



Buckinghamshire Council Children's & Education Select Committee

Agenda

Date: Tuesday 22 March 2022

Time: 2.00 pm

Venue: The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF

Membership: M Bull, Z Williams, T Wilson, P Birchley (Chairman), S Adoh, K Bates, D Blamires, A Collingwood, M Dormer (Vice-Chairman), R Gaster, N Hussain, S James, C Jones, S Kayani, R Matthews, A Osibogun, D Summers and P Turner

Agenda Item	Time	Page No
1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE	14:00	
2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST	14:05	
3 MINUTES To approve as a correct record the minutes of the previous meeting held on 20 th January 2022.	14:10	3 - 14
4 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS	14:15	
5 PUBLIC QUESTIONS The agenda item "Public Questions" is an opportunity for people who live, work or study in Buckinghamshire to put a question to a Select Committee. The Committee will hear from members of the public who have submitted questions in advance relating to items on the agenda. The Cabinet Member, relevant key partners and responsible officers will be invited to respond. Further information on how to register can be found here: https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/your-council/getinvolved-with-council-decisions/select-committees/ No questions have been received.		
6 OFSTED INSPECTION OUTCOME REPORT For the Children's and Education Select Committee to note and ask	14:20	15 - 24

questions relating to the positive outcome of the recent Ofsted reinspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

Contributors:

Richard Nash, Director of Children's Social Care
Simon James, Director of Education
Palvinder Kudhail, Director of Children's Services

7 WORK PROGRAMME

15:00

For the Children's and Education Select Committee to

- (i) Receive a verbal update from the Chairman on the work of the Rapid Review Group on the recruitment and retention of social workers.
- (ii) To put forward further suggestions for the work programme for the 2022/2023 council year.

Contributors:

Councillor Mark Dormer: Chairman of the Rapid Review Group
Katie Dover: Senior Scrutiny Officer

8 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

15:30

The date of the next meeting is to be confirmed at the annual council meeting.

If you would like to attend a meeting, but need extra help to do so, for example because of a disability, please contact us as early as possible, so that we can try to put the right support in place.

For further information please contact: Katie Dover on 01296 531339, email democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk.



Agenda Item 3
Buckinghamshire Council
Children's & Education Select
Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 20 JANUARY 2022 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT TIME NOT SPECIFIED AND CONCLUDING AT TIME NOT SPECIFIED

MEMBERS PRESENT

M Bull, Z Williams, P Birchley, K Bates, D Blamires, A Collingwood, M Dormer, R Gaster, N Hussain, S James, S Kayani, R Matthews, A Osibogun, P Turner and A Cranmer

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

S Carnall, G Drawmer, S James, P Kudhail and R Nash

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

It was noted that Councillors Adoh, Summers, Jones, and T Wilson had given their apologies for the meeting.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- Cllr N Hussain declared a personal interest as a Governor at Pebblebrook School.
- Cllr S Kayani declared a personal interest as a Chair of the Dyspraxia Foundation and as an employee at Bourne End Academy.
- Councillor K Bates declared a personal interest as a Chair of Governors.
- Cllr D Blamires declared a personal interest as the parent of a SEND child and a school employee
- Councillor R Matthews declared a personal interest as a School Governor and volunteer at Transitions UK.
- Zoe Williams declared a personal interest as an employee of Bucks Education Partnership and as a parent governor.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meeting held on 11th November 2021 be AGREED as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

The following question had been received, in accordance with the rules of the constitution, from

Mr V Nicholas, who has attended the meeting:

- (i) Would it be appropriate to include Slough as a statistical neighbour in the aggregated comparative analysis of the County's schools' performance? Certainly this would have relevance as regards the demographic profile of Burnham Grammar School and could also perhaps be relevant for several other conurbations within the County.

In answer to the questions, Simon James, Service Director for Education replied as follows:

- (i) Statistical neighbours are determined through the Children's Services statistical neighbourhood benchmarking tool, which is commissioned by central government and originally produced by the Foundation for Education research in 2007. The latest update had been made in 2021. A number of other local authorities deemed to have similar characteristics are designated as statistical neighbours, based on the range of background variables. Both by the Department for Education and Ofsted use this tool in their analysis when benchmarking local authorities. In order to ensure consistency in data reporting this is considered the most appropriate tool to use.

A further question was received from Ms M Myatt, who requested additional information on the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and other children as a key issue for residents of Buckinghamshire. Although the question was received in line with the constitution, the scrutiny team has not received the question in time for the agenda publication. As the question requires significant additional information, the directors will respond to Ms Myatt in writing as soon as possible.

