



Buckinghamshire Council Children's & Education Select Committee

Agenda

Date: Thursday 15 June 2023
Time: 2.00 pm
Venue: The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF

Membership: J Ward (Chairman), M Dormer, S Adoh, K Bates, D Blamires, L Clarke OBE, I Darby, S James, C Jones, S Kayani, S Lewin, Dr W Matthews, A Osibogun, D Summers, P Turner, Z Williams and T Wilson

Agenda Item	Time	Page No
1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE		
2 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN The Chairman will appoint the Vice-Chairman of the Children's and Education Select Committee for the year 2023 to 2024.		
3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST For Committee Members to declare 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 Committee held on 23 rd March and 17 th May 2023.		3 - 14
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 CHILDREN'S SERVICES UPDATE 15 - 40**
For the Select Committee to consider the update report on the work of the Children's Services Department.
- Contributors:
Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Portfolio holder for Children's Services & Education
John Macilwraith, Corporate Director – Children's Services
Simon James, Service Director - Education
Richard Nash, Service Director – Children's Social Care
- 7 CHILDREN'S SERVICES TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME 41 - 56**
For the Select Committee to consider a report regarding the Children's Services Transformation Programme.
- Contributors:
Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children & Education
John Macilwraith, Corporate Director, Children's Services
Errol Albert, Service Director - Transformation
- 8 REVIEW GROUP REPORT ON PATHWAYS FOR CHILDREN WITH SEND 57 - 74**
For the Select Committee to consider the report of the review group on "Pathways for Children with SEND".
- Contributors:
Cllr Diana Blamires (Chairman)
Group Members
- 9 WORK PROGRAMME 75 - 76**
For the Select Committee to consider and agree the draft work programme for the year ahead.
- Contributors:
All Members
Katie Dover, Senior Scrutiny Officer
- 10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**
The next meeting of the Select Committee will take place on Thursday 7th September at 2.00 p.m. in The Oculus, The Gateway, Aylesbury.

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 THURSDAY 23 MARCH 2023 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 4.45 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

J Ward, M Dormer, S Adoh, K Bates, D Blamires, A Collingwood, C Jones, S Lewin, Dr W Matthews, J Towns, P Turner and Z Williams

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

K Dover, S James, A Howard and J Macilwraith

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

It was noted that Councillors A Osibogun, S Kayani, D Summers and S James had given their apologies for the meeting. Cllr R Stuchbury attended the meeting as a substitute for Cllr S Kayani.

Cllr S Lewin was appointed as a new Committee Member, replacing Cllr N Hussain.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- Cllr K Bates declared a personal interest as a Chair of Governors for nursery schools in Buckinghamshire.
- Cllr P Turner declared a personal interest as a school governor.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 3rd November 2022 be AGREED as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

In relation to the addendum to the minutes, Simon James updated the Committee on information relating to the item "Children Missing Education" as follows:

- There were 96 children missing education in the following categories;
- 19 had moved into Buckinghamshire
- 17 not able to be contacted

- 16 had not accepted a school place
- 9 referrals made from members of the public
- 8 were elected home educated but not able to be contacted
- 6 were movers out of Buckinghamshire
- 5 Gypsy/Roman/Traveller community
- 4 were part of normal checks undertaken by the team
- 4 moved into the county
- 3 had not started the expected school
- 2 were unable to be contacted by the county attendance team
- 2 were transitioning into year 7
- 1 left to go to an independent school

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions were received in relation to this agenda of the Select Committee.

The Chairman noted that Councillor Stuchbury had submitted a question to the cancelled January Committee and that this would be taken at this committee meeting under the Education Standards item to which the question related.

5 OXFORD HEALTH CHILD & ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES UPDATE FOR BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

The Chairman welcomed Andy Fitton, Head of CAMHS and ED Services for Buckinghamshire and Dr Joe Clacey, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist and Medical Lead for Bucks CAMHS, to the meeting.

Andy Fitton noted that the purpose of the report was to assure the committee of the services provided by CAMHS by Oxford Health for children and their families. The report outlined the areas and the performance of each, noting benchmarking against other areas. The report also detailed the areas for development and challenges going forward.

The delivery performance information contained in the report was noted to be somewhat limited, due to the Trust having been subject of a cyber attack last year. This report was focussed on the mental health support.

There had been an increase in requests for referrals of 27% with an increase in the presentation of complexity of needs. The services aimed to increase their provision. Key areas were:

- To make recruitment and retention as good as it could be
- To focus on the support of the most vulnerable young people e.g. eating disorder needs
- Building strong relationships with partners and collaborate further to support families

Dr Joe Clacey noted three clinical areas needing support -

- Awareness of neurodevelopmental need requiring regional and national work
- A continuing increase in demand in mental health services from the pandemic e.g. eating disorders
- An increased demand of young people with increased complexity of mental health need

In response to questions from Councillors the following points were noted:

- Prevention work was delivered via a national programme of mental health support

teams assigned to schools, working with issues such as anxiety. Training was provided for colleagues in schools and on mental health practice. Consultation work was provided to schools and mental health colleagues before referrals to ensure the correct referrals for each individual were made. Identification and awareness of needs had improved over the last decade and therefore earlier help had improved with more lower level interventions. There was a multi-agency approach to prevention to assess how best to help young people.

- Increased funding had been given to Buckinghamshire which allowed for the increase in mental health support teams. This in turn helped to address the increase in the number of referrals.
- A three year national NHS Thames Valley Link Programme was in place to look at additional support for young people with complex needs. There was a well-established team for looked after or adopted children which would be combined with work for young people who did not fit well in other defined areas. Work was underway across the service to ensure better outcomes for young people.
- Following the success of the hospital support worker role in Stoke Mandeville Hospital during crisis presentation an additional role would be created to cover additional hours within the same hospital.
- Funding had been received for three years from the ICB to reduce waiting lists and work on this was part of the SEND development plan. The funding would lead to more therapies provided centrally.
- A major challenge was to find the staff to support the work.
- Work was underway with the charity “Barnados” and also with Bucks MIND to support work and their help was invaluable.
- The Children’s Services and CMH Management Teams were meeting to look at how to best develop services together.

The Chairman thanked Mr Fitton and Dr Clacey for their attendance and presenting the update on Buckinghamshire CAMHS.

6 EDUCATION STANDARDS REPORT 2021-2022

Councillor Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Children and Education noted that the Education Standards report contained positive information regarding the plans for the future provision of Education in Buckinghamshire. The report noted that the schools were doing well compared to national results and that a strong focus was placed on the needs of the more vulnerable children within the area.

Simon James noted that the report delivered key information relating to children and young people for 2021-2022 and for the first-time published attainment data for early years and primary school levels since the covid pandemic. The area was broadly in line with comparative areas nationally. It noted that the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children had increased as per the national trend. Exclusions were below the national rates and the county had a higher percentage of schools rated good or better. More children in Buckinghamshire attend a good or better school than this time last year. Grammar schools were providing spaces for more children who were eligible for free school meals and a higher percentage of young people from within Buckinghamshire were attending grammar schools. The number of children not in education, employment or training (NEET) was lower than the national figures.

For phonics 75% achieved the expected level, KS2 61% - higher than the national average, at

GCSE achievement was 57.3 points at attainment 8 which was higher than national average and statistical neighbours.

