- 2.20 The Association for Director of Children’s Services (ADCS) and many local authorities, including Buckinghamshire have long raised the need for coordinated, national action to help manage the agency market so that it works for children and young people and ensures local authorities are able to employ a stable and sustainable workforce. Overall, there are positive outcomes in the government’s response that will help better manage the agency market and reduce churn. ADCS will continue to represent local authorities and engage with government on the development of statutory guidance that will underpin the national rules.

Placements for Looked after Children

- 2.21 Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide sufficient high-quality placements for their looked after children. Towards the end of the Covid pandemic in Autumn 2021 it has become increasingly difficult to find placements, particularly for children aged 12 plus with complex needs.
- 2.22 The scale of these challenges has now prompted local authorities, including Buckinghamshire, to consider new and radical approaches to achieving placement sufficiency. Councils face significant financial pressures in children’s services as a result of rising numbers of children needing increasingly expensive care.
- 2.23 In Buckinghamshire, we are effective at preventing children from needing to be placed in care, demonstrated by our low rate of children looked after per

10,000 population. There are currently 41 children in care per 10,000 in Bucks, compared to an average of 70 per 10,000 across England. This gap has widened over the last 5 years where our rate of CLA has remained consistent while the rest of country has seen an increase (64 to 70 per 10,000).

- 2.24 Despite maintaining a stable proportion of children in care, the Council's spend on placements has increased significantly over the last 3 years from £27.3m to a forecast £38.4m this year. This reflects growing demand for residential placements due to a loss of foster carers and unit cost increases of 25-30% across all external placement types during this period.
- 2.25 In Buckinghamshire, we currently have 3 in-house registered children's homes comprising 14 beds. By September 2024, 3 additional homes will have opened providing a further 10 beds.
- 2.26 The Council also manages 11 unregistered provisions (rental properties) in Buckinghamshire which house 11 children, cared for by agency staff. These homes care for children who would otherwise have been placed in external unregulated placements out of county with higher levels of risk. Bringing our unregistered placements in-house has been successful in terms of improving outcomes for the children, enabling us to manage risk and assure a good standard of care. Approximately 70% of this cohort of children have very complex needs, including ASD and or ADHD as well as high-risk behaviours including self-harm, harm to others, links to criminal gangs and drug-use.
- 2.27 Whilst the most expensive placements are likely to be unregistered, it is clear that registered provision (registered children's homes) are also increasing their rates each time we enter the marketplace. Currently, the top 25 placements cost the Council £434,964.18 per week. This equates to £22.6m per year. For context, the total placements budget for the 508 children in care and 280 care leavers is £35.8 million per year.
- 2.28 The position in relation to the availability and cost of children's placements is not stationary. The pace of change is high and each time we go into the market currently, providers charge even more. The norm is that for each available bed in the system there can be anywhere between 60 and 200 individual children being put forward for that bed. Providers undoubtedly take advantage of this and are aware of local authority's statutory duties, as reported by the [Local Government Association](#) in October 2023.
- 2.29 One of the only options to change the marketplace is for local authorities across the country to invest in their own provision, as this Council intends to do. As a result, we continue to progress the proposal to expand our inhouse provision as part of the 2024/25 MTFP process. Whilst there are a number of risks to the running our own inhouse provision linked to staffing, occupancy

levels, availability and location of suitable properties as well as maintaining quality across a large inhouse residential service; if nothing changes within the market and we continue to make unregistered arrangements at this level, this represents a greater and more significant financial risk to the Council.

3. Local Context

3.1 The following section gives an overview of the key developments in Buckinghamshire Children’s Services.

Demand levels

3.2 Demand levels across Children’s Services continue to remain higher than pre-pandemic levels; however, despite an increase in contacts during the last 6 months, the number of children and families that are open to children’s social care has reduced compared to the previous 6 months. The number of children supported by our Family Support Service continues to rise as does the number of children with an Education, Health and Care Plan.