5 BUCKINGHAMSHIRE SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2020/2021

Sir Francis Habgood, Independent Chairman of the Buckinghamshire Children Safeguarding Partnership highlighted the following key points regarding the annual report which covered the year to April 2021:

- The Children Partnership is made up of the three statutory partners, the local authority, the police, and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) as the representatives of the health sector. These are equally and jointly responsible for all issues around safeguarding, which is a significant change from the Children Safeguarding Board.
- The year to April 2021 had been significantly impacted by the pandemic with a much higher volume of cases, many with significantly more complex or significant issues. Sir Habgood thanked all workers and volunteers involved in safeguarding issues. The report covered several key issues including:
 - (i) Contextual safeguarding (considering the context in which young people live and understanding when to start thinking about risks) emerged from a thematic review.
 - (ii) Thinking "family"; a theme which was raised in several of the sub -group reports considering that it was important to understand the family context of each case and include the needs of the parent and any particular risks that they might have
 - (iii) A robust tracker was now in place to ensure that; (i) recommendations are understood, (ii) the changes are embedded and (iii) the impacts are understood
 - (iv) 4 reports have been published but date back to incidents from 2016-2018 when the safeguarding teams were in a different position but important issues were raised relating to: safeguarding across borders, neglect, a baby, pre-birth procedures and youth violence
- Work continues on exploitation with a focus on ensuring that there is not duplication of work between the Adults Board, the Community Safety Board and this partnership board.

- Work would continue on the transition between young people and adults.
- Training has been heavily impacted by Covid-19. All training has been done online during the pandemic, and the offer would now be reviewed to assess the use of conferences, briefings and learning events to communicate key messages from reviews, policies and practices.
- All partners continue to fund their partnership to the same level, without any inflationary increases.

During discussion, comments and questions raised by the Committee included:

- Sir Habgood advised that face-to-face training had been affected by the Covid pandemic. The partnership no longer delivered all the training itself. At present, an Excel provider delivers training online. A return to face-to-face training was anticipated, as this would enable discussion between the number of different professionals involved in the process. Core and specific training is supported by a network of people from across different organisations and included training by the police or health sector to gain a broader understanding on different topics. Finally, the learning process would also include information delivered through briefings, learning events and virtual conferences as well as training.
- A Councillor queried whether the number of children missing from education (65) was of concern. Simon James stated that the actual number is significantly higher, however, it has reduced since Covid. The team is ensuring that those children are visited frequently, and Ofsted had confirmed that this is the case. The size of the team has also been increased.
- The development of the new 3-year business plan was progressing and a planning meeting had been held on the 20th of January 2022, which representatives from children and social care, the police and health services had attended and where some key issues (e.g. safeguarding) were discussed. It was anticipated that a draft version of the plan would be completed for inclusion in the safeguarding partnership meeting in March. Sir Habgood thanked the Councillors for their offer of support from the council.
- In response to a question, Sir Habgood highlighted two benefits of having a single chair for the children and adult safeguarding boards, this being a recent development for Buckinghamshire. First, both safeguarding boards share some common themes, such as exploitation and domestic abuse, thus understanding the risks and how services are delivered across the boards was beneficial. Second, the transition between children and adults is critical, and there is a risk that the services are no longer offered to an individual at a certain age, despite their needs remaining the same. Currently, a review is being commissioned by the Adult Safeguarding Board, however, it links closely to Children's Services. It was anticipated that the results would be published soon.
- Sir Habgood informed the committee that roughly 60 % of the Partnership's expenditure is spent on staffing, and the majority of the remaining funds is spent on training. The exact figure is available on request.
- A member wished to know what joint strategic work, mentioned in last year's report, is planned over the next 12 months. Sir Habgood stated that the report covers up to April 2021, and that the ongoing pieces of work covering the links between exploitation and domestic abuse, and neglect would continue going forward. A task and finish group on the subject of neglect was led by Dr Leslie Ray, and drew on good practice around the country. It was currently working on revising the neglect toolkit. Strong links had also been made with the new Domestic Abuse Board.
- A Councillor was interested in the impact of the increasing number of children moving to Buckinghamshire from outside the UK on the service's existing workload. Sir Habgood explained that this issue has not been featured in the work of the partnership. Richard

Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services, advised that children's services provided by Buckinghamshire Council serve all children in Buckinghamshire, as is the statutory expectation. These services were tailored to the individual needs of the children and their families, including understanding any cultural differences.

