



Buckinghamshire Council Children's & Education Select Committee

Agenda

Date: Thursday 30 June 2022
Time: 2.00 pm
Venue: The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF

Membership: Z Williams, T Wilson, S Adoh, K Bates, D Blamires, A Collingwood, M Dormer, N Hussain, S James, C Jones, S Kayani, Dr W Matthews, A Osibogun, D Summers, J Towns, P Turner and J Ward (Chairman)

Agenda Item	Time	Page No
1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE		
2 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN The Chairman will appoint the Vice-Chairman for the forthcoming year.		
3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST For Committee Members to disclose any Personal or Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.		
4 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING To confirm as a correct record the minutes of the meetings of the Select Committee held on 22 nd March 2022 and 18 th May 2022.		3 - 10
5 PUBLIC QUESTIONS 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/>

6	LOCAL AREA SEND INSPECTION OUTCOME For the Select Committee to receive a report detailing the outcome of the Ofsted and Quality Care Commission inspection of the local area SEND provision, carried out between 28 th February and 11 th March 2022. Contributors: Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Children’s and Education Simon James, Director of Education	14:15	11 - 36
7	RAPID REVIEW GROUP REPORT ON SOCIAL WORKER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION To receive the report of the rapid review group on social worker recruitment and retention. Contributors: Councillor Mark Dormer (Chairman)	15:00	37 - 48
8	WORK PROGRAMME An opportunity for Members to discuss possible topics for the future committee work programme. Contributors: All Members Mrs Katie Dover, Senior Scrutiny Officer	15:30	49 - 50
9	DATE OF NEXT MEETING The next meeting of the Select Committee will be held on Thursday 8 th September 2022 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, The Gateway, Aylesbury at 2.00 p.m.	15:50	

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 4
Buckinghamshire Council
Children's & Education Select
Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON TUESDAY 22 MARCH 2022 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 2.53 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

M Bull, T Wilson, P Birchley, K Bates, N Hussain, S James, R Matthews and P Turner

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

R Stuchbury

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

It was noted that Councillors Adoh, Blamires, Collingwood, Cranmer, Dormer, Jones, Kayani, Osibogun and Mrs Williams had given their apologies for the meeting.

Councillor Stuchbury was attending as substitute for Councillor Kayani.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Hussein declared a personal interest as a school Governor.

Councillor Bates declared a personal interest as a Chair of Governors.

Councillor Matthews declared a personal interest as a school governor and volunteer at Transitions UK.

Tony Wilson declared a personal interest as a Trustee of the Oxford Diocesan Bucks Schools Trust.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 20th January 2022 were reviewed.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 20th January 2022 be AGREED as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

4 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman, Councillor Birchley, announced with pleasure that the council's recent Ofsted inspection of Children's Services had shown the extensive improvements that the department had made since the last inspection in 2017 and during the time of the Covid pandemic. She

thanked the Strategic Director, Richard Nash and all the staff for their hard work.

5 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

It was noted that no public questions had been received for this meeting.

It was noted that information relating to a previous public question had been included in the agenda for this meeting. Councillor Bates would follow up the issue on the provision of data for exam results with the Strategic Director.

6 OFSTED INSPECTION OUTCOME REPORT

The Chairman introduced this item on the outcome of the Ofsted inspection which was recently undertaken at the end of 2021. It related to the services provided for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. The service had undertaken an extensive amount of work prior to and during the pandemic. Many issues related to the retention and recruitment of social workers, and front-line managers and these were compounded by increased workloads. The Select Committee responded to this immediately and had set up a rapid review group in January to look in detail at the issue social worker recruitment and retention. The group would present their report to the committee in June.

The Chairman thanked all the staff in the Children's Services department and the Directors for their thorough work over the last few years.

Richard Nash, Strategic Director, attended the meeting via Teams and noted that the meeting had been rescheduled due to another Ofsted inspection of the SEND services. The findings of this would be reported in due course.

Mr Nash gave details of the Council's Ofsted history noting that the service was found to be inadequate in 2014 based on previous service provision. The service was also found to be inadequate in 2017 when it had been hoped that a different outcome would result. 2017 was the starting point of the current leadership team's attempt to turn the service around. It is recognised that change in Children's Services takes time to achieve. The inspection was very thorough with the outcome "requires work to be good" and so was no longer "inadequate".

The findings, which were published in February, were as expected as the department was aware of the shortcomings through quality assurance. 400 children's cases were reviewed and 350 documents. The inspection took place over three weeks with two weeks on site. The report showed that much good work had taken place but it was understood that there was more work to be done to keep the service improving into the future. The work that was achieved by the staff during the pandemic and with the history of poor service in Buckinghamshire was extensive and was recognised by Ofsted.

In response to points made by Councillor Hussein regarding (i) the frequency of change of social workers and therefore fragmented service in some cases and (ii) performance data not feeding through to reducing referrals, Mr Nash responded that the recruitment and retention of social workers was a national problem.

In Buckinghamshire the pandemic has caused a huge increase in volume of work (62% in child protection) which had put great pressure on the workforce, and therefore some social workers would make decisions to work in different roles. The issue was mainly in the frontline child protection area. Agency worker turnover also impacted as cases had to be transferred to other social workers.

Three things were being actioned to address this:

- the expansion of the in-house social worker academy enabling workforce planning; encouraging staff loyalty and reduced dependency on agency staff;
- support around career development and
- the management of high caseloads.

Social work is a difficult area of work and Mr Nash noted the department's intention to support and manage the issues as best as possible.

Mr Nash reported that:

- the Ofsted Inspection is a "stop the clock exercise" i.e. Inspectors report on the situation current at the time. With regards to performance management, the department were aware of the issues.
- High re-referrals were due to a) the pandemic and b) the historical state of the department.
- 93% of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. Ofsted picked up on two cases where there was an issue. The department would manage the changing circumstances of care-leavers lives carefully and although unsuitable accommodation was sometimes used when necessary, the department always tried to ensure that this is for as short a time as possible.
- Children's social work is a statutory requirement of a council so the number of cases referred to the teams varied day to day but had to be dealt with and measures were taken to balance out the workloads on a daily basis. However, work could be at too high a level for some people for some of the time.
- One of the impacts of the pandemic was not being able to involve children as much as possible in the department's work, however going forward they would be involved in corporate parenting.
- In response to a question, the Director noted that part of the improvement work since 2017 included ensuring that the children's recording systems were fit for purpose. Two systems were currently in place but work was progressing to implement only one.
- Supervision and management oversight was very important and performance data was provided on a monthly basis giving information as to which staff had supervision sessions. It was important to make sure this was reported regularly.
- High caseloads meant that sometimes supervision was functional rather than reflective due to time pressures and the high volume of cases but this was being addressed going forward.
- Much work was required to ensure school children moving in and out of the county were given school places at the right place and time. Most schools were near full capacity and therefore the support for children in their education had to be flexible sometimes.

In response to a question from Councillor Collingwood, Mr Nash noted that the service had created a comprehensive set of action plans from the 2017 inspection which were monitored through the Improvement Board, chaired by John Coughlin, Chief Executive of Hampshire County Council.

- Progress from the Board was regularly reported to the Council's Cabinet.
- There was a combination of actions to be taken to avoid the issue of children having too many changes of social worker. The whole service would be looked at to ensure maximum consistency for children.
- The SEND Ofsted inspection report would address the issues of early help mentioned in this Ofsted report and there would be an action plan going forward for that inspection relating to various issues including emotional health which would be addressed in conjunction with health partners.

Foster care had shown an improvement in both the number of carers and placements also. Mr Nash noted the following:

- that work would always seek to improve the numbers of adopters and fosterers.
- Work was underway to increase assessment of the type of skills required by some children re-referred to the service.

The Local Authority Designated Officer had been referred to in the report and the issues in relation to this were resolved prior to the inspection.

The Corporate Director noted how important it is for the service to keep improving. Ofsted had covered a wide scope during its last visit and would keep in touch with the council once a year and would visit again in the future.

Mr Nash emphasised that all the service's staff who had all worked over the last two years during the pandemic with a hugely increased workload to keep children safe under pressurised circumstances, were to be valued highly for their hard work.