	1 Nov 2021 – 31 Oct 2022	1 Nov 2022 – 31 Oct 2023
Contacts	24871	27003
Referrals	14808	7420
Number of assessments from referral completed	6596	4982
Section 47 enquires	3182	2628
Initial Child Protection Conferences	828	626
Children subject to a child in need plan	1112*	983*
Children subject to a child protection plan	616*	463*
Looked after Children	510*	501*
Children open to the Family Support Service (Council Early Help Team)	847*	1207*
Children with an Education, Health and Care Plan	5788*	6459*

*as at 31 October

Children's Services Transformation

- 3.3 Within a national context, in January 2021 the Government commissioned an Independent Review of Children's Social Care which was published in May 2022. The independent review noted that the current way of working by managing risks, responding to episodic need, and having high thresholds to access help, may be restricting the purpose of social care to 'rescuing' children, and keeping services from meeting the needs of families.
- 3.4 Critically, the review proposed a new approach to family help to improve children's lives through supporting the family unit and strengthening relationships achieved through the streamlining of early intervention and widening the scope for targeted early help to support families requiring lower-level statutory intervention (Section 17 work under the Children's Act 1989).
- 3.5 The current structure of our service allows for too many hand-off points and lends itself to process driven case management which does not appropriately support children and young people and is limited in terms of achieving positive outcomes. Inspection activity and feedback from children, young people and families is critical of unnecessary hand off points, creating drift and delay for families and resulting in families having to share their story with multiple practitioners. Ofsted noted during their December 2021 inspection of Children's Social Care that 'many children, particularly those receiving services from the assessment and help and protection teams, have too many changes of social worker. This means that the help they receive is fragmented and episodic rather than carefully planned and underpinned by continuous strong professional relationships.'
- 3.6 Across the Early Help landscape, Government has also introduced the Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme to strengthen multi-agency Family Hubs in line with the levelling up agenda. Family hubs are a place-based way of joining up locally in the planning and delivery of family services bringing services together to improve access, improve the connections between families, professionals, services, and providers, and put relationships at the heart of family support. The Department for Education has set out a minimum expectation of services not in receipt of additional funding to ensure a core offer is made available to all families.
- 3.7 Without a move to a more streamlined model across both Early Help and Social Care, which empowers early intervention and prioritises the development of supportive and enabling relationships between families and professionals, the service will struggle to progress beyond the 'requires improvement to be good' Ofsted judgement.

- 3.8 The proposed changes to the service will be implemented in April 2024 and involve the reorganisation of relevant staff into Locality Family Support Teams and into a Family Hub model. The model for the Locality Support teams has been configured and shaped by intelligence about the presenting needs and vulnerabilities within local communities across Buckinghamshire, demand for services, throughput and caseloads, and the financial viability and sustainability of the proposals. This initial change will support the strengthening of relationships between professionals (local authority, partner agencies and the VCS) at a lower geographical footprint, focused on the needs of children and young people in that given area and responding pragmatically to varying need without process led, artificial hand offs between services.
- 3.9 A further phase will involve the wider review of Children's Services deemed to be out of scope for this consultation as well as engagement with Council services and external partners, including the VCS, to develop multi-agency alignment to structure in line with need and the levelling up agenda. Development of the multi-agency aspect of the model will commence following the internal service redesign to allow the time, space and preparedness required for new locality structures to embed and new ways of working to develop. It will also enable the development of a longer-term view of multi-agency locality working, including the contribution of partners, focusing on the impact on children and families and how practitioners from across the entirety of a children's services system can contribute to the refinement and detail of the model. It is anticipated that a fully embedded integrated model of practice will be achievable in 3 to 5 years.
- 3.10 Alongside the implementation of Locality Based Family Support Teams will be a Family Hub structure, utilising our existing family centres, to bolster the success of the Early Help Partnership. This will ensure that families that do not require statutory or higher tier intervention are supported effectively within communities and that preventative activity is tailored and targeted, through local partnerships, to ensure it reaches families at the earliest point. The Family Hub structure will be closely aligned to the work of the Locality Teams, as this will often provide the mechanisms to support the transfer of families between universal and targeted services.
- 3.11 In addition, changes are proposed in relation to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub to ensure children, young people and families benefit from a truly integrated front door arrangement which can manage requests for support in relation to both Early Help and Social Care services. This arrangement ensures minimal delay for families and ensures families receive consistent advice in relation to threshold and accessing the most appropriate support at the point

of their initial contact with services. It also reduces unnecessary 'hand-off' points for families and professionals seeking advice.

- 3.12 Many Local Authorities have already moved to create multi-disciplinary locality-based services as this is considered to be best practice within the field of Children's Services with several good and outstanding Ofsted rated Local Authorities having already adopted versions of this model. Success of the model relies on bolstering the contribution of partner agencies and critically leveraging the expertise and resources available within the voluntary and community sector, looping the right services into the team around a child at the right time. The move away from process-led referral pathways has been endorsed by the Government who is currently piloting this new approach with a select number of local authorities.