6 EDUCATION STANDARDS REPORT 2020-2021

Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services, introduced the item and Simon James, Service Director, Education and Children's Services, highlighted the following key points:

- The Cabinet Member thanked all the pupils and schools in Buckinghamshire for their ability to adapt to the changes and challenges occurring throughout the pandemic.
- It was noted that the gap between the attainment of disadvantaged children and others has narrowed over the last 12 months.
- Exclusions have continued to remain very low in Buckinghamshire. This was a result of the hard work of teachers and support staff ensuring that the needs of children were met.
- The frequency of Ofsted inspections has significantly increased since September. Buckinghamshire's schools have been supported via the side-by-side programme and the school improvement team. The current inspection framework being used is significantly different to previously used frameworks.
- The support provided to schools in response to the pandemic highlights the strong partnership between the schools and the local authority. Support is offered in the form of supervision for head teachers and access to mental health support teams in schools for as long as it is required.
- 903 children are currently educated at home. This is a lower number than at the height of the pandemic and is in line with national average. The size of the team supporting these children has been increased and support is carefully being monitored.
- The report showed the hard work that had been undertaken by the schools and their staff, and Simon James noted that the schools were a real asset to Buckinghamshire.

During discussion, comments and questions raised by the Committee included:

- A member welcomed that the report considered the data produced over the past two years not to be a robust representation of Buckinghamshire's pupils learning due to the pandemic.
- It was also noted that most attainment results were not available in the 2020 report. It was hoped that after combatting the pandemic, a more comprehensive, data-heavy report could be presented with area specific information. There was confidence in the grades assessed by teachers.
- The report stated that the slight attainment gap between pupils receiving free school meals and others has narrowed. The side-by-side programme was the main body focusing on this. The Challenge board, a comprehensive and collaborative group between head teachers and local authority officers, further supported this issue by targeting individual children in schools where the progress was not as fast as desired. Furthermore, the Quality First Teaching programme ensures that teachers are confident and competent about meeting those needs.
- Simon James advised that overall he was very pleased with children's progress which continued to improve. A partnership across schools allowing selected schools to support others was working well.
- It was further stated that the report only showed countywide figures, and that it would be useful to receive a geographical overview of attainment figures to clearly see

strengths and weaknesses of different locations. Simon James stated that this could be made available on request.

- Simon James reported that breakdown of attendance figures could be provided to the committee as requested by a committee member. The Department for Education offered a daily return around attendance, which a dedicated attendance team was monitoring closely, particularly in relation to vulnerable children. The team worked closely with schools. Current attendance rate is roughly around 90 – 94 % and tended to be higher in primary schools.
- The BASH training session on SEN was praised and the team was committed to continue delivering such sessions.
- It was further stated that free school meal vouchers during the holidays and the holidays activities programme had been welcomed by many parents.
- The healthy activities programme for schools is to be continued, as ongoing funding is received from central government. Feedback received from head teachers was very positive.
- The Council is also facilitating a huddles programme, which enables school leaders to raise issues (e.g. school closures due to Covid-19) with both the school improvement and public health teams in the Council.
- Two members raised the point that despite the improvements seen in the reports, only one school in Buckinghamshire made it into the Sunday Times school ranking. It was advised that the margins between the ranks are usually very small (about 1 %). 89 % of Buckinghamshire's schools are good or outstanding. It was noted that a ranking is not the only measurement of how good a school is, and feedback from parents and school leaders is taken into consideration when working on improvements. Buckinghamshire Council also ranked third within the group of statistical neighbours
- Many members noted that the report provided an overview, but not enough in-depth data, especially compared to reports that have previously been received. The committee wished for more detailed data, measurable targets/actions and a breakdown rather than an average to allow Ofsted comparisons. Simon James acknowledged the comments from the committee and advised that more detailed data is available within reason if requested. He noted however, that splitting the data often results in very small numbers, which may not allow sound conclusions to be drawn. The Council does, however, have access to Ofsted grading reports and additional support is provided for underperforming schools.
- The committee was advised that the attainment figure gave a statistical value which is significantly higher than the national and statistical neighbours' averages. Work is continuously carried out to improve pupil's performance, e.g. through the side-by-side programme which allows well-performing schools to support other schools. Special schools were included in the Side by Side programme.
- A member commented that the action plan mentions local experts training teachers, which means teachers are taken out of the classroom, which, in turn, may disrupt pupil's education. It was suggested that instead, teachers could be seconded to work in other schools to support and upskill their colleagues for a term, allowing the school to make provisions before secondment commences. It was noted that the action plan for the Side by Side project focussed on intervention and prevention schools work to uplift school standards, and this could be shared with the committee. Headteachers reached out to help other schools, and worked with their middle leaders to ensure their work continued in their own schools.
- Simon James noted that information regarding Early Years attainment would be included later on once assessments post pandemic were received. **Action: Simon James**
- Simon James confirmed that grant funding from the Department for Education for the Side by Side Programme and Challenge Group would cease and advised that discussions

were being held at schools forums meetings in order to be retain the level of service when the funding ceases. He assured the committee that the teams are dedicated to offering a service bespoke to children's needs.