In response to Councillors' questions the Officers made the following points:

- The department worked closely with headteachers to ensure that had the necessary support around Ofsted inspections to ensure that they had everything they needed both before, during and after inspections with an increased team to support the schools. The department also attended the feedback sessions and talked through issues with the school leadership team. All schools had the opportunity to dial into a twice weekly meeting, and support was available for headteachers separately.
- The actions noted in the report were extracts from more detailed plans. All schools coming out of Ofsted inspections provided updates on progress at later dates. This report showed themes around improvement issues.

Action: SJ to provide examples of detailed information from schools in intervention categories, and an example of traits of a good school, to allow understanding of how these schools had achieved this.

- Some areas in Wycombe were lower in achieving in early years compared to other areas. As the children progressed through school the gap narrowed. The department were working to get more children into early years settings to help this and was working at community level to see where work could be taken. A sub-group had been set up to help co-ordinate more specific support to certain families, and find what would help. Work had been commissioned with central government also to help work to identify how schools were helping disadvantaged children. A handbook of good practice would be circulated in the summer.
- There were schools outside the Opportunity Bucks schools which were also the target of specific help. The widened gap for GCSEs was a national trend since the pandemic and was expected to be lessened in the next reporting period.
- It was noted that the way in which data was presented was how it was nationally. Our grammar schools out-perform other grammar schools. Our non-selective schools perform better than non-selective schools nationally in other high selective areas.
- We can compare cohorts from KS1 and KS2 but it was noted that the make up of the cohorts in KS2 was different as some young people were from elsewhere.
- It would be possible to compare our non-selective schools to those elsewhere by looking at the national averages as most other areas were non-selective.

Action: S J/G D

- It would be possible to provide data in relation to geographical areas

Action: S J/G D

- Councillor Stuchbury posed the following question:

My question relates to the Education Standards item and to the attainment gap of the key pupil groups in Buckinghamshire. It is stated that the attainment gap has increased post-Covid, and Covid would certainly have been a negative factor for children in all the groups reported within your report, particularly the most economically challenged and those who fall within the broad spectrum of children with special educational needs. Your report suggests that Buckinghamshire children attainment has dropped considerably in percentage from 74% to 64% against Statistical neighbours and national comparisons, however: I would like to ask why, in 2023 nearly a decade forward after the first enquiry and the parliamentary report, are we are still discussing how to improve children attainment gap in education in Buckinghamshire despite the continued efforts by the Education department and what are the factors which you believe will produce the improvement that everybody desires to really make progress with this.?

- Simon James responded to Cllr Stuchbury's written question submitted to the January committee as follows:

I would like to thank Cllr Stuchbury for his question and for his ongoing support for children with special educational needs. We know that he, like all Members wants what is best for children in Buckinghamshire. The issue of the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children, quite rightly remains a priority across the education system. As referenced in the report, the pandemic has led to a widening of the attainment gap across the entire country. In Buckinghamshire, this has also been the case but the gap has widened less than the national average and that of our statistical neighbours. There are a number of interventions that the Local Authority and schools are working on together.

The critical phase is the early years phase. This is where we need to narrow the biggest gap. We know that children do better and better as they progress through the school system but that some have a start that is behind others.

We are particularly focussing on the 10 wards in the Opportunity Bucks area and are expecting to see the gap narrowing between now and the next Education Standards report.

- The data included in the report would contain information from children who were resident outside the county but not from those children who are resident in the county but attend schools elsewhere. The data was affected by some children coming in and out of the county. It was based on the pupil levels in our schools. It would be possible to map information by ward.
- The process of the 11 plus had gone smoothly in this reporting year. Results were delivered well and letters went via the school to avoid the IT issues that had been experienced previously. Over 12,000 children put in for the 11 plus this year and a very small number of parents email addresses were not found.

7 BUCKINGHAMSHIRE EDUCATION STRATEGY 2022-2027

The Chairman invited Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Children's and Education, Simon James, Service Director, Education, and Gareth Drawmer, Head of Achievement and Learning, to speak on this item.

In their presentation, the following points were highlighted:

- The strategy had gone through a review process with partners at the end of 2021 and went to public and member consultation in 2022. 106 responses had been received from children.
- Key themes emerging from the consultation included the need for more early years and secondary provision, as well as specialist SEND provision.
- The strategy had five key priorities, all of which had their own success measures monitored through the Education Strategy Board (joint board across schools and local authority officers) as follows:
 1. Having the right number of places available in the county
 2. Preparing learners for adulthood
 3. Collaboration of school improvement to raise standards
 4. Embedding inclusion across Buckinghamshire
 5. Supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of children

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

- Concerns were raised about the low response rate in the public consultation. It was noted that the strategy went to consultation again for this reason, and time was dedicated to consult with Members as well. It was noted that the strategic priorities and aims were broadly agreed and accepted by the public, resulting in fewer responses. Furthermore, the consultation took place during Covid. In future, more face-to-face promotion would be conducted across the county.
- A Member urged that the strategy should be shared with departments to ensure that future school provision is considered as part of the Buckinghamshire plan. It was noted that joint work was already undertaken across education, housing and property, and that Kingsbrook school was a positive example of this. An analysis had also been done on areas that had high levels of pupil capacity across the county, with new schools being built through section 106 funding.
- Concerns were raised around the recruitment and retention of teaching assistants, particularly in special education institutions. This was considered as part of the strategy, with efforts to make Buckinghamshire a more attractive place for teaching assistants to work. The impact of term-time-only remuneration was also being examined as a priority with school leaders. A working group was also looking at recruitment and retention in education more widely, particularly around the decrease in applicants for teacher training.
- A Member asked what nursery and childcare provisions were available to access by parents and carers. The current percentage quality in terms of early years providers continued to be strong, with 96% being good or outstanding. Consideration was also given to families who could access funding as a result of new legislation. The early years team were particularly focusing on the quality of provision. Training for staff around inclusion was an important factor, as more children were entering early years settings. A review of childcare in the local authority was published annually to strategically identify gaps in service provision, and this was monitored regularly. Population growth was also closely monitored for future planning.
- In response to a Member's question, it was noted that children who are not attending school, or attending different parts of education, were also monitored. For more vigilance, there were plans to increase capacity in the attendance team, particularly in more disadvantaged areas. Exclusion rates had decreased significantly in the past years, with the authority now reaching levels below the national average. Reasons for exclusion are closely monitored to prevent future exclusions.

The Chairman thanked the presenters for their attendance and participation.

8 UPDATE ON THE SOCIAL WORKER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION REPORT

The Chairman invited John Macilwraith, Corporate Director of Children's Services, to speak on this item.

In the presentation, the following points were highlighted:

- Conversations were currently being held with the Director of Health & Adult Social Care to create a joint workforce board for social workers. The organisation's workforce strategy around recruitment and retention, particularly of social workers, was also being reviewed. A workforce consultation was also held, particularly focussing on reducing the reliance on agency staff.
- For social work week, a virtual event has been held to thank social workers for their

work. Next year's event would be held in person, which the Chairman welcomed.

- The wellbeing of social workers was a priority for the organisation. Social workers were able to participate in regular wellbeing sessions and activities, for which feedback has been positive. This was further being rolled out across the Children's Services Directorate.
- Since the academy has been established, 66 social workers had been recruited, and 38 had successfully completed the programme. 51 social workers remain in Buckinghamshire's Children's Services.