The Chairman and the Committee thanked and congratulated the service on the work done in a short space of time to improve the service from "inadequate" to "requires improvement".

7 WORK PROGRAMME

- a) The Chairman noted that a rapid review group had been set up by the Select Committee to look at the recruitment and retention of social workers. The Chairman of the review group, Councillor Dormer had sent his apologies to this meeting but had provided the following words for the Chairman to read in relation to the investigations the group had made so far, as follows:

Update for Children's & Education Select Committee Report into the Retention and Recruitment of Social Workers

With the OFSTED inspection expected in Q4 2021, members of the group took the decision to postpone the commencement of the report to allow senior Officers to focus their time and efforts on the imminent inspection. The following progress had been made:

- Once the inspection had been completed the group began its investigations. All meetings have been held online and in an 'open mic' session with free two-way conversation encouraged. At all stages, the group has emphasised its approach as one of a 'critical friend' looking to help and support the service, but not being reticent about making firm but fair conclusions.
- The group began its investigation with a lengthy meeting with the head of the service, Richard Nash, who provided a full assessment of the national backdrop and how this specifically affected Buckinghamshire with its then 'inadequate' OFSTED rating. Subsequent meetings have included members of the finance team to provide context for the financial implications of recruiting agency and overseas staff. The group has been forensic in its approach to data and costs and delved deep into the financial implications and costs of how the staffing model currently operates and how it might work in an optimal situation.
- The group has examined the organisational workings of the service, together with the administrative burdens placed on certain sections of the organisation, the technology employed to support staff and the role and function of Human Resources.
- In order to ensure that the group created an open forum for discussion, the decision was

- taken for the Head of Service to be excused from meetings with Line Managers and individual Social Workers, in addition the group itself took responsibility for encouraging participation, rather than relying on individuals proposed by others within the service.
- A broad section of Line Management from across the service have attended meetings and there has also been two additional meetings with social workers themselves to ensure that the group has received a wide range of opinions from a variety of different people. A great deal of time has been spent in pre-meeting preparation to ensure that key topics and areas were fully examined in depth, but the group has also been keen to allow and encourage open conversations and discussions throughout all meetings. In addition, all meetings have been concluded with the reaffirmation of our approach to privacy and encouraging those attending to send in further thoughts and observations post the meetings as they see fit.

The group has now concluded the interview and meetings aspect of its investigation and is moving to the 'wash-up' stage. However, we will retain the option to revisit the meetings stage if we feel that we have areas which require more investigation or granularity before the group reports its findings.

The overriding aim of the group is to deliver a report which reflects a true and fair reflection of the current situation for the recruitment and retention of social workers together with key recommendations. Where Buckinghamshire is successful and on point, we will ensure that this is recognised, but where there is room for improvements, the group will not shy away from criticism where it is due.

B) Future Items for the work programme

A draft list of items included children's social care improvement plan: SEND inspection results, Early help and children's centres, and the report of the rapid review group.

Councillor Hussein requested more information on the attainment gap and the workings of the 11 plus exam scheme, in particular the relationship between the schools and the authority, as the council was not responsible for the scheme but for running it.

Councillor Turner requested more information on the engagement and participation of children in care and engaging them in the work of the council on corporate parenting.

Councillor Birchley requested more information on children with special needs placed outside Buckinghamshire.

Mr Nash noted that the Improvement Board held him to account and the work was also reported to the Cabinet. The Select Committee would have sight of the work, rather than have a separate item coming to the committee.

Councillor Stuchbury noted the need to ensure Section 106 contributions matched the needs required in the council.

8 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The provisional date of the next meeting of the Select Committee was Thursday 16th June 2022.

The meeting concluded at 2.55 p.m.

CHAIRMAN



Buckinghamshire Council

Children's & Education Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON WEDNESDAY 18 MAY 2022 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF.

MEMBERS PRESENT

S Adoh, D Blamires, S James, C Jones, R Matthews, A Osibogun, D Summers, P Turner, D Dhillon, J Towns, J Ward and K Bates

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

D Dhillon

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies had been received from Councillors D Barnes, A Collingwood, M Dormer, N Hussain, S Kayani and W Matthews.

2 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

It was proposed by Councillor J Towns and seconded by Councillor D Summers.

Resolved: that Councillor J Ward be elected Chairman of the Children's and Education Select Committee for the ensuing year.

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Report to Children's and Education Select Committee

Date:	Thursday 30 June 2022
Reference number:	for cabinet member decisions only
Title:	Local Area SEND Inspection Outcome
Author and/or contact officer:	Simon James, Service Director Education
Recommendations:	For member of the Select Committee to note the outcome of the recent Local Area SEND Inspection and the next steps.

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to provide the Children's and Education Select Committee with outcome of the recent Local Area SEND Inspection.

2. Content of the Report

- 2.1 Between the 28 February and 11 March 2022, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspected the services provided for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in Buckinghamshire. The inspection team considered how well the local area:
- I. identifies the needs of children and young people with SEND
 - II. assesses and meets the needs of children and young people with SEND
 - III. ensures positive outcomes for children and young people with SEND
- 2.2 The inspection team spoke to a wide range of professionals across health, education and social care and met with children and young people of all abilities in education settings and focus groups. They received feedback from over 1000 parents and carers. In addition, inspectors reviewed Education, Health and Care Plans and over 150 documents and pieces of supporting evidence.

- 2.3 The inspection found a number of strengths across the local area, despite the ongoing Covid-19 challenges. It recognised the considerable activity that is happening as part of our SEND improvement programme and confirmed that our self-evaluation accurately reflects our progress. That said, inspectors also identified 3 area of significant weakness:
- I. The lack of a cohesive area strategy to identify and meet the needs of those children and young people requiring speech and language, communication and occupational therapy
 - II. Waiting times for assessments on the autism and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder diagnosis pathways and the system-owned plans in place to address this
 - III. Waiting times to see a community paediatrician.
- 2.4 As a result of the inspection findings, the local area is required to submit a Written Statement of Action (WSOA) to address significant areas of weakness. The local authority and the area's clinical commissioning group (CCG) are jointly responsible for submitting the written statement to Ofsted.
- 2.5 Progress against the WSoA will be monitored at the Children's Services Improvement Board. This established Board provides the leadership, scrutiny and challenge that will drive forward change in the 3 key areas. The Board is chaired independently of the Council and the CCG, and as such will ensure:
- I. The identified actions are the right actions that will lead to change.
 - II. Progress is reviewed objectively and challenged where it falls short.
 - III. Impact is reviewed and further actions are agreed where required.
 - IV. Outcomes are high quality and have a positive impact on children and families.
 - V. There is sufficient accountability across the council, CCG and partner organisations.
- 2.6 This level of governance reflects the local area's commitment to achieving the ambitions of the WSoA and the importance of getting it right first time for Buckinghamshire children and young people with SEND and their families.
- 2.7 The WSoA is part of Buckinghamshire's broader SEND Improvement Programme and as such the actions will also be reviewed as part of the work of the multi-agency SEND Integrated Services Board who direct and guide the work. The SEND Integrated Services Board reports into the Children's Services Improvement Board and is held accountable by it in relation to the WSoA.

- 2.8 We will of course focus our efforts on improving the areas of significant weakness identified, while continuing with our broader improvement journey across organisations to ensure the support children with SEND receive in Buckinghamshire is high quality and effective.
- 2.9 Please see the full inspection findings below.

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26 April 2022

Richard Nash
Corporate Director of Children's Services
Buckinghamshire Council
Stowe Room, County Hall
Walton Street
Aylesbury
Buckinghamshire
HP20 1UA

Dr James Kent, Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) Accountable Officer (Chief Accountable Officer and Integrated Care System Executive Lead)
Lucy Pike, Local Area Nominated Officer

Dear Mr Nash and Dr Kent

Joint area SEND inspection in Buckinghamshire

Between 7 March 2022 and 11 March 2022, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC), conducted a joint inspection of the area of Buckinghamshire to judge the effectiveness of the area in implementing the special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) reforms as set out in the Children and Families Act 2014.

The inspection was led by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors from Ofsted, with a team of inspectors including another Her Majesty's Inspector and a children's services inspector from the CQC.

