

Report to Cabinet

Title:	Ofsted inspection of Children's Services
Date:	Monday 19 February 2018
Date can be implemented:	Friday 23 February 2018
Author:	Cabinet Member for Children's Services
Contact officer:	Tolis Vouyioukas
Local members affected:	(All Electoral Divisions);
Portfolio areas affected:	All Portfolio areas

For press enquiries concerning this report, please contact the media office on 01296 382444

Summary

In November 2017, Ofsted re-inspected Children's Services under the single inspection framework, following the inadequate judgement received in 2014. This inspection found that the overall judgement of Children's Services remains inadequate. The report was published on Monday 29 January 2018. The report can be accessed here;

https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/local_authority_reports/buckinghamshire/056_Single%20inspection%20of%20LA%20children%27s%20services%20as%20pdf.pdf

Since the previous inspection, Ofsted judged that services for children in need of help and protection, and for children looked after had not improved quickly enough or consistently. Ofsted also found that there continue to be critical weaknesses in some parts of the service. Overall, the report highlights that the local authority has not made sufficient progress since 2014. The council accepts that some children are still not having the right help and support that they need at the time when they need it most.

It is important to note that the report also highlights improvements the council has made and our continued commitment to improve. For example, our adoption services are judged to be good and inspectors recognised our efforts to recruit social workers and improvements in our multi-agency safeguarding hub.

Ofsted found that children are now a top priority for the council and significant financial investment has been made in services for children and families. Inspectors also referred to areas of progress in response to previous monitoring visits by Ofsted; however, the majority of these improvements were recent and too early to evidence a sustained positive impact for children.

Recommendations

(I) Cabinet to consider the outcome of the recent Ofsted inspection.

A. Narrative setting out the reasons for the decision

1. The purpose of this report is to bring to Cabinet the outcome of this inspection, background information, key areas of progress since 2014, the areas which remain of concern and the immediate actions already taken.
2. The inspection judged the overall performance of Children's Services as inadequate. Children in need of help and protection, children looked after and leadership, management and governance were judged to be inadequate, whilst adoption was judged to be good and the experience and progress of care leavers as requiring improvement.

Background:

3. Buckinghamshire was judged to be inadequate by Ofsted following an inspection that took place in June 2014. It was judged to be inadequate for services for children in need of care and protection and for children looked after and achieving permanence. Adoption performance and the experiences and progress of care leavers were judged to require improvement. Leadership, management and governance were judged to be inadequate, as was the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board.
4. In 2014 failures in safeguarding services were said to be widespread and serious. Key areas of social work practice had fundamental weaknesses, including assessment, child protection, management oversight and supervision. As a result children and young people were left at risk of harm. There was a long standing problem of a high level of unallocated cases.
5. In November 2014 the Secretary of State issued a statutory Improvement Direction to the council. The authority was directed to address and remedy, without delay, each of the points or areas outlined in the Ofsted inspection report as priority and immediate actions. 15 such actions were identified in the Ofsted report.
6. An Improvement Board was established in January 2015 and was initially chaired by then Chief Executive to closely monitor the development and delivery of an improvement plan. In October 2015, John Goldup was appointed by the Department for Education (DfE) as an independent chair and was responsible for reporting progress to the Secretary of State. The Board met monthly during the first year and quarterly in subsequent years.
7. In addition to the improvement board activity, Ofsted also carried out 4 monitoring visits between August 2016 and July 2017. Each visit acknowledged some areas of strength and progress; however, a reoccurring theme was that improvements were not achieved consistently or as swiftly as needed.