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

- Members commended the work the department has done around recruiting and retaining social workers. A Member also welcomed the steps the organisation has taken towards providing management training.
- A Member asked about the number of social workers which were agency staff. Mr Macilwraith noted that 30 out of 40 managerial positions were agency team managers. The agency rate for social workers was currently at 25%. Further data around specific teams and the direction of travel would be forwarded to the Committee outside of the meeting. An update from the government around social worker recruitment and retention strategies would also be shared.

ACTION: JM

- Although the agency was successful, this only focused on newly qualified social workers. Recruiting more experienced social workers to manage more complex cases was still challenging. However, seven agency social workers had converted to permanent roles. Consideration was also given to social work practice methodology regarding safety, balanced caseloads and supervision.
- It was suggested that young carers looking after their family members could be encouraged to commence a career in social work, as they already possess some of the skills needed in the profession. Mr Macilwraith advised that the organisation was already considering this as part of its academy approach. Conversations were being held with young carers and education providers, and it was highlighted that carers would already have contact with social workers as part of the assessment process. It was also suggested that the Council could link with voluntary groups, such as Buckingham Winslow Young Carers, to support them.
- A Member noted that technology had been a major issue for social workers. Laptops were acting as a barrier between the child and the social workers, with tablets being a possibly overlooked solution to the issue. Productivity was also a concern due to the pressures and working hours of social workers. The use of transcription software was suggested to alleviate the pressures of frontline staff. Mr Macilwraith advised that he would discuss the suggestion with the principal social worker, facilitate conversations with staff around the suitability of equipment and report back to the Committee.

ACTION: JM

The Chairman thanked Mr Macilwraith for his attendance and participation.

9 WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer provided the following update on the work programme:

- Due to the cancellation of the Select Committee Meeting in January, both (i) the annual report for fostering and adoption and (ii) the placement sufficiency strategy would be carried to the ensuing municipal year.

- During May, a work programme development meeting would be held with officers and councillors to examine possible items to discuss in the ensuing municipal year.

Cllr D Blamires, Chair of the SEND task and finish review group provided the following update about its progress:

- The inquiry focused on improving the experience for parents of children with autism, ADHD or anxiety awaiting diagnosis. Meetings had been held with around 15 organisations, including senior leadership at schools, to examine the issues faced.

10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Select Committee would be held in mid-June of 2023.

CHAIRMAN

The meeting concluded at 4.45 p.m.



Buckinghamshire Council

Children's & Education Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON WEDNESDAY 17 MAY 2023 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 5.50 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 6.00 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

J Ward, K Bates, D Blamires, L Clarke OBE, I Darby, S James, C Jones, S Kayani, S Lewin, Dr W Matthews, D Summers and P Turner

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

P Birchley

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillors S Adoh, M Dormer and A Osibogun.

2 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN RESOLVED –

That Councillor J Ward be elected Chairman of the Children's & Education Select Committee for the ensuing year.

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Children's and Education Scrutiny Committee – Follow up Information

	Date/Committee Item	Action	Update
1.	8/9/22 Early Help Strategy	Councillors to help to raise the profile of the Family Support Service through communication with voluntary groups in ward areas	Councillors - ongoing
2.	8/9/22 Participation Strategy	The website www.youthbucks.co.uk to be publicised via school planners, schools' bulletins Contact housing associations to add the link to the website on their websites Councillors to publicise in their own wards	Contact has been made with housing associations Councillors to publicise website
4.	8/9/22 – Work programme	Attainment Gap – request for further information	Briefing as part of Education item at committee
5.	3/11/22 – Bucks CPB Annual Report	Update in six months' time on meetings with senior leaders	WM -TBC
6.	3/11/22 – Bucks CPB Annual Report	Quantitative performance data to be included in next annual report	WM -TBC
7.	3/11/22 – Bucks CPB Annual Report	Update on multi-agency safeguarding training in six months	WM -TBC
8.	3/11/22 – Children's Services Update	Results of the Ofsted focus visit to be shared with committee	Please see below the link to the Ofsted report published following the October 2022 Focused Visit 50199041 (ofsted.gov.uk)
9.	3/11/22 – Children's Services Update	Information on categories of destinations for care leavers to be shared with committee	As a service we measure the % of care leavers aged btw 19 and 21 who are in education, employment or training. At the end of Dec 2022 this figure was 67% which remains well above the

			benchmark figures both nationally and regionally. As highlighted during Ofsted focus visit in October 2022 care leavers are strongly encouraged to engage in education and training. Inspectors also noted “this is a real strength in Buckinghamshire”.
10.	23-3-23 – Children’s Services Update	To update the committee on work with Impower	Verbal update to be presented to the committee as part of June Committee report
11.	3/11/22 – Children Missing Education	Attendance data to be shared with the committee	Item to come to committee in 2024 “New attendance duties”
12	23-3-23 – Education Standards	SJ to provide examples of detailed information from schools in intervention categories, and an example of traits of a good school, to allow understanding of how these schools had achieved this	SJ to KD to circulate via email
13	23-3-23 – Education Standards	SJ/GD to provide information comparing our non-selective schools to those elsewhere by looking at the national averages as most other areas were non-selective.	SJ/KD via email
14	23-3-23 – Education Standards	SJ/GD to provide education standards information relating to geographical areas	SJ/GD/ KD via email
15	23-3-23 – Update on social worker recruitment and retention	JM to share a central government paper on social worker recruitment and retention	JM/KD via email
16	23-3-23 – Update on social worker recruitment and retention	JM to investigate the suitability of transcription software for social workers and report back to committee	JM



Report to Children's & Education Select Cabinet

Date:	Thursday 15 June 2023
Title:	Children's Services Update
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services
Author and/or contact officer:	John Macilwraith, Corporate Director Children's Services
Ward (s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	For Select Committee members to note the national and local developments across the Children's Services Directorate

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Since the last update to Cabinet in October 2022, the Service has received two regulatory visits. The first was a Focused Visit from Ofsted that looked at our services and support offered to care leavers, and the second was an inspection of Youth Offending Services by HM Inspectorate of Probation. Both visits went well and confirmed that the Service continues on its improvement journey and whilst there is more to do, the Service has an accurate self-assessment and understanding of what needs to be done. In addition, two of our Children's Homes are now judged to be 'Outstanding' by Ofsted and our new 4 bedded Parent and Baby residential assessment resource has just opened, following registration by Ofsted.
- 1.2 IMPOWER have now completed their analysis of the profile of demand and developed a number of recommendations outlining how the Service could improve its financial sustainability by delivering better outcomes at less cost. The IMPOWER work also concluded that the service and its partners can work differently together to meet the needs of children and young people. The findings from this analysis has helped the Service refine our self-assessment from which a whole system Children's Services Transformation Programme has been developed. This change programme will redefine the support we provide

to children and families and redevelop our model to enable interventions that are more responsive to children's needs. Our ambition is to create more opportunities for professionals, including partner agencies, to integrate services around the needs of communities and move from a process driven case management model with multiple hand off points to a relationship based, solution focused system.

- 1.3 On the horizon there are a number of significant national policy changes and the proposed changes to the way in which the Service operates are in line with national policy direction and are based on ensuring that children receive a consistent, purposeful and child centred approach wherever they are on their journey of need from early help through to being in care.

2. National Context

- 2.1 The following section gives an overview of the key national policy developments relating to Children's Services.