Inspectors spoke with children and young people with SEND, parents and carers, and local authority and National Health Service officers. They visited a range of providers and spoke to leaders, staff and governors about how they were implementing the special educational needs reforms. Inspectors looked at a range of information about the performance of the area, including the area's self-evaluation. Inspectors met with leaders for health, social care and education. They reviewed performance data and evidence about the local offer and joint commissioning.

As a result of the findings of this inspection and in accordance with the Children Act 2004 (Joint Area Reviews) Regulations 2015, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI)

has determined that a Written Statement of Action (WSOA) is required because of significant areas of weakness in the area's practice. HMCI has also determined that the local authority and the area's clinical commissioning group are jointly responsible for submitting the written statement to Ofsted.



In reaching their judgements, inspectors took account of the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on SEND arrangements in the area. Inspectors considered a range of information about the impact of the pandemic and explored how the area's plans and actions had been adapted as a result.

This letter outlines our findings from the inspection, including some strengths and areas for further improvement.

Main Findings

- ✓ After a prolonged slow start, in recent years, leaders have started to take effective action to implement the reforms. Delays in meaningful and/or effective action in too many respects, and an insufficient focus on SEND against competing priorities historically, have left a legacy of weak provision and practices. There are clear signs that momentum is growing. However, the current realities for too many children, young people and their families still fall short of what they deserve.
- ✓ There is a lot to do before the reforms will have been implemented as intended. Area leaders know what is working well and do not shy away from the crucial areas where sometimes much improvement is still required.
- ✓ In recent years, SEND has become an increasingly prominent priority for area leaders. There is evidently much more appetite for improvement from everyone involved. This important agenda is frequently discussed at all levels and there is now a considerable amount of coordinated activity that is starting to make a meaningful difference for some.
- ✓ Capacity within the speech and language therapy and occupational therapy (OT) services is unable to meet the demand. These services are trying to develop local solutions to meet needs earlier, and reduce the demand on specialist provision. However, this is not underpinned by an area strategy to address the integrated therapy needs of the children and young people across the county.
- ✓ Too many children and young people are waiting for assessments for a possible diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- ✓ Children are waiting too long to see a community paediatrician. This has remained the case for a number of years and predates COVID-19.

- ✓ Where other weaknesses currently undermine the area's effectiveness, there are robust plans in place and early signs of demonstrable improvement. However, after years where parents and carers have felt they have had to push constantly to get anywhere, it is too soon to see the impact of recent efforts on many families' confidence and trust.
- ✓ The area's SEND inclusion strategy 2021 to 2023 has been developed with a wide range of relevant people, including children, young people, and their families. This process is known as co-production. The strategy sets out a clear and ambitious vision and principles. It aligns closely with the associated plans for improvement which are fit for purpose.
- ✓ Coming together with children and young people and their families to coproduce strategies and improvement plans is a routine way of working in Buckinghamshire. The SEND integrated services board is co-chaired by the chair of the parent/carer forum, FACT Bucks, a pattern that repeats over several other key groups.
- ✓ The central focus of the SEND strategy on preparation for adulthood shows that this area has been correctly identified as an essential priority. This vital improvement work is still at an early stage of development. For many families, uncertainty about what the future holds is a source of considerable anxiety.
- ✓ There is a clear governance structure, closely aligned to each identified strategic priority. Impact groups, with representatives from both professionals and parents, help keep a watchful eye on the progress that is being made in bringing about the necessary improvements.
- ✓ Partners from education, health and care have demonstrated they are able to work well together in jointly commissioning services. They have shown a flexible approach and pooled budgets to create some innovative and effective care and education pathways.
- ✓ There is a good track record of identifying SEND in early years. Notifications from health practitioners ensure that children with additional needs are identified early and supported into settings that can provide well for them.
- ✓ The overall quality of education across Buckinghamshire schools is strong. However, the quality of inclusive practice and SEND provision varies at individual school level. A lack of suitable places locally means that a notable minority of pupils are placed beyond the county's borders.
- ✓ The area's own sufficiency strategy identifies a number of important priorities where the need for more suitable placements is most acute. Priorities rightly include groups with areas of need such as communication and interaction; speech, language and communication; and social, emotional and mental health, including for those who are academically able.

- ✓ Part of the area's strategy for raising the quality of inclusive practice in the area is strengthening the 'ordinarily available provision'. While this approach is largely embraced and valued by schools in theory, its roll out in practice

was hampered by the pandemic. The level of expertise and success in identifying and meeting needs in schools is not consistently strong enough.

- ✓ It takes too long to make important changes to education, health and care (EHC) plans that are agreed following annual reviews. Currently, there is a backlog. The systems are in place to make this process more efficient to help alleviate the situation and the backlog is being systematically addressed.

The effectiveness of the local area in identifying children and young people's special educational needs and/or disabilities

Strengths

- ✓ Early years practitioners are confident and knowledgeable about how to identify potential needs and how to act on these initial concerns. Providers are very positive about the support they receive from the early years SEND team. Support for children identified through the 'assess, plan, do, review' process is led by children's needs rather than formal diagnosis. This means children get the support they need when they need it.
- ✓ Health visitors and school nurses routinely deliver the mandated checks. Young children with SEND have a dedicated health visitor who maintains an oversight of their progress and makes sure the transition into the school nursing service is a positive one. The school nurse team has recently introduced a helpful school readiness programme to identify emerging needs.
- ✓ All children and young people referred to the school nurse team receive a comprehensive emotional screening to help target the necessary intervention. This helps direct the most appropriate support. School nurses have good links with mental health teams and can refer directly into child and adolescent mental health services.
- ✓ Children and young people who are referred to the youth offending service are supported well with the first-time identification of mental ill health or communication difficulties. The youth offending team has commissioned some bespoke work to improve outcomes for marginalised groups.
- ✓ The organisation of the local SEND decision-making panels into multidisciplinary 'surgery groups' ensures decisions are well informed by multiple professional voices. School leaders typically express confidence in these arrangements.

- ✓ Most statutory assessments are completed within the prescribed timeframes. This marks a significant improvement compared with the past, and has been achieved alongside a notable improvement in the overall quality of the plans.
Almost all assessments result in the issue of an EHC plan first time.
- ✓ The most recently produced EHC plans are of much better quality than those written in the past. These newer plans are typically fit for purpose, and many are strong. They are much more likely to represent the views, wishes and aspirations of the child and their family. Closer attention is paid to long-term outcomes and there is a suitable focus on preparing for transition at critical points. Education sections of the EHC plan are strong and this is where parents understandably have most confidence. Health sections remain more variable and the social care sections are comparatively the weakest.
- ✓ The designated clinical officer is new in post and is prioritising improving quality throughout the EHC plan and annual review process.

Areas for development

- ✓ Difficulties recruiting and retaining education, health and care coordinators and other central staff has led to the breakdown in effective communication for many families. Leaders are taking sensible steps to address this issue, but it remains a considerable barrier to building trust and confidence.
- ✓ The area has rightly highlighted the early and accurate identification of children and young people at school age requiring SEND support as an area for development. Currently, the proportion remains lower than is seen nationally. More importantly, too many parents still have recent or current stories of struggling to get the needs of their children recognised and met.
- ✓ Timeliness of health contributions from the community paediatric service to the EHC plan assessment process was significantly out of compliance. The future of a recent successful project which reduced the times from 27 weeks to nearly full compliance has not been secured.
- ✓ Co-production of EHC plans is patchy. There remains a significant legacy of weaker plans. Issues around the variable quality and timeliness of annual reviews are only just starting to be addressed.
- ✓ Information from EHC plans and annual reviews regarding the social participation of children and young people with SEND is not yet routinely considered or used to help evaluate and plan provision.

