

Report to Cabinet

Title:	Children's Improvement Programme Update
Date:	Monday 24 April 2017
Date can be implemented:	Wednesday 03 May 2017
Author:	Cabinet Member for Children's Services
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Local members affected:	All
Portfolio areas affected:	All

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Summary

The Children's Improvement Programme was set up in response to the Ofsted Inspection of Children's Safeguarding Services in August 2014. Since the last report to Cabinet in February 2016, Ofsted have undertaken two Monitoring Visits both of which have concluded that improvements have been made to services for children and families but that there is more work to be done to ensure a consistent, quality service is provided to all children and families.

The Children's Improvement Board continues to monitor and challenge progress against the Improvement Plan and a revised plan will be scrutinised at the Board in April 2017.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to note this update report and the progress and improvements in the service identified by the two Ofsted Monitoring visits as well as the further improvements planned.

A. Narrative setting out the reasons for the decision

1. Following the Ofsted Inspection Report into Childrens Safeguarding Services in Buckinghamshire in August 2014, an Improvement Plan was approved by Cabinet. Subsequently, a refreshed Improvement Plan was agreed by Cabinet in February 2016.

2. The delivery of the Improvement Plan has been overseen by a multi-agency Children's Improvement Board chaired by a DfE appointed Chairperson, John Goldup. The Board scrutinises performance against key performance indicators and progress against the plan, providing challenge and support. In addition to the Children's Improvement Board, John Goldup meets with senior officers on a monthly basis to further scrutinise in detail performance in those areas that is not progressing at the pace expected. The Chairperson is required to submit regular reports to the Minister which inform the 6 monthly DfE Reviews.
3. The bi-annual DfE Review is conducted by a DfE Advisor on behalf the Minister and involves the production of a number of detailed reports and a meeting with Members and senior officers in relation progress in order to determine whether any further intervention is required by the DfE. Following each review, the Minister writes to the Leader of the Council to confirm the ongoing level of scrutiny.
4. In August 2016, Ofsted published new arrangements for monitoring the progress of local authorities with inadequate children's services through quarterly monitoring visits. The monitoring visits involve a small inspection team (2-3 inspectors) being onsite for 2 days tracking and sampling individual children's journey's and assessing the quality and impact of the partnership on improving children's outcomes, . At the end of each visit, an Ofsted Monitoring letter is published. Whilst a full re-inspection will not usually take place until there have been at least four monitoring visits, as Buckinghamshire was 2 years into its improvement journey when the new monitoring arrangements were published, Ofsted have been clear that they may undertake a re-inspection prior to four monitoring visits being completed.
5. Ofsted have completed two Monitoring Visits in Buckinghamshire to date, with two more planned for April and July 2017.
6. The first Monitoring Visit took place in August 2016 (letter attached as Appendix A) and focused on the front end of the child's social care journey. This involved assessing through First Response and Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub how well the threshold for intervention with children and their families was understood across the partnership and implemented by children's social care, The quality of assessment and planning for children and how well the voice of the child was heard when children were in need of help and protection It also looked at how well the service was discharging its duties in relation to children who at risk of or are being sexually exploited (Swan Unit).
7. The inspectors were clear in their report that there had been improvement since the 2014 inspection and progress had accelerated in the last 6 months. They acknowledged the investment and improved leadership across the council in making this improvement possible concluding "children's social care services are now a firm priority for the Council" and that the senior managers in Children's Services are clear about the key priorities they need to concentrate on in order to further improve outcomes for children. There were a number of themes that they identified:
 - All social workers knew their children and families well
 - The MASH and partnership working has improved considerably and is having a positive impact on outcomes for children however there is too much delay in progressing some referrals
 - Thresholds in First Response and Swan are effective and there is evidence of staff using the threshold document to inform decision making
 - The quality of recent assessments has improved but there is still some variability
 - Recording and quality of practice has improved but still remains variable

- Management oversight and supervision is evident and impacting on outcomes for children however it remains too task orientated in its recording in some areas
- Children are being seen and seen alone and there was evidence of good practice for some children with the use of creative tools to hear their voice
- All children have a plan but work is needed to improve their quality so they are effective in driving progress
- Managers are now using the comprehensive performance information to drive improvements
- More work is needed to ensure improvements are made in our private fostering and LADO arrangements

A subsequent action plan was developed and updates reported to the Children's Improvement Board. (See Appendix B)

8. Following on from the first Monitoring Visit by Ofsted, officials from the Department for Education undertook a review of progress. A copy of the overview progress report that was presented to them is attached to this paper for information (Appendix C). In October 2016 the Minister wrote to the Leader of the Council confirming that "on the basis of all the available evidence, I intend to maintain the current level of DfE intervention. The information I have received suggests that the council is prioritising the improvement of children's services and that it is committed to improving outcomes for vulnerable children and their families."
9. The second Ofsted Monitoring Visit took place in December 2016 (letter attached as Appendix D) and focused on services for children in care: thresholds and quality of support provided; effectiveness of the public law outline and legal planning meetings; the independent reviewing service, timeliness and quality of health assessments; and the response to children looked after who go missing and / or are at risk of child sexual exploitation. Again, the inspectors concluded that "the local authority is making steady progress to improve services for children" but highlighted a number of areas which required further work. There were a number of themes that they identified:
 - Social workers know the children well and that there was evidence of good relationships between workers and children.
 - Management oversight is now evident but it is not yet consistently rigorous enough to ensure there is not delay or drift for children.
 - Increased investment in the IRO service has led to significant improvements and their footprint is evidenced on children's files. IRO's are now providing appropriate rigour and challenge and are acting positively as advocates for children.
 - There is significant improvement in the timeliness and quality of health assessments.
 - The thresholds for care are appropriate.
 - Assessments for Looked After Children need to be updated regularly in order to drive the plans and risk assessments for children looked after who are vulnerable to or at risk of CSE are inconsistent.
 - The PLO and Court Tracker needs to be used consistently to provide a clear picture of the progress for cases in proceedings.
 - Further work is required with Legal services to ensure that they are providing a timely and efficient service to all children.
 - Return interviews for children when they go missing are not yet timely or of a sufficient quality.
 - Too many children are waiting for important Life Story work

