

Buckinghamshire County Council

Re-inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

Inspection date: 6 November 2017 to 30 November 2017

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Children's services in Buckinghamshire are inadequate	
1. Children who need help and protection	inadequate
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence	inadequate
2.1 Adoption performance	good
2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	requires improvement to be good
3. Leadership, management and governance	inadequate

Executive summary

Overall progress in improving services for children in Buckinghamshire since the last inspection in 2014 has been inconsistent and too slow. The strategic response to change has been piecemeal and has not successfully achieved the required wholesale improvements to services for vulnerable children. Consequently, at this inspection inspectors found serious shortfalls in some parts of the service, which led to services for children in need of help and protection and for children looked after being judged inadequate.

The high turnover of social workers, high caseloads in some teams and poor recording have all been significant contributory factors to the slow progress of children's plans, and have led to some children being left at risk and in unsuitable circumstances for too long. Frequent changes in social workers or visits conducted by rotating duty workers make it hard for children to develop trusting relationships or for social workers to properly understand children's experiences and circumstances.

A failure to recognise or respond promptly to increasing risk and an over-reliance on parents' own reports of their progress, alongside weak oversight by managers, have led to some children's cases being closed prematurely. These children are frequently referred again when their circumstances deteriorate.

Most children have assessments and plans in place, but the quality of these is inconsistent. Some 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.

Over-optimism about the effectiveness of contracts of expectation and written agreements has led to an over-reliance on their use. For some children, particularly those living with parents on child protection plans or under the placement with parents' regulations, such agreements have been ineffective in ensuring that parents or other family members comply with expectations to keep them safe.

Managers have increased their oversight of social workers' practice. There is evidence of regular supervision, case discussions and intervention by child protection chairs, independent reviewing officers (IROs) and meetings chaired by heads of services. However, they do not consistently lead to the right actions being taken quickly enough. Some processes to improve challenge and oversight have only recently been put in place, and it is too soon to see their impact. Established auditing arrangements detect some of these practice issues, but do not yet focus enough attention on ensuring that children benefit from social work intervention.

Arrangements to meet the needs of unaccompanied asylum seekers when they first arrive are insufficient to ensure that their needs are met.

In response to the findings of the last inspection, elected members made children's services a key council priority. They have maintained this commitment and continue

to financially invest in and promote children's services. There has been an appropriate focus on and investment in stabilising the workforce. This is beginning to have a positive impact. Social work turnover has been reduced and agency staff are used positively to provide additional social work capacity. There is still more work required to ensure that social workers are fully supported to attend relevant training.

Inspectors identified that improvements have been successfully achieved in some service areas, mostly in reaction to the shortfalls identified during monitoring visits. Children benefit from a range of early help services and receive a well-coordinated service when more than one agency is involved with them. The establishment of the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) has been effective, and children who need an urgent response receive a prompt and appropriate service. Children who are vulnerable as a result of going missing now receive timely and thorough interviews on their return to home or care. However, the information from such interviews is not being well used to inform planning to reduce the risk of children going missing again in future. The work of the designated officer is now effective and the response to complaints has been improved.

Thresholds for those children recently coming into care are appropriate. Pre-proceedings and court work have been strengthened and the judiciary has increasing confidence in the applications that the local authority puts before the court. The focus on achieving permanence for children at the earliest stage has enabled the authority to successfully match and place children with a wide range of ages and needs in adoptive families and special guardianship order (SGO) placements. The support for these carers is of an exceptionally high standard.

Recent improvements in the children in care/after care teams and the revised format of pathway plans now ensure that care leavers' views are central to their plans. Further work is required to provide care leavers with all their essential information. Young people enjoy attending the 'We do care' Children in Care Council. The recent development of young people's representatives attending the corporate parenting panel enriches managers' and elected members' understanding of children's and young people's experiences of being looked after.

Senior leaders have worked effectively with their partner agencies at a strategic level to increase the awareness of risks to children who are vulnerable as a result of sexual exploitation. Further work, building on this, is underway to understand and respond to the complex risks that young people face, such as from gangs, 'county lines' (children forced to traffic drugs) and radicalisation.

The recent appointment of an experienced director of children's services (DCS), chief executive and new cabinet portfolio holder for children's services, and continued support from the leader of the council, now provide the local authority with a strong senior leadership team that is committed to accelerating the pace of improvements for children. Leaders accepted all the shortfalls found by inspectors during the inspection and the DCS developed an immediate action plan in response to them.