The effectiveness of the local area in meeting the needs of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities

Strengths

- ✓ The young people participating in the Shout Out for SEND group are rightly proud of what they have done to promote awareness of SEND to practitioners. Members rightly see the group as good preparation for adulthood, the world of work and participation in society. This aspect of coproduction is a real strength. There are other lovely examples of the involvement of children and young people with SEND, for example as 'SEND young inspectors' of the suitability of clubs and activities in the area.
- ✓ The 16 family centres across Buckinghamshire enhance the good quality of pre-school support available in the area. The early years service has established a team of childminders who offer respite and specialist SEND assistance.
- ✓ The early years service team assists settings through a comprehensive accredited training programme, supported by bursaries in some instances. For example, effective training has enabled settings to deliver speech and language screening and the related interventions. Early signs indicate that this strategy may be successful in reducing the need for later intervention. Front-line leaders report this strategy has helped to address some of the impact of COVID-19 on young children.
- ✓ Educational psychologists are expanding their reach into early intervention and are able to offer a range of support across Buckinghamshire. Within specialist provision, children and young people have their needs met in a targeted way through group work or one-to-one clinical sessions.
- ✓ Children and young people have their emotional and mental health needs supported well through an extensive range of evidence-based interventions across all levels of need. The introduction of the 'Step-up' tutoring groups is making a positive difference to how practitioners in primary schools support children with escalating and immediate need. The collaborative approach the area has taken to support the introduction of mental health support teams is noteworthy. The innovative way that this support has been designed means it delivers services in a multidisciplinary way.
- ✓ The expanded reach of the virtual school beyond children looked after to include pupils with other additional vulnerabilities ensures that more children and young people benefit from this strong provision. The annual reviews for children looked after are aligned with their personal education plan reviews where possible and appropriate. In addition to carrying out health assessments, the looked after children's nurse supports ongoing referrals to other health disciplines.
- ✓ Social opportunities for children and young people following COVID-19 are still not as well developed as leaders intend. Leaders are continuing to address this, supporting available clubs and activities to increase provision for pupils with SEND. For example, they have trained providers to understand how to include autistic children and young people, including through a conference for the out of school sector and holiday clubs with the theme 'If you only know this, you'll be more inclusive.'

Areas for development



- ✓ The situation regarding community paediatrician waits has been intensified by an inability to recruit, and rising numbers of referrals. Although the service has tried several initiatives to address the ongoing problem, waiting times remain at 62 weeks before a child will be seen. This is not acceptable.
- ✓ Existing capacity is unable to keep up with demand for the assessments for possible diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The average wait is 559 days, and the longest wait is 811 days. The area has put together a business case which aims to reduce all waits to be in line with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's (NICE) guidance over the next three years. There is a suite of initiatives in place and more planned to help support families while they are waiting. It is positive that the diagnostic assessments are compliant with NICE guidance and that post-diagnostic support is available. However, the area's current proposed response to reduce the waiting times, and compensate for the delay in the meantime, is not sufficient to meet the needs of children and young people currently awaiting diagnosis.
- ✓ The absence of a joined-up approach across the county to the lack of sufficient speech and language therapy and OT means that early support is too reliant upon individual settings. The positive impact of initiatives such as the planned roll out of early language identification measures, school advice clinics and therapy webinars are making a difference. However, a tighter, coherent and coordinated system response is needed to tackle the full extent of the issue. Tribunal rates, though falling again, are high. Many dissatisfied parents are adamant that this is the only way to get the level of support that they believe is right. Area leaders have a detailed analysis of the reasons that cases reach this advanced stage to inform their strategy for further reducing the need for this level of intervention.
- ✓ The churn of education, health and care coordinators and other staff at the centre hinders both timeliness and quality of information and support across various stages of the processes to identify, assess and meet needs. Although children and young people are generally positive about the support they receive from school SEND departments, they say that the knowledge and practice of teachers in adapting provision for pupils with SEND is too variable. The 'ordinarily available provision' documentation sets out clear minimum expectations for settings and schools, but there is more work to do to ensure that this approach is followed consistently well.
- ✓ The recent publication of a co-production charter and pledge commits to involve children, young people and their families more consistently in planning the provision to meet their specific individual needs. Currently, despite notable strengths in strategic co-production, the picture at individual and family level is very variable.

- ✓ Area leaders have consulted and published their sufficiency strategy regarding all education provision with a view to expanding the breadth and variety of available pathways. Leaders are taking steps to ensure that annual reviews routinely include important information about the future plans and aspirations of young people to support further analysis and forecasts of what is needed post-16. Leaders recognise that there is a restricted range of future options for some young people with SEND at age 19. They are in the process of mapping what is needed in the area to refine plans to address this gap. They aim to have what they call their 'transitions guide' published by summer 2022. Parents welcome this but are understandably both worried and frustrated by the current situation.

The effectiveness of the local area in improving outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities

Strengths

- ✓ Young children with SEND are well supported towards school readiness, particularly those with more complex needs.
- ✓ Overall, academic outcomes for children and young people with SEND show many success stories. The picture is typically one of improvement and/or narrowing gaps compared with all pupils nationally, or with age-related expectations.
- ✓ There are some positive examples of the successful use of internship programmes as a gateway to employment. As part of the area's preparation for adulthood strategy, leaders are working proactively with potential employers to expand the amount of available provision. A rise in the proportion of adults with disabilities in paid employment bucks the national trend, although rates are still shockingly low.
- ✓ The proportion of children and young people in education, employment or training post-16 is positive. Vulnerable children with an EHC plan are able to access its protection up to age 25 if they fall out of education, employment or training. Leaders believe strongly that this supports learners with SEND to reengage with education at a later date.
- ✓ Pupils who access the primary pupil referral unit typically re-engage with education well. The vast majority return to their mainstream placements successfully, avoiding permanent exclusion altogether and, in most cases, without further suspensions. Across the area, exclusion rates for those with an EHC plan have fallen in recent years.
- ✓ Children and young people who have an EHC plan and are placed out of county, but whose placement is fragile, continue to have their plan administered by Buckinghamshire until their placement is secure.
- ✓ At the end of February 2022 over 46% of eligible children and young people have accessed their annual GP learning disability health checks. Over 83% of

those on the learning disability register have a health action plan. There is clear evidence of how these have helped support young people in accessing primary care.



- ✓ Leaders have begun work to improve social outcomes for children and young people with SEND through strengthening the contribution of social care to EHC plans. Informed by an internal audit and the annual review strategy, 70 EHC plans of children and young people in local special schools are being reviewed by a multidisciplinary team, including social care. With the permission of families, EHC plans are being updated with new advice. Leaders plan to use learning from the project to inform training, wider practice and future audit tools.

Areas for development

- ✓ Area leaders have begun taking steps that will allow them to analyse more easily how well children and young people are making progress towards their identified EHC plan outcomes, including social participation and preparation for adulthood. However, this work is still at an early stage.
- ✓ Parents are particularly concerned that they do not know about plans and preparation for when children and young people with SEND move into adulthood. While children and young people in the area's specialist provisions tend to achieve well and transition successfully to college, the range of options they need after this is not broad enough. The area priorities include a housing strategy. The area is building capacity in supported living, but this work has only recently got underway.
- ✓ Area leaders do not know enough about the social participation outcomes for children and young people with SEND to best target improvements. Leaders are instigating a mechanism to track this via annual reviews, but it is at an early stage.
- ✓ Work to record and analyse outcomes from therapy interventions to inform future priorities, improvement and commissioning has started. The trust's information systems have recently been adapted to facilitate this work. This offers the potential to enable the area to monitor health outcomes more effectively for children and young people.



The area is required to produce and submit a WSOA to Ofsted that explains how it will tackle the following areas of significant weakness:

- ✓ the lack of a cohesive area strategy to identify and meet the needs of those children and young people requiring speech and language, communication and occupational therapy
- ✓ waiting times for assessments on the autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnosis pathways, and the system-owned plans in place to address this
- ✓ waiting times to see a community paediatrician.

Yours sincerely

Ofsted	Care Quality Commission
Matthew Purves Regional Director	Manir Hussain Deputy Chief Inspector, Primary Medical Services, Children Health and Justice
Clive Dunn HMI Lead Inspector	Marsha Newton CQC Inspector
Lucy English HMI Inspector	Lea Pickerill CQC Quality Assurance

Cc: Department for Education Clinical
commissioning group(s)
Director Public Health for the area
Department of Health NHS
England



Buckinghamshire Children's Services Post Ofsted Inspection Action Plan

Our journey of continuous improvement



“Children’s services in Buckinghamshire are no longer inadequate, but still require further improvements to be good. 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. Leaders and senior managers have achieved important improvements in practice for children in most parts of the service following two inadequate inspection judgements in 2014 and 2017. 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.” (Ofsted, February 2022)

The recent inspection of Buckinghamshire Children’s Services has recognised that services to children and their families require further improvements to be good. This is, in our view, a very significant achievement particularly given the long history of previously inadequate practice and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are also pleased that the inspection acknowledged our improvement journey. But we are not complacent.