- A substantial proportion of children leaves education at the age of 16. Simon James advised that some form of education is mandatory until the age of 16. The Council works with colleges and post-16 providers as well as ensuring map pathways for young people to access alternatives to schools, such as apprenticeships or supported internships as a pathway to the workplace.
- It was noted that children looked after by the local authority for at least one day remain in the disadvantaged cohort for the next 6 years of their education. Vulnerable children (e.g. those in social care) who are electively home educated and those most vulnerable, receive the highest support. Thus, the team has been increased to support this area.
- In line with national trends, girls in Buckinghamshire tend to perform better than boys. This may be attributed to learning styles and exam processes. Work with schools is undertaken to increase understanding of this issue.
- It was hoped to include a champion for disadvantaged children within the 18 established liaison groups. 15 champions have been appointed, which have access to additional work led by the Education Endowment Foundation.

Much of the Side by Side programme's and Challenge Board's work was focused on particular age groups to implement strategies and interventions to narrow the key stage 4 gap.

- In response to a question, it was noted that the Council is currently in conversations with head teachers and governors about how to further support them. A bespoke offer is currently being prepared for local school governors. Once the offer was accepted, it would be agreed how to measure the impact of the measures.
- In conclusion of this item, Richard Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services, paid tribute to the schools for doing an incredible job during the last few challenging years and ensuring education continued. He emphasised the value of the strong partnership with schools and the DFE. Finally he thanked Simon James and Gareth Drawmer and their teams for their contribution during the difficult past years. The Chairman echoed the comments and thanked the committee for their questions.

7 FOSTERING, ADOPTION AND SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS

The Chairman introduced the item by emphasising the Council's commitment to long-term, stable placements for each child, thus minimising the number of times a child may need to move. She highlighted the importance of integrated work to support each placement. Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services, commended the service and the hard work undertaken over the last few years adding that the service had been expanded in a digital way, which has produced good results.

Richard Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services, welcomed Palvinder Kudhail, Service Director Children's Social Care, and Sandra Carnall - Head of Children's Care Services.

The following key points from the report were highlighted:

- The report sets out the key placement options for looked-after children in respect to fostering, both long-term and short-term, special guardianship orders, which provide a long-term option for children where the guardian has parental responsibility, and adoption, the most secure placement.
- Performance data in respect of recruitment of foster carers and adoptive parents is generally good, despite Covid-19 and lengthy court proceedings.
- 70 % of Buckinghamshire Council's looked-after children are placed with in-house carers,

which are likely to be local, enabling children to maintain local connections in the community and attend the same school.

- A recruitment strategy for the next three years is in place, which includes a recruitment campaign to ensure carers cater for all children's needs. A focus was placed on the need for child and parent placements, finding more foster carers from ethnic minority groups and placing larger sibling groups.

During discussion, comments and questions raised by the Committee included:

- It was noted that conversion rates in the recruitment and retention strategy seem to be dropping despite growing interest. It was also noted that single carers in particular seem to leave the system. The Council does return to these people to find out the reason for their leaving and whether they have an interest in returning to fostering. Standards for care are very high, and a comprehensive training programme is offered by the Council to increase retention of foster carers. Recruitment is mostly done through social media or existing foster carers. The pandemic had caused some single adopters to leave for different reasons including ill health, being furloughed and being unable to financially sustain their homes. Others had applied but then returned to work and could not then take up a fostering role. Where a foster carer had left or paused their role, the team gave support to them to see if there was anything that could be done to support them further. It was noted that due to the increase in time taken for court proceedings, children now stay in foster care longer, thus spaces for new children are limited.
- A member asked what percentage of Buckinghamshire children are accommodated within Buckinghamshire, and how many the Council could accommodate. Richard Nash advised that it is most important to understand and meet the specific needs of a child at any point in time, whether that be within or outside of Buckinghamshire. The recruitment strategy aims to have as many foster carers as possible dealing with a wide range of children, but it may not always be possible to do so.
- It was noted that the adoption process is less straightforward than fostering, and that less support is offered for adoptive parents despite making a lifelong commitment. Both processes are very rigorous and guided by national minimal standards. There is also an adoption fund that enables the Council to commission bespoke support packages. Some children were placed in "foster to adopt placements"; an approach sometimes used for babies.
- Councillors praised the child-centred focus by the teams in supporting children in this difficult area.
- Within the Children's Services departmental structure there is a specific position of an appointed officer for children's homes. The council is currently looking to recruit to that role as it is the most suitable form of supporting that area of the service.
- To improve the fostering and adoption service, the teams are consistently working within the national standards, reviewing offers to carers and how they are recruited and aim to prioritise issues raised in Ofsted inspections.
- A number of foster carers move forward to adopt the child in their care. Furthermore, there has been an increase in foster carers applying for special guardianship orders. A policy has been devised to enable the Council to guarantee payments for two years, which had made a difference to those wishing to adopt.
- Higher levels of support are offered to fosterers looking after older children. Many fosterers prefer to consider caring for younger children. Many of the out of county placements were for older children.
- The Mockingbird activity is a model where a cluster of foster carers is recruited specifically for a group of children who know each other. Funding has been received to pilot the programme.