Children's Social Care Review

- 2.2 On 2 February 2023, the Department for Education issued its response to the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#), [the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's inquiry](#) into the murders of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and the [Competition and Markets Authority's study](#) of the children's social care market, in three consultation documents:
 - i. An overarching strategy, [Stable Homes, Built on Love](#).
 - ii. [A report proposing reforms to agency social work](#).
 - iii. [A proposed national framework](#), setting standards and outcomes for children's services
- 2.3 The Government's implementation and strategy consultation, 'Stable Homes; Built on Love', is a direct response to the Care Review, the National Child Protection Review and the Competition and Markets Authority review, all of which reported in 2022. The government's implementation and strategy consultation document is seen as phase one of implementing a whole system change to how children's social care will operate over the coming two to five years. Realising a new vision for children's social care requires long-term reform, underpinned by further investment and changes to legislation. Phase one will be between now and the spending review in two years' time and will seek to make immediate improvements while laying the foundations for whole system reform. Activity in phase two will be about embedding reform everywhere. This will require further investment, legislation (subject to

parliamentary time) and a wider programme of support to embed the reset of the whole system envisaged within the implementation plan.

- 2.4 **Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation** sets out six pillars for reform underpinned by £200m of new investment alongside related consultations on a new national framework for children’s social care and the child and family social worker workforce. The 6 pillars and summary actions are as follows:

Pillar 1: Family help provides the right support at the right time so that families stay together

Pillar 2: A decisive multi-agency child protection system

Pillar 3: Unlocking the potential of family networks

Pillar 4: Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care

Pillar 5: A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one

Pillar 6: A system that continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data

- 2.5 **Funding:** £200m in funding over two years. The care review called for £2.6bn over five years.

- 2.6 **Social work training and development:** An early career framework will be established, replacing the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, as recommended by the review. Practitioners will be supported to develop, and be assessed against, the “skills and knowledge needed to support and protect vulnerable children”, and, in years three to five, to develop into “expert practitioners”. This will be tested by a group of early adopter councils with a view to full implementation in 2026.

- 2.7 **Social work recruitment:** The DfE will “explore ways to support the recruitment of up to 500 additional child and family social worker apprentices” to help tackle staff shortages, though it has not provided details on how this will happen.

- 2.8 **Agency social work:** The DfE has proposed bringing in national rules to reduce the cost and use of agency social workers in children’s services. This would include capping the rates local authorities pay so that agency staff receive the equivalent of permanent workers doing the same role, once benefits have been taken into account.

- 2.9 **Social worker pay:** The DfE has rejected the care review recommendation for national pay scales for social workers on the grounds that this risked

destabilising the local government pay system for insufficient benefit. But it has said that it wants greater transparency in what councils pay social workers in children’s services and wants to see existing inequalities in pay for particular roles reduced.

- 2.10 **Social worker registration:** The DfE has also rejected a care review proposal for all registered social workers, including managers and academics, to spend 100 hours in direct work each year to remain close to practice. It said “it did not want to risk children facing more changes of practitioner or managers being drawn away from supervision”.
- 2.11 **Family help:** £45m will be allocated for up to 12 ‘families first for children pathfinder’ areas to trial the care review proposal to introduce multidisciplinary family help services, to provide “non-judgmental”, joined-up support for families affected by issues such as domestic abuse or poor mental health. This will bring together existing targeted early help and child in need services. As part of this, the DfE will consult on removing the requirement for social workers to lead child in need cases.
- 2.12 **Child protection:** Child protection lead practitioners, who will have received “advanced specialist training”, will be appointed to lead safeguarding cases in the pathfinder areas, as called for by the care review. As recommended by the care review, they will co-work such cases with family help teams. In addition, the pathfinders will test the national panel’s proposal to set up multi-agency teams consisting of social workers, police officers and health professionals to carry out child protection work. The DfE will also consult on new multi-agency child protection standards as part of a review of Working Together to Safeguard Children in 2023.
- 2.13 **Independent reviewing officers and child protection conference chairs:** The DfE has rejected the care review’s proposal to abolish the independent reviewing officer role. Instead, it has proposed to review and strengthen it. The strategy did not reference the care review’s separate proposal to abolish the child protection conference chair role.
- 2.14 **Involving family networks:** The 12 pathfinders will test using family group decision-making, such as family group conferences, at an early stage to support parents minimise risks to children. In addition, seven areas will test providing family support network packages providing resources to help families care for children and avoid them going into care.
- 2.15 **Kinship care:** A kinship care strategy will be published in 2023 while £9m will be spent on improving training and support for kinship carers. The government will also explore the case for the care review’s recommendations of a financial

allowance and the extension of legal aid for those who become special guardians or responsible for children through child arrangements orders.

- 2.16 **Foster care:** £27m will be spent on a carer recruitment and retention programme over the next two years focused on shortage areas, such as sibling groups, teenagers, unaccompanied children, parent and child placements and children who have suffered complex trauma. The care review called for the recruitment of 9,000 carers over three years. In addition, foster carers will receive an above-inflation rise in minimum allowances to deal with rising costs.
- 2.17 **Commissioning care placements:** The DfE has backed the care review's proposal to transfer responsibility for the commissioning of care placements from individual councils to regional groupings of authorities, regional care co-operatives (RCCs), which will initially be tested in two pathfinder areas before being rolled out. It has also accepted the Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) Study proposal to commission a national body to provide help for authorities/RCCs in forecasting demand and procurement. It said these measures would address the insufficiency of placements for children in care, improve outcomes and tackle the excess profit-making identified by the CMA among the largest providers.
- 2.18 **Financial oversight of providers:** A financial oversight regime will be introduced for the largest children's home providers and independent fostering agencies (IFAs), similar to that for adult social care, to reduce the risks of providers exiting the market suddenly.
- 2.19 **Relationships for children in care and care leavers:** £30m will be spent on family finding, befriending and mentoring programmes for looked-after children and care leavers, to help them find and maintain relationships, as the care review recommended.
- 2.20 **Support for care leavers:** The suggested grant made available to children leaving care will increase from £2,000 to £3,000, while the bursary for those undertaking apprenticeships will rise from £1,000 to £3,000, broadly in line with care review recommendations.
- 2.21 **Care experience:** The DfE has rejected the care review's call for care experience to become a protected characteristic under equality law, which would have required public bodies to tackle inequalities facing those with care experience and prohibit businesses and employers from discriminating against them. The department said it had heard significant concerns that self-declaration of care experience would increase stigma and that other measures in the strategy – including extending corporate parenting requirements to bodies other than local authorities – would have more impact.