The aim of this Post Ofsted Action Plan is to address the findings made by the Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) re-inspection in December 2021, clearly indicating how we will implement the 7 recommendations. Alongside this plan, we have a clear vision for work with children and families, which is underpinned by our “fundamentals for the future”.

1. **Strengths based** - actively exploring and acknowledging family strengths as well as their difficulties. We will use methods for building hope and motivation of change, reducing resistance or ambivalence to change. Providing families with **consistent, multidisciplinary**, and where appropriate **‘high challenge, high support’** to change and become more **resilient**.
2. Children and young people’s wishes, feelings and experiences placed at the centre; a relentless focus on the **timeliness, quality and effectiveness** of help given to children, young people and their families.
3. Recognising that **risk and uncertainty** are features of the system where risk can never be eliminated but it can be managed smarter.
4. The development of **professional expertise** to work effectively with children, young people and their families.
5. Truly valuing and acting on **feedback** from children, young people and families; and **continuous learning and improvement**, by reflecting critically on practice to identify problems and opportunities for a more effective and efficient system.

In our drive towards achieving consistently good services, we follow a cycle of improvement, continuously reviewing and testing our practice and oversight to ensure that we are making progress and creating actions to address our priority areas. In addition, a suite of key performance indicators will be used to track and monitor progress against each recommendation and priority area.

Governance and Accountability

As a senior leadership team, we will take responsibility for the delivery of our plan. We will monitor improvements in performance and practice, measuring impact of our plan quarterly. Our independently chaired Board will continue to meet every two months and maintain oversight of the progress being made against the Ofsted recommendations and other improvements required across the service.



Actions in Response to Ofsted Recommendations



Recommendation 1: 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.

<p>Outcomes we are seeking to achieve:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Greater understanding of the local factors underpinning the high re-referral rate. A reduction in the number of children with a previous referral within 12 months of their latest referral. Audits showing families receiving the right support at the right time. A reduction in the number of families that step back up after being stepped down from requiring statutory social care support. A greater proportion of referrals received seeking statutory intervention meet the threshold for statutory intervention. 	<p>Red: Little or no progress/at risk Amber: Progressing with minor delay Green: Good progress / on track Blue: Completed / embedded</p>
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Ref	Action	Accountable Lead	Deadline for completion	Progress, impact and what more needs to be done	Progress RAG
1.1	Review and report on the reasons for re-referral rate.	Amanda Andrews	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
1.2	In response to the findings from the review above (1.1), develop a specific set of actions that address identified areas for development.	Palvinder Kudhail	31 July 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	

Recommendation 2: The consideration and cumulative impact of earlier interventions and family histories in children and family assessments.

<p>Outcomes we are seeking to achieve:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Assessments are timely and proportionate to risk, informed by research and by the historical context and significant events for each child. Assessments are dynamic and change in the light of emerging issues and risks. Assessments lead to direct help for families if needed and are focused on achieving sustainable progress for children. Help given to families is proportionate to the level of need. Families only tell their story once and actions / plans that have not worked in the past are not repeated. 	<p>Red: Little or no progress/at risk Amber: Progressing with minor delay Green: Good progress / on track Blue: Completed / embedded</p>
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Ref	Action	Accountable Lead	Deadline for completion	Progress, impact and what more needs to be done	Progress RAG
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2.1	Issue and embed guidance and tools to staff to improve the quality of the consideration of diversity in case work with children.	Amanda Andrews	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
2.2	Issue guidance and good practice exemplars to staff about assessments and use of research and analysis including historical information.	Errol Albert	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
2.3	Undertake dip sampling of assessments to ensure that families histories are taken into account and research informs appropriate interventions.	Palvinder Kudhail	30 September 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
2.4	Understand and report on the reasons for high numbers of assessments that lead to no further action.	Amanda Andrews	30 September 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
2.5	Develop, issue and embed revised guidance on safety plans with a stronger focus on ensuring that they are robust and up to date, and share good practice exemplars with staff.	Amanda Andrews	30 September 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
2.6	Evidence better oversight of outcomes and follow up of feedback in return home interviews in plans for children through audit activity.	Ollie Foxell	30 September 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	

				What more needs to be done:	
2.7	Identify and develop initiatives / interventions that supports mothers who have repeat pregnancies where children are removed.	Errol Albert	31 March 2023	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	

Recommendation 3: The quality of social workers' direct work with children.

Outcomes we are seeking to achieve:

1. Children and young people benefit from stable and meaningful relationships with social workers.
2. Practice is based on understanding each child's day-to-day lived experience and is informed by the most recent assessment.
3. Plans set out clearly the detail of the direct work required based on the needs of the individual child.
4. Children are seen regularly and seen alone by their social worker and children understand what is happening to them.
5. Children are safer as a result of the help they receive.
6. An increased number of children and young people engage in participation activity including 'We do Care' and routinely share their views, wishes and feelings.

Red: Little or no progress/at risk
Amber: Progressing with minor delay
Green: Good progress / on track
Blue: Completed / embedded

Ref	Action	Accountable Lead	Deadline for completion	Progress, impact and what more needs to be done	Progress RAG
3.1	Undertake a series of workshops across all teams about effective direct work with children and share tools and techniques that can be used.	Aman Sekhon-Gill	30 September 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
3.2	Review and issue guidance and good practice exemplars for plans to be clear and focused, avoiding generic statements.	Aman Sekhon-Gill	30 September 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	

3.3	Feedback to be sought from a sample of children and young people in relation to their experience and impact of the work undertaken with them.	Gareth Morgan	30 November 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	

Recommendation 4: The support provided to children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless.

<p>Outcomes we are seeking to achieve:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Young people receive timely and effective support that prevents the need for them to become homeless. 2. More young people on the edge of care are presented to the Legal Planning and New Admissions Panel in a timely way increasingly the opportunity for earlier intervention. 3. A reduction in the number of young people living in unsuitable accommodation. 4. Young people identified as requiring joint assessments of need with housing that are compliant with the Southwark Judgment, are carefully monitored to ensure they receive the support they need from all services. 	<p>Red: Little or no progress/at risk Amber: Progressing with minor delay Green: Good progress / on track Blue: Completed / embedded</p>
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Ref	Action	Accountable Lead	Deadline for completion	Progress, impact and what more needs to be done	Progress RAG
4.1	Undertake a dip sample of all young people at risk of or homeless to ensure that practice for 16/17-year-old homeless is in line with the agreed protocol and guidance and Southwark Judgement.	Amanda Andrews	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
4.2	In response to findings from the review above (4.1), develop a specific set of actions that address identified areas for development.	Amanda Andrews	31 July 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
4.3	Complete a further review of children aged 16 and 17 years who have recently presented as homeless. This will include those who present directly to housing and third sector organisations to	Amanda Andrews	30 September 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	

assess impact of the revised protocol and guidance.

Recommendation 5: 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

Outcomes we are seeking to achieve:

1. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) offer strong, positive challenge through flexible and supportive actions to drive forward good practice and bring effective, timely support which prevents unnecessary drift and leads to improved outcomes for children and families.
2. IROs apply robust scrutiny which impacts the care planning and review process for each child. IROs are strong advocates for children and young people and work diligently to ensure the child's wishes and feelings are given full consideration and that the care plan fully reflects the child's current needs.
3. Plans to make permanent arrangements for children and young people are effective and regularly reviewed by IROs.
4. IROs challenging any shortfalls in care plan actions and checking the progress of children in between their statutory reviews. They ensure that children are seen and supported to contribute to their review and to influence planning.
5. An increased number of children and young people participate in their review.
6. IRO review outcomes are recorded within 5 days of the child's review and this is closely monitored.