UASC

- 3.13 As reported during the last 6 month update, Buckinghamshire Council continues, along with all other local authorities, to take Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) when they are referred via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The Council is required to continue to receive referrals until it reaches 0.10% of the child (0-18) population (128 individuals for Buckinghamshire). At the time of writing, the Service supports 77 UASC, an increase from 26 in September 2021.
- 3.14 These decisions by central government are having a significant impact directly and indirectly on the Council's budgets. The direct impacts are on placement costs and on subsistence payments. Indirectly, the impact on placement availability for all children has and continues to decrease supply, hence why this Council as well as all other local authorities in the country are having to use unregulated provision. In additions, significant delays in processing asylum claims by the Home Office for unaccompanied asylum care leavers is also increasing the length of time that the local authority has to continue providing accommodation and support to young people as the young people are unable to work or claim benefits.

School Inspections

- 3.15 In 2022/23, Ofsted resumed the inspection process after disruption caused by COVID. The new OFSTED framework had moved away from data-heavy inspections and now includes a judgment based on quality of education. This includes the 3 I's; Intent (how the curriculum is designed and sequenced), Implementation (how that curriculum is taught) and Impact (the achievement of pupils).

- 3.16 The new framework, updated July 2023, continues the strong focus around safeguarding. The Inspection Handbook has also been updated to include information on the culture of safeguarding and guidance on indicators of ineffective safeguarding.
- 3.17 During the academic year 2022/23, 33 Buckinghamshire schools underwent graded inspections. The judgements were as follows:
- 4 outstanding
 - 18 good
 - 11 requires improvement
 - 0 inadequate
- 3.18 The key themes that impacted upon inspection outcomes in 2022/23 included:
- Consistency of teaching and planning
 - Support for most vulnerable including those who are persistently absent and SEND
 - Ambition and challenge for all learners
 - Safeguarding: particularly record keeping and follow up of actions
 - Governance monitoring processes insufficiently challenging
- 3.19 Whilst educational outcomes in Buckinghamshire continue to be strong, with the majority of young people across our county leaving school with very good results; this is not always the case for pupils from disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds. Disadvantaged pupils continue to achieve less well than their non-disadvantaged peers.
- 3.20 One of the key objectives of the Education and Skills priority area within the Opportunity Bucks programme is to reduce the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils residing within the ten wards. The Buckinghamshire Challenge is a programme to support all schools in Buckinghamshire to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils through undertaking research, analysis and the establishment of key Buckinghamshire principles for schools to effectively address this issue. The Buckinghamshire Challenge is now targeted at schools with a high number of Opportunity Bucks pupils with a focus on strengthening essential literacy skills and improving literacy attainment outcomes for disadvantaged pupils at all age phases in Opportunity Bucks schools. Strong literacy skills are essential to enable pupils to access all areas of the curriculum and are therefore the foundation of all future learning.
- 3.21 The Buckinghamshire Challenge Literacy Project will encourage collaboration between schools to identify excellent literacy practices which can be shared,

whilst also identifying key areas for development. A bespoke improvement programme will be developed to meet the identified needs and training provided for all staff across the targeted schools. The learning from this project will then be shared with all schools across the county. Two additional projects are being undertaken to enable Opportunity Bucks pupils to engage with future careers opportunities within the county:

- i. The Opportunity Bucks Schools' Short Film Competition is a collaboration with Pinewood Studios to highlight the importance of film and TV as an employment sector and is designed to spark pupils' curiosity for a future career in the industry. All schools with a high proportion of pupils residing in the Opportunity Bucks wards have been invited to submit a 3-minute short film on the topic 'School Life', the planning, production and editing of which will be supported by Pinewood Studios and partners. A celebration event, attended by a delegation from each school and where submitted films will be screened and winners announced, will be held at Pinewood Studios in May 2024.
- ii. The App Accelerator Project is being delivered by Buckinghamshire-based Microsoft Partner, The Cloudy Foundation, and is designed to support and challenge young people in years 9-13 with an interest in a career in business and IT. The students are working collaboratively to design a Microsoft PowerApp to develop a project management reporting system for the Chesham Community Board. Support for the students is provided by The Cloudy Foundation, together with local businesses and educational mentors, to help student design, create and deliver the project. Students will gain valuable work experience, increased digital skills and the development of a network to support their future careers.

3.22 As a service, we note the inquest ruling following the very sad circumstances around the inspection of Caversham Primary School in Reading and the subsequent death of Ruth Perry, the school's head teacher. Locally, we recognise the pressure that our school leaders are placed under for a variety of reasons, including Ofsted inspections and we work to ensure they are supported in their wellbeing. Actions for this currently include:

- An offer from our educational psychology service for termly clinical supervision of head teachers.
- Weekly informal 'huddles' online for head teachers to hear updates and connect as part of a community.