- 2.22 **National standards and outcomes:** The DfE will consult on a children’s social care national framework, as proposed by the review, setting expected outcomes for children and families that should be achieved by all local authorities. The proposed outcomes would be for children and families to stay together and get the support they need, for children to be supported by their family network and to be safe in and out of home and for children in care and care leavers to have stable, loving homes. These will be underpinned by two “enablers”: that the workforce is equipped and effective and leaders drive conditions for effective practice. Ofsted inspections will be aligned to the national framework.
- 2.23 There is much to welcome in the Government’s children’s social care reform strategy, and we broadly support the 6 pillars and associated activities. A focus on earlier help, support that builds on the strengths within a child’s wider family network, and greater ambition for our children in care and care leavers are all areas where we can make an enormous difference. We are also pleased to see the consultation on children’s social work agencies. While there is a place for agency social work, too often we see a high churn of agency workers leading to poorer outcomes for children. That being said, the new strategy is limited in scope and appears to commit too little investment to implement a wholesale overhaul of the sector (as suggested in the MacAlister Review). The reforms also appear unlikely to reduce sustained current levels of demand for children’s home placements or properly address the severe undersupply of these placements, particularly in the short term. In addition, many of the planned reforms will also be slow to implement, beginning with long consultation processes and pilot schemes which will not help address the immediate pressures faced within the system in relation to demand, complexity, workforce and cost.
- 2.24 The strategy commits £200 million in additional funding to support children’s social care. Any additional investment is of course welcome and will be vital to implement reforms. However, LGA analysis prior to high levels of inflation indicates an existing shortfall of £1.6 billion per year simply to maintain current service levels. The Care Review recommended an additional investment of at least £2.6 billion over four years, prior to the impact of inflation, to improve the system to better meet children’s needs. And despite increasing their budgets by £708 million in 2020/21, councils still overspent their budgets by £800 million that year, indicating the scale of pressure on the system, across the country.
- 2.25 Although the strategy seemingly accepts the recommendations of the CMA’s market study, it is not particularly bold in its attempts to address the demand source for children’s services through well-funded early intervention schemes,

nor does it outline plans to increase supply of much-needed children's home placements. The new strategy rejects the policy direction taken in Wales and Scotland of removing profit from children's home provision, as well as the suggestion made in the MacAlister Review of a windfall tax on large providers. The establishment of a financial oversight regime (which is likely to be similar to that which exists in adult social care as part of CQC regulation) is aimed at ensuring that financial failure of providers does not negatively impact on the lives of children, and as in the case of the CQC, is not likely to represent a threat to profit-making by private providers. The CMA itself noted in its market study that it is cheaper for local authorities to commission children's home placements from the independent sector than to develop their own. Although a large part of the document is devoted to the aim of improving early intervention services for children, only £45m in funding has been committed for this (for an initial 12 pilot areas), with very little being allocated elsewhere. This means that children living in the vast majority of the country will not benefit from the additional funding that is desperately needed and the level of investment is unlikely to significantly decrease the number of children becoming looked after and requiring residential home placements. This is of concern for the service, given the significant increase in the cost of external placements.

- 2.26 One key commitment from the strategy that may impact the commissioning of placements is the establishment of Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs). These regional bodies aim to help commissioners of placements gain oversight and control of their local market and bring down placement costs by pooling resources and sharing information to better predict need and reduce the number of spot purchased placements. Implementation of RCCs is likely to be slow, with the initial pilot scheme set to cover two areas whilst a parallel consultation with stakeholders is held to define the scope and role of these bodies. The Local Government Association has also expressed concern that RCCs may represent another layer of bureaucracy and undermine localised, personalised interactions with looked after children. Wider regional commissioning groups may also clash with the government's goal of reducing placements that are at a long distance from the child's home. RCCs are unlikely to gain control of the market unless the root causes of demand for looked after children's residential placements, such as deprivation and family breakdown, are addressed and properly funded solutions are implemented. Recent years have seen a fall in government funding of early intervention and family support, whilst expenditure on statutory care services for looked after children has increased significantly. The root cause of the prevalence of long-distance placements is an undersupply of home capacity across local authorities in the region, and although regional resource pooling and information sharing may go

some way to reducing the number of out of area placements, it seems unlikely that it will be capable of fully addressing the underlying trends of sustained demand paired and a lack of local provision.

- 2.27 We would have liked to see more focus on some of those issues that lead to more children and families needing support from children’s social care, including financial deprivation and access to children’s mental health support. We agree with the assertion of the Care Review that without addressing issues such as these that are outside the remit of children’s social care, “reforms to children’s social care risk treating the symptoms and not the cause”.
- 2.28 Overall, while it is positive there is now have a clear direction of travel following last year’s reviews, the strategy points to a range of consultations over the coming year and a period of pathfinder and pilot activity. This is important for medium to long-term change; however, most of the changes signalled in this strategy will not deliver results quickly. Inflation and pressures on council budgets will only compound the difficulties facing services, while the impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis is increasing children’s need for support every day.

Schools White Paper

- 2.29 As reported in the last Children’s Services Update presented to Cabinet in October 2022, the Government published the [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#) at the end of March 2022. This White Paper set out proposed reforms to the education system focused on providing an excellent teacher for every child, delivering high standards of curriculum, behaviour and attendance, targeted support for every child that needs it and a stronger and fairer school system. Specifically, the White Paper also set out plans for all state schools in England to be in or moving towards being in multi-academy trusts by 2030 and was followed by a Schools Bill that aimed to legislate for a new system for overseeing and regulating academy trusts.
- 2.30 The Education Secretary has since informed MPs that the Schools Bill “will not progress” in the third session of Parliament, However, ministers "remain committed" to the objectives of the Schools Bill, and “parts of the government’s plan that did not need legislation changes were going to be implemented”.
- 2.31 The Service will be watching carefully as further detail emerges on which parts of the plan will be progressed in the future; however, we do feel there is a missed opportunity to integrate family support and service arrangements for vulnerable children.

SEND Green Paper Response

- 2.32 Following the consultation on [SEND Review: Right support, right place, right time](#) which proposed reforms for a single, national SEND and alternative provision system, the DfE has recently released The SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan which confirms investment in training for thousands of workers so children can get the help they need earlier, alongside thousands of additional specialist school places for those with the greatest needs.
- 2.33 The DfE report that “this plan follows extensive engagement with around 6,000 consultation responses and 175 events, ensuring the new reforms take into account the views of children, young people, parents and carers. The plan sets out a roadmap to transform the SEND and AP system and make it sustainable over the long term.”
- 2.34 Please see below a summary of the key points from the strategy below:
- 2.35 The transformation of the system will be underpinned by new national SEND and AP standards, which aims to give families confidence in what support they should receive and who will provide and pay for it, regardless of where they live.
- 2.36 There will be new guides for professionals to help them provide the right support in line with the national standards but suited to each child's unique experience, setting out for example how to make adjustments to classrooms to help a child remain in mainstream education.
- 2.37 To improve parents' and carers' experiences of accessing support, the plan will cut local bureaucracy by making sure the process for assessing children and young people's needs through Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) is digital-first, quicker and simpler wherever possible.
- 2.38 This package forms part of the government's significant investment into children and young people with SEND and in AP, with investment increasing by more than 50% compared with 2019-20 - to over £10 billion by 2023-24.
- 2.39 There will be expanded training for staff, ranging from up to 5,000 early years special educational needs coordinators to 400 educational psychologists, covering a wide range of educational needs. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will develop an apprenticeship for teachers of sensory impairments.
- 2.40 The changes are also underpinned by a strengthened local authority inspection regime joint between Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission that became effective from January 2023. The Service is currently seeking clarification on

what this means for the inspection timeline; however, we are beginning to work on our inspection readiness.

- 2.41 The SEND and AP system needs a reset to make it work better for all children and families, to strengthen accountabilities and to reduce the insurmountable costs that threaten the financial sustainability of local authorities. Improving the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND is a joint endeavour and so we welcome the strengthened role and commitments of health partners as outlined and more consistent offers of support for children and young people who need it. However, the plan must go much further and faster in a number of areas. While the response is largely focused on children in school, there is more we must do to re-set the system so it has a sharp focus on outcomes, not just for children today but also for the adults they will become in the future.
- 2.42 The additional funding being made available to support the proposals is welcome, but with high needs budget deficits rising there is still not enough money in the system to meet the level of need being seen. The costs associated with the current SEND system are significant and this this must be addressed.