Red: Little or no progress/at risk
Amber: Progressing with minor delay
Green: Good progress / on track
Blue: Completed / embedded

Ref	Action	Accountable Lead	Deadline for completion	Progress, impact and what more needs to be done	Progress RAG
5.1	When IROs escalate cases as a result of drift and delay, the IRO will set specific actions they will take to address the identified problem. These actions are in addition to those set for the allocated social worker.	Aman Sekhon-Gill	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
5.2	Develop a data set and use this to track and report monthly on the timeliness of resolving IRO resolutions.	Aman Sekhon-Gill	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
5.3	IRO Practice standards to be shared with social work teams to	Aman Sekhon-Gill	30 June 2022	Action status:	

	embed the CLA review process within all social work teams.			Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
5.4	Undertake dip sampling of the impact of the IRO footprint on casefiles, consistency of the use of the agreed headings, and compliance with IRO practice standards.	Aman Sekhon-Gill	30 September 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	

Recommendation 6: Improve the quality of case supervision for social workers in order that it promotes consistently effective work with children

Outcomes we are seeking to achieve:

1. Regular supervision takes place which promotes a reflective and analytical approach to children and families' needs.
2. Supervision is utilised to increase workers' confidence, competence and their ability to think critically leading to improved decision making and effective interventions with children and families.
3. Supervision is held within timescales reducing drift and delay and supporting case progression and this is closely monitored.

Red: Little or no progress/at risk
Amber: Progressing with minor delay
Green: Good progress / on track
Blue: Completed / embedded

Ref	Action	Accountable Lead	Deadline for completion	Progress, impact and what more needs to be done	Progress RAG
6.1	Revise case work supervision template so that there is a distinct focus on impact, reflection, and what needs to be done to secure a good outcome for the child.	Palvinder Kudhail	31 May 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
6.2	Workshop with managers to consult on the above prior to implementation.	Aman Sekhon-Gill	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
6.3	Implement and embed the revised supervision guidance and	Aman Sekhon-Gill	31 August 2022	Action status:	

	undertake live observations of case work supervision to assess impact.			Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
6.4	Through our quality assurance programme, complete a review to assess the quality and impact of supervision across all teams.	Aman Sekhon-Gill	30 September 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	

Recommendation 7: The engagement and participation of children in care in the corporate parenting work of the Council

Outcomes we are seeking to achieve:

1. Children and young people are encouraged to express their views, wishes and feelings, and these are considered in the planning and delivery of services.
2. The local authority is a committed corporate parent that recognises and prioritises the needs of children in all aspects, such as housing, career opportunities, education and learning.
3. Children in care and care leavers are helped to understand their rights, entitlements and responsibilities. Care leavers are well-informed about access to their records, assistance to find employment, training and financial support.
4. The local authority celebrates the achievements of children in care and care leavers. It shows it is ambitious for their futures.

Red: Little or no progress/at risk
Amber: Progressing with minor delay
Green: Good progress / on track
Blue: Completed / embedded

Ref	Action	Accountable Lead	Deadline for completion	Progress, impact and what more needs to be done	Progress RAG
7.1	Launch Buckinghamshire's Participation Strategy 2022-2025.	Gareth Morgan	31 May 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
7.2	Embed feedback from participation with children and young people into all reports to the Corporate Parenting Panel.	Alison Munt	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	

7.3	Undertake periodic checks to evidence that care leavers understand their entitlements and how to access support.	Alison Munt	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	
7.4	Team Managers to ensure Personal Advisors understand the Local Offer and use this knowledge in their work.	Alison Munt	30 June 2022	Action status:	
				Impact against outcomes set:	
				What more needs to be done:	

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**Children's & Education
Select Committee
Review on Recruitment & Retention
of Social Workers**

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Introduction

In November 2021, the Children's and Education Select Committee considered there was an urgent need to form a rapid review group to investigate Social Worker recruitment and retention at Buckinghamshire.

I agreed to chair this group and was joined in this by three other colleagues, Cllrs Karen Bates, Patricia Birchley and Rachael Matthews.

The aim of the review was to focus on the issues relating to the problem of recruiting and retaining enough training and qualified social workers in Buckinghamshire. This has been a subject of much concern for local authorities nationally for over 10 years and has been experienced in varying degrees in different areas of the country depending on varying local and national factors.

Social work is often an extremely demanding career and particularly so during and since the Covid pandemic. Our social workers are to be highly valued and supported for the work they do to support the people of Buckinghamshire.

I hoped that by leading the rapid review group and undertaking a thorough investigation into the issue of social worker recruitment and retention that we would be able to contribute to and build on the Council's and Directorate's efforts into improving the numbers of social workers in our workforce.

I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues on the review group as well as all the Council Officers we spoke to with particular thanks to Richard Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services.

Cllr Mark Dormer, May 2022



Councillor Mark Dormer



Councillor Karen Bates



Councillor Patricia Birchley



Councillor Rachael Matthews

Executive Summary

The following findings were reached for the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams:

- There is a national shortage of quality staff, both permanent and agency
- Caseloads in Buckinghamshire are high, but not out of kilter with the national picture
- Demand is high which is leading to longer hours worked than the service and the council would expect
- The HR support needs of these teams have changed and therefore require reorientation to provide a different and higher level of support
- The implications of the COVID pandemic are having a significant impact on the service in terms of increased caseloads and we see this gathering momentum
- The group has full confidence in the service leader Richard Nash
- The ASYE Academy is a significant asset for recruitment and retention in Buckinghamshire
- The service needs to do more to help develop the skillsets of first Line Managers
- Additional injections of money will not alleviate the challenges faced
- Improvements in technology, software and hardware would increase efficiency and reduce workload
- Measures and procedures can be introduced swiftly which will have positive material impact in the short and long-term at negligible cost

Initially the intention of the rapid review group was to consider Social Worker Recruitment and Retention across Children's Services. However, it became apparent very early on in the evidence gathering, that the key focus of our review should be the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams, where turnover of staff and use of agency social workers is highest and work pressures are intense. The review group was advised that there had been a 60% increase in Child Protection work since September 2020 therefore our key findings and recommendations are focussed on these two teams.

Recommendations for Child Assessment and Child Protection teams:

Recruitment:

1. Overhaul of the approach, understanding and procedures of HR for recruitment
2. Introduction of a new strategy to promote the benefits and advantages of working at Buckinghamshire
3. Consideration of the introduction of an additional payment for permanent staff to be paid 1/3rd after Year 1 and 2/3rd after Year 2, with costs offset by fewer agency staff
4. Improvements to career development opportunities and progression within Buckinghamshire Council

Retention:

5. Dedicated HR resource integrated into these two teams and sitting alongside them
6. Improve and upgrade technology (hardware and software) to increase efficiency
7. Investigate the Introduction of an additional payment for permanent staff to be paid 1/3rd after Year 1 and 2/3rd after Year 2, with costs offset by fewer agency staff
8. Introduction of core skills training for line managers immediately on appointment, potentially through an extension of the AYSE Academy
9. Improved career development path both within and outside of current roles
10. Further investigation into pastoral care and support, including supervision sessions and the introduction of a buddy/mentor scheme
11. Introduction of 360° reviews across all levels and teams including HR support
12. Introduction of administrative support staff to assist with time consuming administrative functions and non-core responsibilities
13. Corporate Director to gather feedback, views and experience of IT from frontline staff to identify areas for improvement of existing software and the introduction of new technology hardware
14. Improved communication and cascading of information of benefits and support available

Additional key recommendations:

15. Consider a review to investigate the effectiveness of HR support across services
16. Expansion of the ASYE Academy
17. Continue to examine other counties with 'Good' and 'Excellent' OFSTED ratings to see what can be learned and which procedures and approaches could be adopted
18. Weekly report to the Cabinet Member and Corporate Director detailing average caseload per social worker (including highest and lowest level), changes in total team numbers together with historic data for comparison and direction of movement to identify trend with the trend trailing two weeks to smooth intra-day movement*

(*unless this report already exists)

Context

The recruitment and retention of social workers has been a key issue for local authority Children's Services departments for over ten years and has been well documented by various national organisations with statistics relating to the issue published annually by central government. Local authorities have been focussed on the attraction, recruitment and retention of social workers and social worker managers, using various methods to improve the situation. However, the success of the actions to address the social worker deficit in each area has varied depending on competition, pay and employment packages as well as geographical location, reputation, development opportunities, caseloads and quality of support, supervision and leadership.