- The chairman thanked members and officers for their hard work undertaken across the council and during the pandemic for children in the county.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman introduced the work programme which outlined the areas of the service's work to be examined by the committee over the forthcoming council year. The following points were noted:

- Councillor Stuchbury requested that as part of its forthcoming work programme that the Select Committee review how speech therapy is delivered, especially in light of changes that have arisen due to the pandemic. The service is now no longer provided in-house by family and children's centres. Simon James advised that this is something that can be considered for discussion in the work programme. The Select Committee supported the request to add this item to the work programme and it was noted that it would be helpful to have information on the history of how the changes came about before the item comes to the committee **Action: Simon James**
- The committee approved the rapid review scoping paper on the recruitment and retention of social workers. In response to a question, it was noted that funding was available for the next financial year for the additional 21 social workers recruited during the pandemic.

9 DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting of the Select Committee will be Thursday 10th March 2022 at 2.00 p.m.

Maxine Myatt's Question to the Children's Services & Education Select Committee 20 January 2022 with the Director's response:

The question is outlined below:

I would like to ask Buckinghamshire Council for more information about the Attainment Gap between children from disadvantaged background and other children, in our prosperous county of Buckinghamshire.

I consider this should be one of the key issues for Councillors and residents in Buckinghamshire and that more analysis about the underlying factors relating to the issue should be in the public domain. There are particular reasons why we should be very concerned about this. The annual Report of the Education Policy Institute 2020 (based on 2019 data) indicated that nationally narrowing the Attainment Gap had ground to a halt even before the Covid 19 pandemic. It is concerning that in Buckinghamshire, the 2019 data indicated an already worse situation with a worrying widening of the gap at secondary level.

I also note that the way you report performance against this indicator in terms of comparison to the national average, does not take into account that Buckinghamshire is a prosperous area. When the Education Policy Institute reworked data taking into account relative low levels of deprivation in Buckinghamshire (apart from pockets) our situation compares less favourably. Alan Milburn's work on Social Mobility in 2016, for the then Conservative Government, found that many of the richest places in England were doing worse for their disadvantaged children than places which were much poorer. It is concerning that his 2016 report identified South Bucks and Wycombe with some of the largest attainment gaps in the country.

I appreciate that Covid 19 will have impacted the situation – indeed we all know that disadvantaged children will have been affected more adversely than others. However, we are talking about a worrying situation that predates the pandemic.

I appreciate that measuring attainment for 2020 and 2021 has been a challenge, but would like to ask specifically if you could you provide a breakdown of the following:

- *Secondary attainment data with outcomes for selective and non-selective schools separated*
- *Secondary attainment data according to area (Wycombe, Aylesbury, Chiltern and South Bucks)*
- *Secondary attainment data in relation to Disadvantaged Children according to ethnicity.*
- *Secondary attainment data in relation to the most Persistently Disadvantaged Children (Those who remain qualified for free school meals for 80% of their school years)*

The response from the Director of Education:

As described in the report presented to the Select Committee, changes to assessments/exams linked to Covid19 restrictions mean that only a limited range of results for KS4/GCSE at national and local authority level have been published by the Department for Education (DfE). Local Authorities do not have access to pupil or school level results for 2020 or 2021 and as a result, we are unable to provide more detailed analysis of results.

As well as comparing Buckinghamshire results to the national average we have compared Buckinghamshire results to Statistical Neighbours where this information is available. Statistical Neighbours are other LAs deemed to have similar characteristics based on a range of background variables

Secondary attainment data with outcomes for selective and non-selective schools separated. This information was included in the 2019 Education Standards Report available at this [link](#) – see page 33. Both selective and non-selective school results compared favourably to the national averages for similar schools. Data by admissions basis has not been published by DfE for 2020 or 2021, and we do not have access to the underlying school level data that would be needed to calculate Buckinghamshire figures.

Secondary attainment data according to area (Wycombe, Aylesbury, Chiltern and South Bucks). This information is not available for 2020 and 2021 for the reasons above. 2019 data published by DfE is below.