Spring Budget 2023

- 2.43 One of the greatest opportunities to make a tangible difference to a child's life is when they are very young and the recent Budget announcement provides some welcomed extra funding to support childcare providers.
- 2.44 Significant reforms to the childcare system will result in an extension to those eligible for free childcare. By September 2025, 30 hours of free childcare will be available for every child over the age of 9 months with working parents. This will be introduced in phases, with 15 hours of free childcare for working parents of 2-year-olds coming into effect in April 2024 and 15 hours of free childcare for working parents of 9 months – 3 years old in September 2024.
- 2.45 This extension in free hours will be very supportive for working parents as it will provide a consistent and substantial package of support which covers the entire period following paternity leave to when their child starts school. The extension of the 30 hours free childcare offer will mean more children and families can benefit from this policy, but government must ensure the hourly funding rate for providers significantly increases so it is closer to the actual costs of delivery. The government has committed to increase the funding by £204 million from this September rising to £288 million next year; however, there are concerns within the early year sector that the measures will not go far enough to address financial pressures facing providers.

- 2.46 The childcare sector, both nationally and locally is facing problems with recruitment of staff at all levels. Maintaining qualified staffing levels within the sector continues to be a priority and in order for the expansion of the free hours to be successful, additional financial support will be required to help the early years sector recruit, and retain, the high-quality workforce it desperately needs.
- 2.47 In addition to the free childcare extension, schools and local authorities will be funded to increase the supply of wraparound care, so that parents of school age children can access flexible childcare between 8am and 6pm – tackling the barriers to working caused by limited availability of wraparound care. In Buckinghamshire, our Early Years team actively support schools to work with the private, voluntary and childminder sector to provide sufficient wraparound care that meets the needs of parents, and we have a number of excellent examples of where successful partnership working within the sector has supported working parents outside school hours. This work will continue, and the team will support schools to strengthen its wraparound offer to parents where there is an identified need.
- 2.48 Whilst some of the proposals lack detail at this early stage, more children having access to high quality, affordable childcare is something the Council welcomes and will give children a better start in life as well as playing a crucial role in levelling up outcomes and closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. The service is awaiting further detail and will explore how this initiative will benefit and align to ‘Opportunity Bucks’.

3. Local Context

- 3.1 The following section gives an overview of the key developments in Buckinghamshire Children’s Services.

Children’s Services Transformation

- 3.2 Since 2020, the Service has experienced an unprecedented increase in demand, with referral and re-referral rates significantly higher than statistical neighbours. which will be contributing to demand pressures. The level of demand experienced at the front door (MASH) continues to remain high and this high volume of work has impacted the timeliness of contact and referral activity. Inconsistencies in the quality of referrals and understanding of threshold across the partnership are also contributing to the demand pressures and the further work is ongoing with our partner agencies to address these areas. Causes of volume are being managed, but this surge has also led

to significant increases in the child protection cohort and changes to the profile of children who become looked after with more adolescents entering care. This is having a significant impact on the directorate's budget.

- 3.3 This increase in demand is mirrored across other areas. Nationally, there has been a 32% increase in children subject to Child Protection Plans, in the 10 years to 2019/20. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care projects an increase in the number of children in care from 80,000 (May 2022) to approximately 100,000 in a decade.
- 3.4 In late 2022, IMPOWER was commissioned to support further analysis of the profile of demand and develop recommendations outlining how the Service could progress the transformational journey to increase financial sustainability through delivering better outcomes at less cost. The findings aligned to the Service's self-evaluation and consolidated what was known around key issues which included:
 - i. Opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of support provided by improving collaboration through better sharing of information and increased system-wide multi-disciplinary ways of working.
 - ii. Opportunity to target need variation through locality specific services and community offers.
 - iii. Opportunity to reduce the numbers of children and families supported through statutory services by promoting a focus on "family first".
 - iv. Reflection of the dominant "social care" culture with partners driving an increase in demand in statutory services through a very high number of unsuitable referrals. There was clear evidence to demonstrate that a risk averse culture at the front door is a core driver of demand and that this should be addressed through implementation of 'early help first' thinking during triage of cases to decrease the number of children and families escalating to unnecessary levels.
 - v. The need to rebalance from process and performance to longer term demand management with system-wide support that can reduce avoidable demand by focusing on the most prevalent presenting needs.
 - vi. Services need to be targeted at both the most prevalent needs and towards families most at risk of their needs escalating into requiring a more intensive social care intervention.
- 3.5 On the horizon there are a number of significant national policy changes (as mentioned in section 2) that have enabled the service to consider the way in which both social care and education services are designed and delivered to

the children and young people of Buckinghamshire. The proposed changes to the way in which the Service operates are in line with national policy direction and are based on ensuring that children receive a consistent, purposeful and child centred approach wherever they are on their journey of need from early help through to being in care. The following key principles have already been agreed and will inform the new delivery model and address some of the barriers that exist currently:

- i. The new model will be based on multi-disciplinary locality-based working that is closer to the communities, boosting the contribution of partners.
- ii. We will reduce hand off points and minimise assessments for families and enable the system to respond to changing risks.
- iii. There will be alignment between services and seamless transition at all points of the child's journey.
- iv. We will introduce and embed a clear practice model and methodology that is all about nurturing relationships with children and families.
- v. We will ensure that the most trusted professional and lead professional is working with the child and family.
- vi. A workforce development strategy will be developed to support the continuous professional development of staff.
- vii. A menu of evidenced based interventions will be available.
- viii. We will work to mature and improve the children's system across the county.

3.6 In addition, the current structures with the Service have led to significant issues with recruitment and retention in certain teams, particularly within Help and Protection, where staff have carried caseloads that are higher than we would like, for a significant period. Across these teams, the high caseloads continue to contribute to over-reliance on a high-cost agency workforce and the teams have struggled to achieve the stability necessary to deliver high quality support for children and families. Our social work qualified agency rate across the service is currently 26%; however, is higher in our front line child protection teams. Mitigating activity, including the introduction of the Social Work Academy, has supported the stabilisation of the service and there is clear evidence that for some teams, such as Children with Disabilities, this has been impactful with the team now benefitting from a skilled, predominantly permanent workforce. However, for Assessment and Help and Protection, the benefits have not been fully realised due to high demand for services,

complexity of work and pressured caseloads. That being said, results from our most recent workforce survey data shows that:

- 84% feel motivated to do my best
- 82% happy working at the BC
- 88% positive working relationship
- 88% trusted and enabled to do my job

3.7 Many Local Authorities have already moved to create multi-disciplinary locality-based services as this is considered to be best practice within the field of Children's Services with several good and outstanding Ofsted rated Local Authorities (for example, Hampshire) having already adopted their own version of this model. The move away from process-led referral pathways has been endorsed by the Government who is intending to pilot this new approach with a select number of local authorities in the coming months. Moving to the locality-based model will support the Service's expression of interest in participating in the pilot.

3.8 Without a move to a more streamlined model, which prioritises the development of supportive and enabling relationships between families and professionals, the service will struggle to improve practice further and may not progress beyond the 'requires improvement to be good' Ofsted judgement. In addition, our ability to secure a permanent and stable workforce will remain limited. The move to a locality-based model of delivery also presents the opportunity to rebalance the skills and knowledge of the workforce equitably to ensure children and young people receive the right support from appropriately qualified practitioners that meets their needs.