The following areas of progress are reflected in the November 2017 Ofsted inspection report:

8. The recent appointments of an experienced Director of Children's Services (DCS), chief executive, new cabinet portfolio holder for Children's Services and the continued support of the leader of the council now provides the local authority with a strong senior leadership team that is committed to accelerating the pace of improvements for children.
9. Children are now a top priority for the council and significant financial investment has been made in services for children and their families.
10. Inspectors found clear improvements in arrangements for corporate parenting, with a comprehensive induction, training and ongoing briefing programme in place.
11. The vast majority of referrals from partners are of good quality, enabling prompt decision-making about next steps.
12. Children who are vulnerable as a result of going missing now receive timely and thorough interviews on their return to home or care. Return home interviews are timely and of good quality
13. The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) provides a timely and effective response to concerns about adults who work with children. Work to raise awareness of the designated officer role to ensure a full understanding of professionals' responsibilities has taken place with a wide range of professionals.
14. Foster carers are assessed, trained, approved and supported well. Conscientious, dedicated supervising social workers support carers carefully and record their work correctly.
15. The availability, quality and breadth of adoption support are a considerable strength in Buckinghamshire. Adopters receive excellent support, when required.
16. Assessments of potential adopters are well written, with carefully considered analysis and reflection.
17. Children looked after are making appropriate progress in their level of development at the different key stages. The difference in achievement between children looked after in Buckinghamshire and their peers is decreasing.
18. Care leavers receive good support that enables them to continue with their education or find employment or training.
19. The virtual school's careful monitoring of personal education plans gives children good support with their education, allowing them to make suitable progress in line with their level of development.
20. The partnership and transition arrangements through the virtual school and with the local college are very effective.
21. The quality of audits seen by inspectors on cases tracked during the inspection has improved, accurately identifying all areas of weaker practice. Inspectors saw some areas of improvement.

The report clearly identifies the following areas of concern:

22. Overall, progress in improving services for children in Buckinghamshire has been inconsistent and too slow. Some children are still not having the right help and support that they need at the time when they need it most.
23. There are widespread and serious weaknesses in services to safeguard children. These weaknesses span some social work teams. Risks are not always recognised, and weak managerial oversight at all levels is a common feature in too many children's cases.
24. There continue to be critical weaknesses in the service to children looked after. This has resulted in a small number of children experiencing further significant harm while in care. A few children have continued to live in neglectful circumstances and some have not had all their basic needs met.
25. Despite a concerted effort to stabilise the workforce, children still have too many changes of social workers. This, coupled with high caseloads in some teams, makes it difficult for children to build meaningful relationships with their allocated worker.
26. Social work practice is not always sufficiently child focused. Social work intervention is not sufficiently responsive to changing and increasing risk, particularly when children experience neglect or are exposed to domestic abuse.
27. Many plans are ineffective. They do not demonstrate a full understanding of risks to children or their unique individual needs, and are not responsive to changes in circumstances.
28. Managers at all levels lack the necessary rigour to ensure that children's plans are progressed. As a result, some children experience delay in becoming looked after and others remain in unacceptable situations for too long.
29. At 33%, the re-referral rate remains high compared to the England average (22%) and that of statistical neighbours (21%). Inspectors found that inconsistent practice, poor management oversight and the closing of children's cases prematurely are key contributors to high re-referral rates.
30. The prevalence of domestic abuse is one of the local authority's biggest challenges. It is a risk factor for 62% of children who are subject to a child protection plan. Services available to support children and their parents are insufficient, with many having waiting times of several months.
31. Assessments are too descriptive of families' circumstances and lack insight into the child's experience.
32. Significant information is not always included in assessments and, for these children, the resulting plans and interventions are often vague and generalised.
33. Management oversight in the majority of children's cases is of serious concern.
34. Arrangements for the support and oversight of children looked after who are living at home under placement with parents' regulations is not sufficiently diligent.
35. In too many cases a lack of professional curiosity has adversely affected decisions about the safety and well-being of children. Basic questions about historical events or children's current circumstances are not explored and evaluated.