As an often extremely stressful area of work, the role of an agency worker has become more attractive to social workers due to the opportunity for earning a higher rate of pay, working more flexibly and moving local authority if the work becomes untenable in one area. It perhaps also makes it easier to have a break between roles. The use of agency workers has increasingly become an essential part of a local authority's provision of social workers in order to meet demand for children's care services.

There has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of children being referred to the service and being subject to child protection plans and those children are also presenting with increasingly complex needs. This trend has been further compounded by the pressures brought about by the Covid pandemic.

The Children's Social Work workforce statistics published by gov.uk for the year October 2020 to September 2021 show that the total number of FTE social workers nationally was 32,502 and there were 6,522 vacancies and 5,977 agency workers. The agency worker rate had increased by 3% since the previous reporting year to 16%. The number of children and family social workers increased to the highest point in five years, however there were 5,000 leavers in 2021, up 16% from the previous year.

The mismatch in social worker requirements between over demand and under supply is affecting all local authorities. It is an issue represented in many local authority Ofsted reports where the success or otherwise of recruiting social workers has a major impact on the provision of services to children.

In Buckinghamshire, as in other local authorities, the social worker shortage has presented several challenges and this has been further compounded by the pressures of the pandemic. The recent Ofsted report of Buckinghamshire's Children's Services department noted the extensive work that had been undertaken by staff during the period which included the Covid pandemic, to move from "inadequate" to "requires Improvement to be good". However, the report noted that "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".

In October 2021 the total number of qualified social workers in post in Buckinghamshire was 339 of which 221 were permanent staff and 118 were agency staff (35%). In addition, 53 posts were vacant. Since 2019, the authority has undertaken several initiatives to improve social worker recruitment and retention including setting up a social work academy to develop and support newly qualified social workers. Due to the vacancy rate and high turnover of agency staff, caseloads are often high, particularly in the Child Assessment and Protection teams, resulting in long working hours and stress for the social workers.

Methodology

The rapid review group held a series of meetings as follows:

21-1-22	Meeting with Children's Social Care Corporate Director, Richard Nash & HR
28-1-22	Meeting with Elizabeth Williams, Head of Finance
2-3-22	Focus Group discussion with 5 Social Work Line Managers
2-3-22	Focus Group discussion with 3 Social Workers
16-3-22	Meeting with HR Officers
17-3-22	2nd Focus Group discussion with 6 Social Workers

These meetings provided an opportunity for Officers in the respective areas to give their perspective on a range of issues relating to the recruitment and retention of social workers. The focus groups held with social workers and their managers were held in strict confidence, so they were able to speak openly. Participants were also encouraged to provide any additional thoughts via email.

Research information was also gathered and analysed on the national picture of social worker recruitment and retention, as well as information from other local authorities.

Initially the intention of the rapid review group was to consider Social Worker Recruitment and Retention across Children's Services. However, it became apparent very early on in the evidence gathering, that the key focus of our review should be the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams, where turnover of staff and use of agency social workers is highest and work pressures are intense. The review group was advised that there had been a 60% increase in Child Protection work since September 2020 therefore our key findings and recommendations are focussed on these two teams.

The rapid review group considered the following issues:

a) Recruitment Issues:

- (i) HR recruitment practices, processes, and how these adapt to the changing environment e.g. improved Ofsted result
- (ii) Understanding of pay levels and inter-authority agreements
- (iii) Issues relating to the geography of Buckinghamshire including the travel demands on social workers
- (iv) Career progression and planning
- (v) Management training and induction
- (vi) How the well-being of staff is supported

b) Retention Issues:

- (i) Investigating how we can address high caseloads and long working hours
- (ii) Addressing the particular Child Protection and Assessment team pressures and issues
- (iii) HR processes and procedures, pay and reward issues: overtime, time off in lieu
- (iv) Provision of a visible career path for all social workers
- (v) Management and supervision of social workers
- (vi) Technology issues and work processes within the role
- (vii) The geography of Buckinghamshire
- (viii) Improving communications

Key Findings

After carefully considering the evidence we collected through interviews, alongside desktop research into the national situation regarding recruitment and retention of qualified social workers, the review group wish to report the following observations and key findings, which are pertinent to the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams:

Recruitment

1. Overhaul of the approach, understanding and procedures of HR for recruitment

- Members would like to see a far more proactive and supportive approach from HR, particularly when responding to vacancies in the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams.
- We heard from social workers how an agency worker leaving at very short notice can have a significant impact on the rest of the team, who have to pick up their cases. Some managers were unsure who to contact in HR for support with recruitment, so there needs to be increased visibility and urgency from HR when vacancies arise. HR should formulate a plan to address the situation within an agreed response time to ensure that managers are well-supported.

2. Introduction of new strategy to promote the benefits and advantages of working at Buckinghamshire

- The findings of the Ofsted inspection undertaken in late 2021, which rated the service as 'requires improvement to be good' demonstrates that social work practice is moving in the right direction, despite the increased challenges in complexity and demand resulting from the Covid pandemic.
- The review group recommend that a new recruitment strategy should be developed by HR to promote working at Buckinghamshire, in light of the recent improvement in the Children's Services Ofsted rating. As a large unitary council, Buckinghamshire is well-placed to offer attractive career development opportunities alongside a competitive financial package.
- Existing members of staff were also complementary about the Tusker car scheme which should be highlighted as part of the overall benefits package.
- The possibility of using video testimonial of a social worker who has completed the ASYE Academy training to promote this opportunity to new recruits on the Council's website should be considered.

3. Consideration of the introduction of an additional payment for permanent staff to be paid 1/3rd after Year 1 and 2/3rd after Year 2, with costs offset by fewer agency staff

- Members are aware that the Council has some existing arrangements for offering an additional market premium to help with hard to recruit roles. These additional monies are currently paid on successful completion of a probation period.
- This recommendation would introduce an additional 'retention' bonus to encourage new permanent staff to stay. Crucially, this would benefit both children and families by providing more stability and individual social workers, who would have more opportunity to gain experience and adjust to the Council's specific processes and ways of working.
- We understand that a new memorandum of understanding has been signed by 19 local authorities in the South East, which is designed to set a maximum agency pay rate for different social work roles. This should minimise competition between councils for agency staff and it is hoped that this will help to stabilise the agency workforce.

4. Improvements to career development opportunities and progression within Buckinghamshire Council

- Members would like to see a more structured and consistent approach to career development. Managers should be encouraged to discuss opportunities for progression with social workers regularly, not just at their formal annual performance review.

- As a large unitary authority, Buckinghamshire is well-placed to offer opportunities for progression within the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams, and crucially across other social care teams, which would help to build a more stable workforce.
- A well-conceived and ongoing Learning and Development offering demonstrates that an employer values their staff, as well as being a valuable opportunity to upskill individuals. The Council wants individuals to succeed and build a career in Buckinghamshire. However, we heard that social workers often found it hard to attend training because of their high caseloads.
- We recognise that this is difficult when demand for the service is high. Perhaps the concept of 'protected learning time' could be considered where teams, on rotation, to ensure that there is always emergency cover, could have two hours of protected learning once every quarter.
- A clear career pathway would also boost the Council's recruitment offer and whilst many social workers might aspire to be promoted to team managers, consideration should also be given to other options, for example, quality assurance or training type roles or moving into other more specialist areas of social work.

Retention

5. Dedicated HR resource integrated into these two teams and sitting alongside them

- The review group believe that there is a disconnect between HR and the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams. A dedicated HR resource would help to improve HR's understanding of the demands of the role, which in turn will help them in improving their approach to recruitment and retention practices. It will also help HR to react quickly to changing circumstances with staffing levels in the teams.
- Social workers we spoke to suggested that exit interviews should be conducted by HR alongside team managers to ensure that any trends in reasons for leaving are quickly identified and where possible, responded to and immediately reflected to senior service and HR managers in a formalised manner. For example, we learned that a number of staff left in quick succession when Slough Borough Council was offering a higher rate of pay.