3.9 The move to a locality-based model will also support the service to address the financial pressures and to deliver services within the financial envelope of medium-term financial plan (MTFP).

3.10 A Children's Transformation Board will be established that will support the implementation of the inter-linked workstreams for the re-design of the delivery model across Children's Services. The Transformation Board will provide the strategic input and oversight to ensure that the changes planned are implemented as set out in the individual plans.

3.11 The Board will make evidenced based decisions whilst ensuring that there is creativity and innovation during the delivery of the programme and the robust tracking of milestones and outcomes. The oversight will include monitoring of the transformation programme and the way we work to ensure that we use our human and financial resources wisely on those things that work best for children and families. The transformation programme will be aligned to

delivering the priorities and efficiencies identified within the medium-term financial plan and report into the Council’s Better Buckinghamshire Board.

Demand levels

3.12 Demand levels across Children’s Services remains higher than pre-pandemic levels; however, despite an increase in contacts during the last 6 months, the number of children and families that are open to children’s social care has reduced slightly compared to the previous 6 months. The number of children supported by our Family Support Service continues to rise and does the number of children with an Education, Health and Care Plan.

	Apr 2022 – Sept 2022	Oct 2022 – Mar 2023
Contacts	12,895	13,686
Referrals	7,363	4,721
Section 47 enquires	1,458	1,393
Children subject to a child in need plan	1,170*	990*
Children subject to a child protection plan	630*	541*
Looked after Children	498*	509*
Children open to the Family Support Service (Council Early Help Team)	831*	1,045*
Children with an Education, Health and Care Plan	5,698*	6,034*

*as at 31 March 2023

Ofsted Focused Visit

3.13 In October 2022, in line with the inspection of local authority children’s services (ILACS) framework, Ofsted conducted a Focused Visit that looked at our services and support offered to care leavers. Whilst this was not a graded inspection, Ofsted has now published their findings from this visit. The full report can be accessed [here](#); however, please see the key headlines below:

- i. The support to care leavers in Buckinghamshire has improved since the last inspection. While progress is evident, there remain inconsistencies in the quality of practice.
- ii. Younger care leavers and those in education are encouraged to be successful and ambitious by committed workers, managers, leaders and the lead member for children, who are proud of the young people's achievements.
- iii. Many visits are regular, proportionate and carefully planned, while others lack purpose or focus only on the current pressing issue for the care leaver.
- iv. Caseloads for some practitioners who are supporting care leavers are high. This makes it more challenging for them to undertake meaningful direct work with young people.
- v. While care leaver participation has been strengthened in Buckinghamshire, their voices at corporate parenting panel are inconsistent.
- vi. Leaders in Buckinghamshire have an understanding of the strengths of the service, the areas for development and the future challenges.
- vii. Pathway plans are written confidently and warmly with, and to, the care leavers. The young person's voice and experience are well captured. While most pathway plans are reviewed six monthly, they are not routinely updated when young people's circumstances change. Care leavers are strongly encouraged to engage in education and training. This is a real strength in Buckinghamshire.
- viii. Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation where they feel safe and which meets their need
- ix. Most care leavers have access to universal health services and, when needed, are supported by their PAs to attend key health appointments.
- x. Gaps in service provision, different thresholds between children and adult services or insufficient planning mean that some care leavers' emotional health needs are not met in a timely way.
- xi. Care leavers, including those over 18 who are at risk of or experiencing exploitation, benefit from effective multi-agency risk management meetings and specialist, meaningful direct work via the exploitation team.

- xii. Comprehensive performance data is used to support the progress of work effectively across the service. Check and challenge meetings help to provide leaders with an additional line of sight to practice.
- xiii. Senior leaders made a conscious decision to target quality assurance activity at areas of greatest risk within the wider children's service. Subsequently, a very small number of care leavers' records have been subject to formal audit in the past six months. While there is evidence of dip sampling by senior managers to seek to understand and influence practice, the low number of records subject to formal audit is a missed opportunity to identify practice changes, formalise learning and contribute to a learning and feedback loop.
- xiv. The revised care leaver offer is clear and accessible and includes an aspirational emphasis on education. Care leavers spoke positively about their PAs and the local offer, with some saying that they felt they had received financial and practical support that exceeded offers for care leavers in other areas. One care leaver told inspectors, 'I feel so lucky to be a Bucks care leaver.'

3.14 Inspectors also identified the following areas of practice that need to improve:

- i. The number, quality and impact of audits and the extent to which care leavers' voices are included in this work to help underpin learning.
- ii. The number of 22- to 25-year-olds who are aware of the local offer and accessing support.
- iii. The consistent voice of care leavers at corporate parenting panel.
- iv. The sense of permanence and stability for care leavers in staying put arrangements.

3.15 Of course, there is always more to do and the Service we will remain focused on progressing Ofsted recommendations as well as further improving the service in our drive towards delivering the council's ambition to provide consistently good services for Buckinghamshire's children and young people.

Youth Offending Service Inspection

3.16 In January 2023, HM Inspectorate of Probation published their findings following an inspection of [Youth Offending Services \(YOS\) in Buckinghamshire](#).

3.17 Overall, Buckinghamshire YOS was rated as 'Good'. As part of the inspection, inspectors also reviewed the quality of resettlement policy and provision, which was separately rated as 'Outstanding'. This is a very significant achievement and the outcome is testament to the hard work, dedication and

skill of our colleagues within the YOS as well as across the Council and partner agencies.

3.18 A summary of the key findings from the report can be found below:

- i. The governance and leadership of this service is strong.
- ii. The youth justice plan has been developed with input from board members and is based on detailed understanding of the profiles of children and their needs.
- iii. Board arrangements are effective, and mechanisms are in place to oversee the delivery of the strategy.
- iv. Comprehensive data reports about the profile of children, as well as YOS performance enable the board and management team to oversee service delivery.
- v. We were pleased to see the focus on addressing ethnic disproportionality being driven at board level.
- vi. Children have access to a range of services and interventions that meet a spectrum of needs and they are supported to access these.
- vii. The positive feedback we received from children confirms that they are getting the support and help they need.
- viii. A skilled, stable, highly motivated, staff team are supported by a competent management team that promotes a culture of learning and development.
- ix. There are excellent training and development opportunities and a strong connection between operational delivery and strategic priorities.
- x. All aspects of post-court work are excellent.
- xi. Case managers take a holistic approach to their work. They balance children's desistance, and safety and wellbeing needs, with an equal focus on protecting the public where a risk of harm has been identified.
- xii. The consistent quality of statutory work was impressive. However, the services delivered to children who receive out-of-court disposals is not of the same quality as that received by children on court orders.
- xiii. Assessment of children's own safety and wellbeing and planning to manage and reduce the risk of harm they may present to others require improvement.
- xiv. Information sharing and joint work with social care is strong; however, further work is needed to ensure information within out of court disposal assessments consistently reflects social care input.