	Pupils living within area		Pupils attending school within area	
	Number of KS4 pupils	Average Attainment 8 Score	Number of KS4 pupils	Average Attainment 8 Score
Aylesbury Vale	1974	50.2	2007	53.1
Chiltern	1057	60.2	1420	56.6
South Bucks	588	53.3	660	55.4
Wycombe	1920	51.2	1730	55.2

Secondary attainment data in relation to Disadvantaged Children according to ethnicity. This information is not available for 2020 and 2021 for the reasons above. 2019 data for the major ethnicity categories, as recorded on school census, are below. Results for the more detailed ethnic groups have also been provided where pupil group numbers are large enough.

	Disadvantaged Pupils		Other Pupils	
	Number of eligible pupils	Average Attainment 8 Score	Number of eligible pupils	Average Attainment 8 Score
Asian or Asian British	196	42.8	952	60.6
Black or Black British	44	36.8	112	54.8
Chinese	<5	<5	31	73.1
Mixed/Dual background	93	37.6	273	59.2
White	447	34.3	3527	57.0

	Disadvantaged Pupils		Other Pupils	
	Number of eligible pupils	Average Attainment 8 Score	Number of eligible pupils	Average Attainment 8 Score
Indian	21	51.3	364	70.4
Pakistani	153	40.6	415	49.6
Black Caribbean	21	27.7	30	43.6
White and Black Caribbean	51	33.8	71	46.8
White - British	418	33.7	3292	57.1
Any other white background	22	46.1	214	54.8

Secondary attainment data in relation to the most Persistently Disadvantaged Children (Those who remain qualified for free school meals for 80% of their school years). This is not a standard definition of disadvantage, so is not included in published figures. The definition of disadvantage used by the DfE is those pupils eligible for pupil premium, which covers children who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last 6 years. Results for this group of pupils is included in the report to Select Committee.

Simon James
Service Director: Education

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Report to Children's and Education Select Committee

Date:	Thursday 10 March 2022
Reference number:	for cabinet member decisions only
Title:	Ofsted Inspection Outcome
Relevant councillor(s):	Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member Children's Services & Education
Author and/or contact officer:	Richard Nash, Corporate Director Children's Services
Ward(s) affected:	All wards
Recommendations:	For Select Committee members to note the positive outcome of the Ofsted reinspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.
Reason for decision:	For information only

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Children's Services in Buckinghamshire was judged to be inadequate by Ofsted in August 2014 and November 2017.
- 1.2 Following the November 2017 'Inadequate' judgement, Ofsted recently conducted their reinspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. As part of the inspection, inspectors evaluated:
 - overall effectiveness of the service
 - the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection
 - the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers
 - the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families

- 1.3 This inspection found that Buckinghamshire was no longer 'Inadequate', and the overall judgement of Children's Services was 'requires improvement to be good'. The report was published on Friday 11 February 2022 and can be accessed [here](#).
- 1.4 This is, in our view, a very significant achievement particularly given the long history of previously inadequate practice and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on demand for services. We would like to thank and acknowledge the considerable efforts of our staff and the contribution of partners in achieving this inspection outcome.

2. Content of report

- 2.1 Children's Services in Buckinghamshire was judged to be inadequate by Ofsted in August 2014 and November 2017.
- 2.2 As this was Buckinghamshire's second inadequate judgement, the Secretary of State appointed John Coughlan CBE, former Chief Executive Hampshire County Council, as Children's Commissioner to undertake a review to determine if the most effective way of securing and sustaining improvement in Buckinghamshire was to remove the control of children's social care from the Council. As part of the review, the Commissioner recommended that the Council should retain control of its Children's Services and that there should be no alternative delivery model in Buckinghamshire; however, some external support should be commissioned. As a result, the Secretary of State appointed Hampshire County Council, as the Council's improvement advisers. The purpose of the improvement partnership with Hampshire is to provide the service with independent advice, support and challenge. An Improvement Board, chaired by John Coughlan was also established and included representatives from the Police, Health and Education. The purpose of the Board was to drive sustainable improvement across Children's Services to address the feedback and areas of concern identified during the November 2017 inspection.
- 2.3 Between July 2018 and October 2019, Ofsted completed 4 monitoring visits. This is standard practice by Ofsted prior to carrying out a full re-inspection. The report of each monitoring visit has been published and is available via the Ofsted website. All monitoring visits reflected progress and also the general challenge in improving services and also specific challenges around recruitment and retention of social workers.
- 2.4 The fifth monitoring visit was scheduled for Spring 2020; however, this was postponed due to Covid-19. Once Ofsted commenced inspection activity again, they conducted a Covid Focused Visit in February 2021. Challenges in relation to recruitment and retention were noted again as well as the significant increase in demand as a result of the pandemic.