- A comprehensive two-year induction programme for new head teachers, with some specific sessions for secondary headteachers.
- An offer of an experienced mentor for the first year of headship.
- Focussed support from the school improvement team before, during and after an inspection.
- A series of professional development activities including an annual two-day conference – providing opportunities for networking and building a strong community of head teachers.
- Termly briefings led by the Director of Children’s Services.
- Six ‘liaison group’ meetings a year for head teachers to work together in localities.
- Access to the employee assistance programme.
- Termly “Friday Forums”. A networking, information and effective practice sharing opportunity for headteachers.

Local Area SEND Update

3.23 For more detailed information, please refer to the Area SEND Update paper presented to Cabinet on 4 January 2024. For ease, please see a summary of that paper below.

3.24 Whilst progress has been made in a number of areas following the March 2022 local area inspection, the following challenges are hindering the pace at which improvements are being made:

- i. **Waits for access to diagnoses and therapy support are still too long** and despite an ICB investment of £4.6m in April 2023 to support additional specialist and clinical capacity, recruitment to positions has proven to be extremely challenging. Therefore, whilst there has been some progress since the last inspection, the impact of the investment on waiting times has been limited.
- ii. **The number of EHCPs maintained by Buckinghamshire is also increasing.** As of 1 November 2023, there were 6450 EHCPs maintained by Buckinghamshire as compared to 4054 in January 2019. It is therefore likely that the number of EHCPs maintained will move over 7000 in 2024. The increase in the number of EHCPs maintained creates further pressures across the SEND system. These include, but are not limited to:
 - Shortages in the SEND workforce, including teachers, teaching assistants, therapists and our own SEND team.

- Increased pressures on the waiting lists for diagnoses and therapies.
 - Increased pressures in securing a sufficiency of specialist school places.
 - Increased pressure in securing sufficient pathways to adulthood for young people with SEND - education, employment and supported accommodation.
- iii. **Shortage of Educational Psychologists (EP)** which has led to a decline in our performance against the statutory 20 week EHCP needs assessment measure as EP advice and info must be sought as part of any assessment. In 2022, Buckinghamshire received 1365 requests for assessment, an increase of 101% compared to 2016. The increasing trend in requests is continuing into 2023, we are currently projecting a further 20% increase since 2022 and a 74% increase in requests for assessment since 2020. The size of the Council's Educational Psychology team has not increased since 2019. Nationally and locally, it has proven increasingly difficult to recruit and retain Educational Psychologists. At the time of writing there are 5 vacancies in our team of 16. Poor performance against the 20 week statutory measure risks reputational damage through LGO complaints or judicial reviews. We are already seeing increasing complaints and pre-action letters in relation to EHCN assessment delays. The impact on any future inspection outcome is also likely to be negative. A [DfE Research report](#) published in June 2023 found that 88% of local authorities reported that they were currently experiencing difficulties recruiting Educational Psychologists.
- iv. **There are very significant financial pressures on the High Needs Block.** The High Needs Block (HNB) within the Designated Schools Grant (DSG) funds the cost of educational provision for children with SEND together with education related therapies such as Speech and Language support and some of the central costs of the SEND team. This budget is coming under increasing pressure as the numbers of children with SEND and the intensity of needs increases. We anticipate a £3m overspend by March 2024. Buckinghamshire is not alone in facing challenges in meeting the needs of children with SEND from within its HNB budget. Sixty-Four authorities are currently part of the DfE Safety Valve programme for areas with the highest HNB deficits. A further fifty-five authorities with significant pressure, including Buckinghamshire, have been invited to take part in the [Delivering Better Value in SEND Programme](#). The diagnostic work module of this programme has identified that, whilst our current HNB overspend is comparatively small in relation to that of many other

local authorities, it will grow exponentially without significant mitigation.