Immediate actions already taken:

36. During the inspection, an action plan was promptly developed and presented to Ofsted to deal with the immediate and emerging concerns raised by inspectors.
37. This has been strengthened since the publication of the report to ensure it fully incorporates the 10 recommendations Ofsted made. The plan itself may be subject to change following an action planning visit with Ofsted on Wednesday 28th February 2018.
38. In addition, an operational improvement plan has been developed to ensure that any action taken is embedded consistently in practice across all social work teams.
39. An urgent review to ensure that monitoring and visiting arrangements to all children looked after in placements with parents are sufficiently robust to ensure their safety has occurred.
40. Senior Managers are meeting weekly to check actions are being completed on time and that team managers are effectively overseeing cases to drive children's plans.
41. The use of practice forums has been strengthened to support staff in capturing the learning from audits in order to influence and change practice.
42. An external provider has been commissioned to deliver mandatory training on professional curiosity for all social work staff and managers. In addition, they will be also be involved in the implementation of action learning sets across all core social work team focussing on this topic and management of risk.
43. A review has commenced of all children in need cases to provide assurance that children are safe and that plans are effective and address any identified risks.
44. Increased scrutiny of weekly reports to monitor caseloads.
45. Weekly observations of social work team meetings introduced to immediately intervene where the potential for drift and delay is evident.
46. Risk assessment tools have been made readily available for all staff.
47. Peer development sessions, regular observations and monthly auditing introduced to ensure that there is a consistent understanding amongst child protection conference chairs and independent reviewing officers on the identification and management of risk, including escalation where necessary.

Next steps:

48. As the Local Authority has been judged inadequate for the second time, the DfE will appoint a commissioner in the coming months. Their task will be to assess the council's capacity and capability to improve its Children's Services in a reasonable timeframe. Three months after their appointment, they will report to the DfE with a recommendation about the future of Children's Services in Buckinghamshire.
49. In addition, Ofsted will also carry out monitoring activity that includes an action planning visit, quarterly monitoring visits and a re-inspection. The monitoring visits may not be equally spaced throughout the year and the date of the first visit will be agreed as part of the action planning visit on Wednesday 28th February 2018. The monitoring visits

will focus on where improvement is needed the most and we anticipate between 4 and 6 visits before a re-inspection.

50. The Ofsted report acknowledges the commitment from both elected members and the senior leadership team in prioritising Children's Services. This political and corporate commitment will only be strengthened as the council implements the recommendations made by Ofsted.

B. Other options available, and their pros and cons

N/A

C. Resource implications

To ensure that all the actions identified above can be taken forward in a timely manner some non-recurring funding will be required, including having a small improvement team. This will be funded from a 'Major Projects' earmarked reserve and will not exceed £500,000.

It is also worth noting that the council is confident that the current level of funding across children's social care compares favourably to our nearest neighbour groups.

D. Value for Money (VfM) Self-Assessment

It is important to allocate resources to our top priorities and ensure we achieve the outcomes required to secure improvements identified in the Ofsted report.

E. Legal implications

The local authority must carry out its statutory obligations in respect of safeguarding Children and Young People, as set out in the Children Act 2004 and in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'.

F. Property implications

There are no property implications.

G. Other implications/issues

If the council does not respond in a way deemed appropriate by the DfE, they may advise ministers to take further action. There is a presumption in cases of persistent or systemic failure that children's social care services will be removed from local authority control, for a period of time, in order to bring about sustainable improvement, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so. The commissioner will assess whether there is sufficiently strong evidence to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should services continue to remain with the council.

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

N/A

I. Communication issues

Prior to and after the publication of the Ofsted report, all Children's Services staff were invited to a briefing session to share the findings of the inspection. Further sessions have also been held for all staff across the organisation and partner agencies.

J. Progress Monitoring

Oversight of progress and key deliverables will be monitored weekly through the Ofsted Action Plan group, chaired by the Executive Director of Children's Services. In addition, the Corporate Management Team will hold monthly meetings to review progress against the plan, chaired by the Chief Executive of the Council with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services in attendance. Update reports will also be provided to Cabinet regularly. The Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee will also play a key part in scrutinising progress.

K. Review

N/A

Background Papers

Appendix 1: High Level Action Plan

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 Democratic Services Team by 5.00pm on Friday 16 February 2018. This can be done by telephone (to 01296 382343), or e-mail to democracy@buckscc.gov.uk