6. Improve and upgrade technology (hardware and software) to increase efficiency

- We heard from social workers that their laptops can create a physical barrier when they are meeting with children and families in their home environment, and we suggest that using a tablet device instead could be a helpful alternative.
- In addition, it would be helpful for Child Assessment and Child Protection social workers to be able to use voice-recording devices to note their observations when they have conducted a s47 assessment or a review visit. These could then be typed up by administrative staff in the office and checked and verified by the social worker thereafter. Voice-recording and voice-recognition software has improved in recent times so this should be investigated as a way of ensuring more efficient record keeping.

7. Investigate the Introduction of an additional payment for permanent staff to be paid 1/3rd after Year 1 and 2/3rd after Year 2, with costs offset by fewer agency staff

- Please see the explanation above, set out under Recommendation 3.

8. Introduction of core skills training for line managers immediately on appointment, potentially through an extension of the AYSE Academy

- We are aware that there is a council wide 'Being a Buckinghamshire Manager' programme that has been introduced recently alongside a number of specific management training courses and videos online through the Corporate Learning Hub.
- The review group see a need for additional training for new line managers, ideally immediately on appointment, which would focus more on the specific core skills needed to be an effective

manager in children's services. This would be an opportunity to introduce a consistency of approach and set clear expectations.

9. Improved career development path both within and outside of current roles

- See recommendation 4 above

10. Further investigation into pastoral care and support, including supervision sessions and the introduction of a buddy/mentor scheme

- Supervisions are key to supporting frontline social workers, both in terms of developing quality social work practice and supporting an individual's own emotional wellbeing. We heard that due to the pressure of workloads, some supervision sessions were focussed on the headlines of specific cases with little time available for personal reflection.
- The review group recognise that this is a consequence of the high levels of demand that the service is currently experiencing but it is important that there is a consistent approach to supervisions.
- We heard from some managers that it is difficult to devote enough time to newly qualified social workers when workloads are high, but newer social workers really need to form connections to help support them in the workplace. We therefore suggest the introduction of a buddy/mentor scheme across each of the teams.
- The details of how a buddy/mentor scheme should operate can be worked out by the Senior Managers – perhaps new members of staff could request a mentor and the Principal Social Worker can facilitate this.
- We heard of valuable initiatives that had been introduced including making Educational Psychologists available to social work teams and senior managers regularly checking in with staff with particularly high caseloads.
- There is also a corporate employee assistance package known as PAM Assist where counselling, legal, financial and health and wellbeing advice are available. This confidential service can be accessed online or via a telephone helpline. The availability of PAM Assist should be promoted more widely by line managers and HR.

11. Introduction of 360° reviews across all levels and teams including HR support

- The review group believe that there would be value in introducing 360-degree reviews across the teams. This is a method whereby individuals are reviewed 'laterally' by their peers and also 'vertically' by their managers and by the staff who they line manage. This would be a useful tool for supporting consistent management practice and would also encourage an open working environment, where all staff should be comfortable to share feedback.

12. Introduction of administrative support staff to assist with time consuming administrative functions and non-core responsibilities

- We acknowledge that there are administrative support staff in children's services currently, but we feel that introducing additional support staff could help to relieve over-stretched social workers of some of their administrative burden by updating files and typing up assessment reports on their behalf. Social Workers will still need to check and verify these reports to ensure they are accurate, but this would be quicker than writing them from scratch themselves.
- It was noted that whilst additional social workers have been recruited as project teams in response to the increased demand in child protection work, there has not been a commensurate increase in administrative support staff.

13. Corporate Director to gather feedback, views and experience of IT from frontline staff to identify areas for improvement of existing software and the introduction of new technology hardware.

- The review group are aware that LCS, the main file recording system for Children's Services is quite 'clunky' and very form intensive. The Council has tried to make some amendments to the system, but these have had a mixed reception from social workers who are using it on a daily basis. We heard, for example, that it can be very time-consuming to upload reports.
- We therefore propose that the Corporate Director should gather feedback from frontline staff and investigate what further improvements could be introduced to make this element of social work easier.
- The review group is confident that there will be technology software packages and Application Programming Interfaces (API) which will alleviate the time-consuming processes that social workers currently face, enabling them to spend more time with children and families.

14. Improved communication and cascading of information of benefits and support available

- During our discussions with social workers, it appeared that there was not a consistent approach to disseminating information.
- Social workers wanted to hear more feedback from the Improvement Board, especially what was going well. They also wanted to understand their connections in with other services e.g. HR and Communications contacts.
- Health and Wellbeing advice and encouragement to take breaks should also be promoted to staff.
- We heard that National Social Work Week had not been promoted to teams. This was a missed opportunity, and it was suggested that the Council could have its own celebration event for Social Work.

Additional key recommendations

15. Consider a review to investigate the effectiveness of HR support across services

- We suggest that it is time to review the effectiveness of the corporate HR delivery model.

16. Expansion of the ASYE Academy

- Additional funding to expand the ASYE Academy over the next three years was agreed by Council in the Budget in February 2022. After speaking with social workers who had come through the Academy and with Richard Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services, the Review Group believe that the ASYE Academy has been highly effective in enabling the Council to grow its own social workers and endorse the continued commitment to and further expansion of this initiative.

17. Continue to examine other counties with 'Good' and 'Excellent' OFSTED ratings to see what can be learned and which procedures and approaches could be adopted

- As part of the Ofsted improvement journey, the Council has sought to learn from best practice elsewhere, with external expertise brought in through the Improvement Board and senior managers networking with their counterparts across the country. Members would like to see this continue as the service works towards 'Good'.

18. Weekly report to the Cabinet Member and Corporate Director detailing average caseload per social worker (including highest and lowest level), changes in total team numbers together with historic data for comparison and direction of movement to identify trend with the trend trailing two weeks to smooth intra-day movement*

(*unless this report already exists)

Conclusion

It is clear that whilst caseloads remain high, the pressure on social workers is immense and the review group wish to pay tribute to all Children's Services staff who are working incredibly hard in very difficult circumstances to improve the lives of children and families in Buckinghamshire. We hope that the recommendations in this report will help to improve the Council's recruitment and retention of staff and create a more stable workforce which will be beneficial for both service outcomes and individual social workers.

Select Committee Work Programmes 2022/23

Children's and Education Select Committee (Chairman: Julie Ward, Scrutiny officer: Katie Dover)

Date	Topic	Description & Purpose	Lead Officer	Contributors
30 June 2022	SEND Local Area Inspection Outcome	An update further to the inspection earlier this year	Richard Nash	Anita Cranmer Richard Nash/ Lead Officers on the
	Rapid Review Group Report on Social Worker Recruitment & Retention	To consider the report before it is submitted to Cabinet	Katie Dover	Mark Dormer Richard Nash
	Work Programme	For the upcoming municipal year	Katie Dover	Julie Ward Anita Cranmer Katie Dover
8 September 2022	Early Help Strategy and Impact of Family Support Service	To receive an update on the Early Help Strategy	Simon James Gareth Morgan	Simon James Anita Cranmer John Macilwraith
	Participation Strategy for Young People 2022-2025	To receive an update on the Participation Strategy for Young People 2022-2025	Richard Nash/John Macilwraith/Gareth Morgan	John Macilwraith/Richard Nash Anita Cranmer
3 November 2022	Update on Children's Mental Health (CAMHS to present)	To receive an update on service provision following the increased demand post-Covid	Richard Nash/John Macilwraith	CAMHS representative Anita Cranmer John Macilwraith
	Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership Annual Report	To receive an annual report 2021/22 from the Partnership Chairman	Richard Nash/Francis Habgood/John Macilwraith	Sir Francis Habgood John Macilwraith
	Education Strategy 2022-27	To receive an update on the agreed Strategy	Simon James	Simon James

				Anita Cranmer John Macilwraith
26 January 2023	Education Standards Report	For the Select Committee to receive the assessment outcomes for the years 2021/22 for children and young people in Buckinghamshire	Simon James	Simon James Anita Cranmer John Macilwraith
23 March 2023	Fostering and Adoption Service	To receive an overview of the service and hear progress through 2021/22	Palvinder Kudhail	Anita Cranmer Richard Nash John Macilwraith
	MacAlistair report – independent review of children’s social care	Information report update	Palvinder Kudhail	Palvinder Kudhail
	Out of County Placements	To update the committee on the current challenges with regards to out of county placements	Richard Nash/John Macilwraith	John Macilwraith