- 3.25 A recent development within the service is the introduction of an SEN Support line to make it easier to make contact with the SEND teams. This line is open to all schools and professionals to access advice and support for any child or young person with SEND when they need support. The call line has also helped to reduce the stress and anxiety that many families face when dealing with SEN issues, and to improve the communication and collaboration between families and professionals. The call will be answered by a Specialist Teacher, an EHC Co-ordinator (EHCCo), a SEND Inclusion Advisor or an Educational Psychologist.
- 3.26 In January 2023, Ofsted and the CQC implemented a new area send inspection framework. Under the old framework, areas such as ours with a Written Statement of Action (WSOA) would have received a re-inspection focused only on the progress made in the WSoA priority areas. Under the new framework, the local area will instead be subject to a full inspection within the first 3 years of the new inspection cycle i.e. by January 2026. One of the key differences between the new inspection framework and the previous one is the introduction of graded judgements. As of 1 December 2023, Ofsted had published 15 Area SEND inspection reports under the new framework. Five areas had received the top grade and four the lowest with the remaining six areas receiving a Grade 2.
- 3.27 There are some themes in the recommendations for priority action and improvement that are common to both areas with a Grade 1 judgement and those with a Grade 3 judgement. These include setting measurable targets to reducing long waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessments, joint local area evaluation of the impact of actions and improving oversight of alternative provision. These have all been taken account of in the work we are doing in Buckinghamshire.
- 3.28 The local authority and the ICB need to prepare for the next inspection and ensure that improvement and change activity is aligned to the new inspection framework and that our governance structures enable a clear focus on driving improvement.

Ofsted Annual Engagement Meeting

- 3.29 Under the Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection framework, Ofsted arrange an annual conversation with every local authority for both children's social care and SEND services. In Buckinghamshire, the annual conversations were held on 30 June 2023 and 23 October 2023 respectively.

- 3.30 In preparation for both sessions, the service shared the latest self-assessment and performance data. Ofsted use the annual conversation as an opportunity to scrutinise performance, service development and progress on any actions set at the last inspection. This assists Ofsted in determining the timing and scope of any subsequent inspection activity.
- 3.31 Feedback received from Ofsted at the end of the annual conversation was positive and the service's self-assessment was accepted in full.

DfE visit

- 3.32 On 10 October 2023, John Edwards, Director General and Dame Kate Dethridge, Regional Director, and other DfE colleagues visited Buckinghamshire. During their visit, DfE colleagues met with Senior Leaders from the service and the Lead member as well as attended a number of themed sessions that included:
- Buckinghamshire Overview and Children's Services Transformation
 - Placement Sufficiency – overview of the current position, the associated pressures and our plans to increase the availability of local placements and services for Buckinghamshire's looked after children.
 - Social Worker Recruitment & Retention – the challenges we face and our local response.
 - Buckinghamshire SEND Services working within a national SEND System.
 - Site visit to the Kingsbrook School and their SEMH unit.
 - Focus group with Headteachers on narrowing the gap and improving educational outcomes for children and young people in Buckinghamshire.
- 3.33 Please see the feedback from DfE following the visit below:
"I am writing to thank you for hosting our visit. We really enjoyed our day and the opportunity to see the many improvements you have made, are currently working on and the impact of these. It was lovely to meet your Senior Leadership Team and hear about the wonderful things they're focussing on to improve outcomes for children and young people in Buckinghamshire. Their passion and positivity was delightful to see. Please do pass on our thanks to all the team who took time out of their busy schedules to talk to us, it was great to hear from your social workers and the challenges they face but equally how enthusiastic they are about what they do. It was wonderful to finish the day at such an impressive new school building and to spend time hearing from local Headteachers. Thank you again for arranging such an insightful day and making us feel so welcome, please do pass on our thanks to everyone involved."

3.34 As part of the visit, DfE officials were asked to consider how they could support the service with:

- Implementation of Social Care reforms – the role of family support teams and the child protection lead professional in child in need work.
- Learning from elsewhere to improve educational outcomes for the children and young people living in areas of deprivation.
- Recruitment and retention of Social Workers and Educational Psychologists.
- Encouraging high quality teaching and inclusion in academy schools.

4. Other options considered

4.1 N/A – report for information only

5. Legal and financial implications

5.1 There are no specific legal or financial implications as a result of agreeing to the recommendations the paper. However, there are significant financial pressures associated with a number of areas detailed within the report, particularly pertinent to placements for children looked after, the mandated transfer scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and children with SEND.

5a. Director of Legal & Democratic Services comment

5.2 Paper for information only.

5b. Section 151 Officer comment

5.3 Paper for information only.

6. Corporate implications

6.1 Similar to above, there are no specific corporate implications as a result of agreeing to the recommendations the paper; however, changes made as part of the Transformation Plan no doubt require additional support from corporate support services such as HR and Finance.

7. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

7.1 N/A

8. Communication, engagement & further consultation

8.1 N/A

9. Next steps and review

9.1 The next update will be provided to Cabinet in Summer 2024.

10. Background papers

10.1 N/A

11. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by email [democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk]

