



Report to the Children's Select Committee

Title:	Children's Services Update
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Purpose of Agenda Item

The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the Select Committee on key developments within the service during the last six months.

Commissioner Related Activity

1. Following his appointment in March 2018, the DfE appointed commissioner, John Coughlan has completed his 3 month review of Children's Services. His main findings included:
 - a. A significant amount of work is required to establish and normalise good social work and child care practice across the organisation.
 - b. Good early progress is being made but unquestionably this engagement needs to be made more systematically and then sustained relentlessly.
 - c. Previous officer leadership had driven a hard and data based approach to performance management which did not take sufficient account of the quality of practice.
 - d. Changes to practice are already being implemented, supported by changes in performance and quality assurance.
 - e. Changes are being driven at pace but nobody should be under any illusions that there are quick fixes as the scale of the necessary improvement is significant. It should be generally recognised internally and externally that the timeline to establishing embedded and sustained effective services is likely to be a minimum of three years.
2. The commissioner's recommendation to the Department for Education is that there should be no alternative delivery model in Buckinghamshire and that the Council should retain its Children's Services. The current direction of travel should be endorsed in terms of the internal leadership's improvement planning. That said, he recommends that some external support

should be commissioned. A primacy should be placed on the support and development of front line managers and staff, balancing a firm application of consistent high standards with a systematic range of mechanisms to ensure those managers and staff are closely involved in and own the improvement process.

Revised Statutory Direction

3. On 12 July 2018, the DfE issued a revised statutory direction that Buckinghamshire County Council will retain its Children's Services.
4. In determining the revised direction, the Secretary of State considered:
 - a. Ofsted's inspection report of 29 January 2018, which found that children's social care services are 'inadequate'.
 - b. The Commissioner's report of 4 June 2018, which concluded there was no valid reason for the introduction of an Alternative Delivery Model in Buckinghamshire; and his recommendation that Buckinghamshire has some form of external support and challenge to oversee and monitor the delivery of the improvement plan.
5. The Secretary of State has appointed Hampshire County Council, as the Council's improvement advisers. The Council is required to co-operate with Hampshire County Council and to comply with any instructions of Hampshire County Council in relation to the improvement of the Council's exercise of its children's social care services functions.
6. Hampshire County Council is expected to support the Council's improvement programme on those areas of practice that Ofsted has judged to be inadequate.
7. The direction issued by the DfE will remain in force until it is revoked by the Secretary of State.
8. As a service, we will work closely with colleagues from Hampshire County Council and utilise their expertise and support to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

Ofsted monitoring visit

9. Following the November 2017 inspection of Children's Social Care, Ofsted conducted a two-day monitoring visit in July. During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas:
 - a. Thresholds for working with children in need.
 - b. The recognition, understanding and response to risk for children in need.
 - c. The quality of direct work with children and parents, and the links between this work and children's plans.
 - d. The quality of plans, the quality and timeliness of arrangements for the review of children's progress, and the understanding that children and their families have of these plans, and of what needs to improve.
 - e. The quality of management oversight and supervision, particularly in the following areas: assessing the impact and progress of work; support for social workers to address any difficulties in working effectively with families; and the guidance and support provided to social workers in their direct work with children.

- f. The speed and decisiveness of the response to escalating risks.
 - g. The effectiveness of the quality assurance of social work with children in need.
10. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case files, meetings with social workers and managers, discussions with senior managers and analysis of other documentations and data. The key findings are shown below:
- a. From a very low base, the local authority is making some early progress in improving services for children and young people who are the subject of a child in need plan.
 - b. Senior leaders have a clear and well-informed understanding of the significant weaknesses in the quality of work with children in need. Plans to improve practice are credible and well devised. Senior managers are strongly committed to moving forward at a realistic pace, and are determined to achieve rapid and sustainable improvements in children's circumstances and outcomes.
 - c. While the impact of most social work remains too weak, there are encouraging signs of early improvement, underpinned by realistic plans to build on this foundation.
 - d. The majority of social workers who spoke with inspectors said that they have opportunities to express their views, and that recently appointed permanent senior managers are more visible, responsive, approachable and practice orientated. Staff expressed cautious optimism that practice is slowly improving, and that the culture is increasingly transparent.
 - e. Caseloads are too high, and this limits the time that social workers have available to spend working directly with children and their families.
 - f. The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision are too variable: managers do not consistently support and assist social workers to evaluate and build an improved understanding of the needs of children.
 - g. Not all risks are fully recognised or understood, and this leads to failures and delays in the safeguarding of a minority of children. Some children's cases continue to be stepped down too quickly before children's circumstances and outcomes sustainably improve.
 - h. Most child in need plans lack focus and specificity and do not achieve purposeful, timely and measureable outcomes for children. Most contingency plans are too vague and generic and are not tailored to individual children's circumstances.

High level action plan update

- 11. Following the Ofsted inspection, a significant amount of immediate remedial action has been taken to establish a firm base for improvement within the service.
- 12. 97% (35 of 36) of immediate actions set out within this high level action plan have been progressed, with many ongoing as a continuous, integral part of the delivery of our services. The next phase of our improvement journey will focus on testing the foundations now in place and adapting our improvement plans accordingly to ensure we are strengthening the service and respond at pace to emergent and legacy issues.
- 13. Having reflected on the progress that has been made with the current improvement plan at phase 1 of the improvement journey, we have developed a refreshed improvement plan that continues to embed performance compliance, further develops practice and quality standards and seeks to develop innovative and creative solutions moving forward. The phase 2 plan is

split into four distinct themes: Practice, Performance, People and Partnerships.

14. The action that is taken and the progress that is made to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families will continue to be monitored and reviewed by the Children's Improvement Board. The Board is chaired by the Children's Improvement Adviser and comprises of Buckinghamshire's Corporate Management Team, Children's Services Management Team representatives, representatives from partner agencies and Hampshire County Council representatives.