

8 January 2019

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Dear Tolis

Second monitoring visit of Buckinghamshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Buckinghamshire children's services on 11 and 12 December 2018. This was the second visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness in January 2018. The visit was conducted by Donna Marriott and Tara Geere, Her Majesty's Inspectors, and Rebecca Wilshire, Ofsted Inspector.

Based on the evidence seen by inspectors during this visit, the local authority is beginning to demonstrate some early signs of improvement in some parts of the service providing help and protection for children. However, considerable pressures on capacity are evident in some parts of the service and the quality of assessment, planning and intervention remains too variable.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in respect of the arrangements for supporting children in need of protection, including:

- the understanding and application of thresholds
- the quality, effectiveness and impact of assessment and planning in managing risk and improving children's outcomes
- the effectiveness of practice in response to increasing or reducing risks for children subject to a child protection plan, including pre-proceedings interventions
- the quality and timeliness of supervision, management oversight and decision-making, social work capacity and caseloads.

A range of evidence was considered for the visit, including electronic case records, discussions with social workers and their managers and other supporting documentation. In addition, inspectors spoke with the judiciary and the children and family court advisory and support service.

Overview

Since the last monitoring visit, leaders have continued to respond purposefully to the critical weaknesses in services for children in need of help and protection in Buckinghamshire. The senior leadership team continues to maintain a clear focus on how best to improve children's services and have the political support to deliver this. They have an accurate understanding of the extent of the challenge and a realistic improvement plan in place to address this. They are focusing attention on the things that matter most and recognise that their greatest challenge is to stabilise the workforce.

Leaders' work to tackle quality, performance and capability issues has resulted in a high turnover of staff, in social worker and managerial positions. This has created considerable shortfalls in capacity in some parts of the service, leading to high caseloads. Some children's cases are allocated to managers, and the children are visited by duty social workers, while waiting allocation to a social worker. This makes it difficult for children to build meaningful relationships with social workers.

Work to strengthen the quality of practice and ensure greater compliance with basic practice standards is beginning to show some early signs of improvement in some parts of the service. There remains too much variability in the quality of assessment, planning and intervention. The impact of this is that some children do not receive the help, protection and support they need.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last monitoring visit, leaders have continued to maintain a clear focus on improving services for children in need of help and protection. They have worked determinedly to deliver improvements across the service, with strong political support. Work has taken place to re-align the service, refresh the quality assurance framework and review the child protection advisory service. A refreshed improvement plan, implemented in November 2018, brings an increased focus on strengthening practice and quality standards, alongside continuing to embed performance compliance.

Leaders are under no illusion about the extent of the improvement that is needed, and they demonstrate a determination to deliver this. They have been assertive in seeking to strengthen the quality of practice and ensure greater compliance with basic practice standards. This is beginning to improve practice outcomes for children, but there has also been a negative impact on the capacity of the workforce in some parts of the service. There remains too much variability in the quality of intervention, which means that not all children are effectively helped and protected.

Variability in standards of social work practice and frontline management impedes the practice improvements that are needed, and that leaders aspire to. Senior leaders are aware that it is difficult to achieve consistency and quality in practice, particularly when there are considerable gaps in supervision for some social workers across the service. Leaders have sought to mitigate against these shortfalls where possible, with senior managers acting down in order to provide case direction, support and advice. A clear

plan is in place to ensure robust performance management of staff, where appropriate, to ensure that the service continues to improve. As the leadership team continues to strengthen oversight by frontline managers, it is bringing increased rigour in ensuring supervision and case direction. Where supervision is in place, social workers value the support, guidance and direction that it provides.

The high rate of social worker and manager turnover has created shortfalls in capacity, leading to high caseloads for some social workers. Some children's cases are allocated to team managers and worked by duty social workers, while they await assessment or allocation. This results in delays for some families getting the help they need and makes it difficult for children to build meaningful relationships with social workers. Leaders have made concerted efforts to address these shortfalls, while ensuring oversight to mitigate potential risks, but considerable pressures remain. Despite these pressures, morale across the workforce is positive, with most social workers reporting that they enjoy working in Buckinghamshire and feel supported by their peers and managers.