These additional areas have been added to the action plan and updates reported to the Children's Improvement Board. (See Appendix E).

10. Positive progress and improvements have been made across the four main areas of the Improvement Plan including:
- The development of a shared vision for children and families across the partnership
 - All children who require a statutory social work assessment and intervention have an allocated social worker
 - 652 families, 1,552 children have been allocated a lead family worker through Early Help Panel
 - 757 families have been turned around against Families First criteria
 - Children are now visited within 5 days of referral during assessment and seen alone (94%)
 - A recent survey showed 97% of workers across partnership understood and used the threshold document
 - Improved timeliness of decision making of referrals completed in 3 days from 61% (April 2015) to 94% (Jan 2017)
 - Assessments are now being completed in a timely way (45 working days) increasing from 87% (April 15) to 92% (Jan 2017) to ensure the child's needs are understood
 - Increased number of children subject to CP Plans from 333 to 564 which is now in line with statistical neighbours and shows appropriate identification of significant harm
 - 97% of children in care have an up to date care plan so they are clear about what is happening to them
 - Through the complex case management system there has been a significant improvement in engagement across the partnership which has resulted in the delivery of bespoke packages to jointly support and manage the risks of the most vulnerable children
 - 88% looked after children have an up to date pathway plan so their needs are identified
 - 28 young people open to After Care are in further education and 13 are in higher education
 - Increased the number of qualified social workers from 194 in August 2015 to 227 in January 2017 whilst also reducing the percent of agency workers from 25% in August 2015 to 20% in January 2017.
 - Improvements have been made to the Children's Social Care IT database (LCS) to reduce the amount of time workers have to spend inputting information into the system.
11. In December 2016, the Chair of the BSCB presented a report to the Improvement Board on the work that had been completed by the partnership over the previous two years to improve outcomes for children in Buckinghamshire. (See Appendix F). The report clearly shows the amount of work completed by the BSCB and the sub-groups particularly in relation to increasing the partnerships' understanding and knowledge of thresholds, the development of a multi-agency Child Sexual Exploitation Strategy and Serious Case Reviews.
12. Following on from the second Monitoring Visit, and in recognition of the evidence of continuing progress and improvement, the Chairperson of the Children's Improvement Board decided, in consultation with Board members and the DfE, to reduce the governance around the improvement journey from monthly to quarterly meetings. The next Board meeting is scheduled for April 2017 and will focus on reviewing progress

against the February 2016 Improvement Plan, with the aim of producing a more focused plan for the year ahead. This will be shared with Cabinet for information once developed.

13. The third Monitoring Visit in April will focus on services for children in care and permanence, including children placed out of area, placement sufficiency and corporate parenting.

B. Other options available, and their pros and cons

N/A

C. Resource implications

Funding for the Improvement Programme Manager and a Project Officer has been secured until March 2018 in order to ensure there is dedicated resource driving the improvement plan.

The technology elements of the refreshed Improvement Plan will be delivered by carrying forward the underspend in the Improvement Programme one-off budget from 2016/17 into 2017/18 via the Improvement Programme reserve.

D. Value for Money (VfM) Self Assessment

N/A

E. Legal implications

N/A

F. Property implications

N/A

G. Other implications/issues

Ofsted have recently set out its future plans for the inspection of local authority children's services. These plans will be subject to piloting over the coming months, ready for implementation in January 2018. They propose moving from a single inspection applied universally to all local authorities to a more proportionate approach that takes account of earlier performance and current data and intelligence.

They have confirmed that they will continue with the current approach to local authorities judged inadequate: that is, quarterly monitoring visits with the next inspection either being a single inspection (SIF) or a post-monitoring SIF as set out in the August 2016 guidance.

H. Feedback from consultation, Local Area Forums and Local Member views

N/A

I. Communication issues

N/A

J. Progress Monitoring

Progress will continue to be monitored on a regular basis by the Improvement Board. The next Ofsted Monitoring visits are due to take place in April and August. Monthly updates will be taken to One Council Board.

K. Review

N/A

Background Papers

N/A

Your questions and views

If you have any questions about the matters contained in this paper please get in touch with the Contact Officer whose telephone number is given at the head of the paper.

If you have any views on this paper that you would like the Cabinet Member to consider, or if you wish to object to the proposed decision, please inform the Member Services Team by 5.00pm on Friday 21 April 2017. This can be done by telephone (to 01296 382343), or e-mail to democracy@buckscc.gov.uk