- 2.5 Between 29 November and 17 December 2021, Ofsted conducted their reinspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. As part of the inspection, inspectors evaluated:
- the overall effectiveness of the service
 - the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection
 - the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers
 - the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.
- 2.6 During the inspection, inspectors reviewed approximately 400 children’s case files and over 350 documents. Inspectors also met with staff, partners, children and young people, care leavers, parents and carers, adopters and foster carers, as well as the Leader, Cabinet Member Children’s Services & Education, Chief Executive and Senior Leaders within Children’s Services.
- 2.7 This inspection found that Buckinghamshire was no longer ‘Inadequate’, and the overall judgement of Children’s Services was ‘requires improvement to be good’. The key findings as detailed within the inspection report are set out below.
- 2.8 **Overall Effectiveness: requires improvement to be good.**
- a) No children were identified at immediate, unassessed risk of serious harm and no widespread or serious failures for children were seen across the range of services.
 - b) Leaders worked highly effectively to ensure that children were safeguarded during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - c) The scale and speed of improvement work have been impeded by acute and persistent recruitment and retention difficulties of both social workers and frontline managers and the depth and extent of poor social work practice dating back to the last inspection in 2017. These challenging conditions have been compounded by the pandemic, particularly a large and persistent increase in demand for children’s services following children’s return to school.
 - d) Many children, particularly those receiving services from the assessment and help and protection teams, have too many changes of social worker.
 - e) Senior managers have established a comprehensive and rigorous set of performance measures, which gives them a sound understanding of the services provided for children. However, this data is not always used to full effect.
 - f) The positive impact of quality assurance work has accelerated during the last six months but has been too slow in generating widespread higher standards of practice that improve children’s circumstances and experiences.

2.9 **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good**

- a) Children are identified when they are at immediate risk of serious harm and prompt action is taken to protect them. No widespread or serious failures were identified that left children exposed to serious continuing harm. This is a tangible improvement on the position at the last inspection in 2017. It has been achieved while addressing the considerable additional challenges entailed in safeguarding children during the pandemic.
- b) The work carried out in targeted and universal early help services results in discernible improvements in many children's circumstances. These services prevent many children's difficulties worsening and escalating.
- c) Children referred to the MASH needing urgent safeguarding responses are immediately identified and decisive actions are taken to protect them. Strategy meetings are held quickly, with relevant partner agencies attending or providing information.
- d) Too many children and families are re-referred who are not at significant risk of harm but require skilled help to improve their circumstances.
- e) Some assessments are too superficial. They often list histories of previous referrals and interventions, but do not evaluate these in conjunction with current concerns to provide a coherent picture of children's circumstances over significant periods of time.
- f) A sharp increase in the number of strategy meetings and initial child protection conferences (ICPCs) has led to delayed ICPCs. Inspectors did not find any avoidable harm arising for children because of delays, and most of the children had tight initial safety plans in place.
- g) Children on a plan are seen regularly by their social workers and many receive help that improves their circumstances and helps to keep them safe. However, the quality of direct work with many children often has little purpose. Emerging indications of improving practice were seen with some children on CP plans over the last six months which redressed previously entrenched patterns of drift and delay.
- h) Most child protection advisers (CPAs) regularly seek updates on children's progress, but their scrutiny is not always incisive enough when plans are floundering.
- i) When concerns about children's safety and well-being increase, work in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) is effective.

- j) Decisions to remove children from parental care are careful and in the best long-term interests of the child.
- k) Some children aged 16 and 17 years old who present as homeless are not well supported when they present to children's social care.
- l) The local authority has suitable oversight of most children not currently placed full-time in education.

2.10 The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

- a) Some older children wait too long for permanency arrangements to be confirmed and associated drift is not always effectively challenged. Direct work with children often lacks a clear purpose and is fractured by changes in children's social workers. A small number of care leavers live in unsuitable accommodation.
- b) Some older children wait too long for permanency arrangements to be confirmed and associated drift is not always effectively challenged. Direct work with children often lacks a clear purpose.
- c) Many care leavers valued the support provided to them during the pandemic and most children are living in secure and stable foster families.
- d) Diligent early permanence work is conducted with children who have recently entered care, particularly during care proceedings.
- e) Work with some children living with their parents under a care order requires strengthening. Some children have well-considered assessments and plans; however, for others, weaker planning and drift leads to avoidable delays in discharging their care orders.
- f) Most children in care are settled and feel safe where they live.
- g) Review meetings for children in care take place on time and with the appropriate people.
- h) The regular footprint of the IROs is present on children's files, but formal escalations are not consistently recorded to address drift in care planning.
- i) Care plans are refreshed regularly; however, the effectiveness of some care plans is limited as they contain generic rather than individualised actions.
- j) Children in care have their routine health needs met. Some children receive support with their emotional health and well-being, but others experience considerable delays in waiting for child and adolescent mental health assessments or interventions.
- k) An established Children in Care Council provides opportunities for some children in care and care leavers to have their views heard on the services they receive.