Most social workers visit children regularly and build effective relationships with them, taking time to understand their experiences. However, not all children are visited in accordance with their needs, with gaps in visiting evident. Social workers use a range of direct work tools to engage children and elicit their views, but there is more to do to ensure that this work is properly recorded.

Managers have more recently begun to take rigorous action to improve the quality of assessments, but variability remains. Too many lack sufficient analysis to inform the assessment of risk and decisions regarding next steps. Not all capture the impact of identity, culture and diversity on children and families' experiences. Although most assessments include information from other agencies, chronologies are weak and do not include important information regarding family histories.

Managers' work to strengthen the quality of assessments has led to a decline in assessment timeliness, and higher caseloads. Prior to this monitoring visit, the service reported significant pressures in capacity which meant that just over 100 children's cases were held in managers' names. These children were visited by duty workers while awaiting allocation to a social worker. Concerted work by senior managers meant that these children's cases had been allocated by the time of the monitoring visit, although considerable pressures in capacity remain.

The refreshed 'Beyond Auditing' quality assurance framework is providing senior managers with an effective understanding of the quality of social work practice. The new strengths-based approach to auditing provides social workers with opportunities for reflection and learning, facilitating practice development. Subsequent action is not always sufficiently rigorous in addressing shortfalls in practice or ensuring that actions are completed so that children's plans progress at the pace needed. Senior leaders are aware of this and continue to take action to address practice deficits

Strategy meetings are convened in response to concerns that children are suffering harm. Most include police and children's social care only and do not always set out clear actions and timescales for delivery or interim safety plans to ensure that children are

protected while enquiries take place. Most child protection enquiries include family history and agency information to inform the assessment, but there is some variability in the quality of this.

Initial child protection conferences are convened when children's needs escalate and most lead to an appropriate outcome. The timeliness in which these are convened has declined over recent months. Children and parents are supported to attend conferences, but it is not always clear how well children who do not attend are helped to share their views. The local authority commissions a service to provide advocacy to support participation, but there is limited evidence of their intervention.

The quality of child protection plans requires improvement. Some plans do not include clear actions or timescales for delivery, and language is often professional, making it difficult for parents to understand. Contingency plans are not always evident, or are vague, making it difficult for parents to be clear about the consequences if progress is not achieved. As part of the improvement plan, work has started with child protection advisers to strengthen the quality of child protection plans.

Child protection reviews take place regularly for most children and involve the family in reviewing the plan. Partners engage readily in child protection conferences and provide reports to support shared decision-making. There is considerable variability in the regularity and quality of core group reviews. For some children, these do not take place regularly enough, and there are significant gaps between meetings. When they do take place, there are inconsistencies in the quality of recording of the meeting, making it difficult to measure what progress is being made.

The senior leadership team has ensured increased oversight of child protection planning since the inspection. They have begun to review child protection planning for disabled children and for children who have been subject to plans for longer periods, having identified weaknesses in practice. As management oversight has been strengthened, this has led to an increase in applications to the court. However, continuing weaknesses in the effectiveness of child protection planning remain, as evidenced in sampling by inspectors. This work needs to be progressed with pace to ensure that children are effectively supported and protected. Child protection advisers provide some challenge in response to weaknesses in practice or a lack of progress in children's plans, but this is not consistently evident. For some children, a lack of core groups, gaps in visits, or a lack of progress against the plan has not been effectively tackled by child protection advisers.

When children's cases are escalated to legal planning, these meetings are used effectively to consider whether the threshold is met for proceedings and to inform planning regarding next steps. Pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline (PLO) are used to ensure that families are given every opportunity to work with the local authority to prevent unnecessary escalation. However, some confusion is evident as child protection processes are not followed for all children in pre-proceedings. Managers are beginning to take action to address this practice so that where concerns are significant enough to warrant legal action, that they are supported by rigorous, multi-agency child protection plans.

The introduction of the PLO tracking panel, which provides scrutiny of children's plans, has led to some improvement in the oversight of children's cases and the quality of practice. PLO meetings are effective in tracking progress of the plan and in engaging parents in planning. However, there is still further work to do to ensure that all children's plans are progressed without delay, particularly for those children who have been in PLO for extended periods.

Thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with this monitoring visit. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. It will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Donna Marriott
Her Majesty's Inspector