Children in care can access the support of advocates if they wish, and a small number do so.

- l) The quality of a small number of foster carer assessments is weak and delays are evident in the completion of some connected person assessments.
- m) Prospective and approved adopters are well supported through regular visits and effective communication.
- n) Care leavers are visited regularly by their PAs and are able to establish trusted relationships that are valued by most young people. Not all care leavers are routinely informed of their rights and entitlements.
- o) The virtual school works collaboratively with the care leavers team to actively promote young people's engagement in education, employment and training (EET).

2.11 The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

- a) Leaders and senior managers have achieved important improvements in practice over the last year for children in most parts of the service following two inadequate inspection judgements in 2014 and 2018.
- b) Several strengthened elements of leadership are in place, but much more needs to be done to ensure that children receive consistently positive standards of social work intervention in all parts of the service.
- c) A knowledgeable and highly committed new senior management team is providing highly focused practice leadership.
- d) Managers at every level have worked tirelessly and collectively to ensure that children are safeguarded in the face of the unique and continuing challenges generated by the pandemic.
- e) Social workers' workloads in the assessment and help and protection teams are relentless and highly demanding. Persistently high workloads and staff turnover continue to impede senior managers' efforts to substantially improve the quality of social work practice.
- f) Senior managers are determined and persistent in their efforts to recruit and retain more social workers.
- g) Improved strategic engagement with partners has secured much greater confidence in the local authority's decision-making and responses concerning work in the front door.

- h) Quality assurance of social work with children is still at an embryonic stage and is not yet a powerful determinant in improving practice standards, although its influence and scale have gained pace and traction over the last six months.
- i) Senior managers are determined and persistent in their efforts to recruit and retain more social workers.
- j) A detailed and accurate performance management system provides managers with frequently updated and rigorous metrics about performance in most parts of the service.
- k) Children's services are at the centre of the recently unitarised council and considerable additional investment has been provided to children's social care services. Regular scrutiny provides the leader of the council and cabinet member for children with an informed understanding and they both have an inquisitive eye.
- l) Most social workers receive regular case and personal supervision and management oversight. Case supervision is predominantly functional rather than reflective and developmental. Heavy workloads in the front door teams leaves limited time to critically reflect on the progress of plans and the influence of direct work on helping children.
- m) Social workers and frontline managers attend a wide range of pertinent training and development opportunities.
- n) Despite the intensive workload demands, most social workers spoken with during the inspection like working in Buckinghamshire and reported that their managers support them and help them prioritise their work.

2.12 **What needs to improve?**

- a) The understanding, and reduction of, a high rate of re-referrals and assessments that result in no services being provided for children and their families.
- b) The consideration and cumulative impact of earlier interventions and family histories in children and family assessments.
- c) The quality of social workers' direct work with children.
- d) The support provided to children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless.
- e) The impact of independent reviewing officers (IROs) in decisively escalating children's cases when there is drift and delay in the progress of their care plans.
- f) The quality of case supervision for social workers in order that it promotes consistently effective work with children.
- g) The engagement and participation of children in care in the corporate parenting work of the council.

3. Other options considered

3.1 N/A

4. Legal and financial implications

4.1 In light of the positive Ofsted judgement, the Statutory Direction issued to the Council in relation to Children's Services under Section 487A(4B) of the Education Act 1996 is in the process of being revoked by the Secretary of State.

4.2 There are no financial implications associated with the outcome of this inspection.

5. Corporate implications

5.1 N/A

6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

6.1 N/A

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

7.1 N/A

8. Next steps and review

8.1 The service is currently in the process of developing an Improvement Plan in response to the Ofsted recommendations. This plan must be submitted to Ofsted by Wednesday 25 May 2022.

8.2 Local authorities judged as 'requires improvement to be good' at their most recent inspection will receive standard inspections by Ofsted. The standard inspection will usually take place about 3 years after the previous inspection. In between inspections, the local authority will receive up to 2 focused visits.

8.3 An independently chaired Board will continue to meet every two months. The Board will maintain oversight of the progress being made against the Ofsted recommendations and other improvements required across the service. John Coughlan, CBE, will continue to be the Independent Chair.

9. Background papers

[June 2014: Ofsted Inspection Report](#)

[November 2017: Ofsted Inspection Report](#)

[July 2018: Ofsted Monitoring Visit](#)

[December 2018: Ofsted Monitoring Visit](#)

[June 2019: Ofsted Monitoring Visit](#)

[December 2019: Ofsted Monitoring Visit](#)

[February 2021: Ofsted Focused Visit](#)

10. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

- 10.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone [] or email []

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