- xv. Leaders also need to better understand the reintegration rates for children who are not in mainstream education to make sure every child has the best possible education placement.
- 3.19 As a result of our inspection findings, the following recommendations were made.
- i. Monitor the reintegration rates of YOS children into mainstream education to make sure that children return to full-time mainstream education in every case where this is appropriate.
 - ii. Ensure information within out of court disposal assessments consistently reflects social care input and that the roles and responsibilities for each service area are clearly identified within a children's plans.
 - iii. Improve the quality of assessment and planning for out-of-court disposal work to focus on the safety and wellbeing of children and the management of risk of harm to others.
 - iv. Review the out-of-court disposal guidance so that it sets out explicitly how the service intends to meet all diversity, safety and wellbeing needs, and risk of harm to others.
 - v. Strengthen out-of-court disposal assessment processes so that children and families are engaged at the earliest opportunity and ensure their views routinely contribute to disposal decisions
 - vi. Consistently ensure that suitable supervision arrangements for children completing reparation and expand the number of projects available.
 - vii. Seek to proactively diversify the pool of volunteers so that it reflects the children and families the service works with.
- 3.20 An action plan has been developed in response to the above and the Service will of course continue to stay focused on further improving the service and ensuring that our services to vulnerable children and young people are the best that they can be. Progress against the plan will be overseen by the YOS Strategic Partnership Board.

Local Area SEND Inspection

- 3.21 As report previously, in 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. Following inspection, the Local Authority and the Integrated Care System (formerly the CCG) were jointly responsible for submitting an action plan to

Ofsted, detailing how the following 3 areas of significant weakness would be addressed.

- 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.

3.22 The action plan, known as a Written Statement of Action (WSOA) was co-produced with key stakeholders across education, health and care services including voluntary and community sector organisations and parent representatives. The WSOA was submitted and approved by Ofsted in August 2022.

3.23 Since finalising the WSOA significant work has been undertaken to establish the infrastructure and monitoring mechanisms. This has included:

- i. The development of detailed operational plans with metrics to capture the specific activity and targets that underpin the published high level WSOA.
- ii. Alignment of activity with the wider SEND improvement programme to prevent duplication, ensure interdependencies are understood, and wider priorities continue to be addressed.
- iii. The development of a dashboard to track Key Performance Indicators and visually evidence progress.
- iv. Allocation of a dedicated project manager to oversee progress and escalate issues where this is insufficient. An additional health funded project support officer role is also in the process of being created.
- v. Establishment of a WSOA governance structure, including a monthly meeting with leaders across education, health, care and parent representatives, as well as a SEND Improvement Board that will scrutinise progress and ensure accountability.
- vi. Wide scale mapping of existing resources and support available across the local area for children and young people with SEND.
- vii. An under 5s Task and Finish Group has been created, with key professionals across the Local Area to identify key improvement actions, prioritising early identification of need, by providing the

right support at the right time for children under 5 regardless of wait times.

- 3.24 As part of ongoing monitoring, our first meeting with the DfE to review progress within the WSoA was held in December 2022. This was an opportunity to provide an update on each action identified within the WSoA, to ensure progress is being achieved at pace and reflect any evidence available, demonstrating a positive impact to the lived experience of children and young people.
- 3.25 Feedback following this meeting was positive; however, progress needs to be maintained within all workstreams to ensure improvement work continues at pace. Progress against the WSoA will continue to be monitored through day-to-day project management, monthly reporting to the WSoA Group, and presentations at the SEND Improvement Board which continues to meet every 6-8 weeks.
- 3.26 To support progress in this area, colleagues across our local area partner organisations, schools and parent/carer representatives all came together at an event held on Tuesday 7 March 2023 to talk about co-production. Co-production is about developing equal working partnerships between children and young people who use services, their families, carers and professionals. The aim of the event was for colleagues to find out more about the benefits of co-production, what is currently happening in Buckinghamshire and how we can all play our part in championing co-production in SEND services. During the day, the Buckinghamshire SEND Co-production Charter was launched. The Charter is the agreed shared principles and way of working for co-production in SEND services across the Buckinghamshire local area. We also launched the Buckinghamshire Co-production Promise, a way for people to sign-up to support the Buckinghamshire Co-production Charter. The event was very well attended with almost 100 colleagues coming together to hear guest speakers share examples and case studies of co-production they have worked on with children and young people with SEND and their families. Attendees also took part in a group workshop activity, the outputs of which will feed into the ongoing SEND improvement work programme. Feedback from attendees about the event was extremely positive. Alongside the event, resources are being developed to help co-production embed across the local area; including a co-production toolkit, aimed at anyone working with children and young people with SEND and/or their families. The toolkit will give a practical understanding of what co-production is, how effective it can be and how to do it well. We plan to continue the co-production conversation during National Co-production Week in July 2023 and on an ongoing basis.

Placements for Looked After Children

- 3.27 Looked After Children (LAC) are the responsibility of the local authority where they ordinarily reside. That local authority has the legal responsibility for placing their LAC in either registered (with Ofsted) foster placements or registered children's homes. Buckinghamshire, like all local authorities, utilises a mixture of internal placements, those run by the Council, and external placements run by private organisations.
- 3.28 Currently, the service has 18 residential beds available across our 4 children's homes, this includes 4 beds within our newly establish parent and baby unit, Sunflower House. The quality of provision across our homes is also extremely high with 2 of them now rated by Ofsted as 'Outstanding'. One of the homes is rated as 'Good' and Sunflower House is yet to be inspected.
- 3.29 Since October 2021, it has become increasingly difficult to find placements, particularly for children aged 12 plus with complex needs. Until recently, this Council had never placed a young person in unregistered provision and it is always our intention not to do this. However, as the availability of placements for the most complex children and young people became virtually non-existent, this has led the Council and all other local authorities in the country to be faced with using provision that is not Ofsted registered for some under 16-year-olds. At the time the report was written, there were 11 young people in unregulated placements. All of whom have carefully planned arrangements that are monitored and agreed by the Service Director. Once the child is placed, the allocated social worker will visit weekly and our commissioners will undertake, within 4 weeks, an unannounced visit where they will speak to the child, the manager and check paperwork such as child's records, staffing rotas and staff DBS records. In addition, the service is currently developing, with legal colleagues a set of practice standards for children and young people in such placements. Where we have young people in unregistered provision, staff in children's placements, commissioning, allocated social workers and senior officers work relentlessly to identify alternative registered provision. This includes encouraging the unregistered provider to register with Ofsted and find alternative solutions that cost less and will be safe for the individual young person.
- 3.30 The solutions to the complex scenario of a young person with high needs, difficult behaviours and an unregistered provision take a considerable time to create and manufacture. One potential solution for some of the young people involved is for satellite homes to be created that are linked to our own registered children's homes. This is something that the service is actively exploring. In addition, we are developing a Placement Sufficiency Strategy that accurately reflects the current position and clearly articulates the service's

plans to increase the availability of provision for our children and young people that meet their needs and provides them with a safe place to live and thrive within Buckinghamshire.

- 3.31 Buckinghamshire Council has now, along with all other local authorities, been mandated to take Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) when they are referred via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). In addition, the Council is also now required to continue to receive referrals until it reaches 0.10% of the child (0-18) population (128 individuals for Buckinghamshire) compared to the previous ask of 0.07%, 89 individuals for Buckinghamshire. At the time of writing, the Service supports 73 UASC, an increase from 48 in September 2022.
- 3.32 These decisions by central government are having a significant impact directly and indirectly on the Council's budgets. The direct impacts are on placement costs and on subsistence payments. Indirectly, the impact on placement availability for all children has and continues to decrease supply, hence why this Council as well as all other local authorities in the country are having to use unregulated provision.
- 3.33 A number of commissioning actions are underway to procure increased provision for care leavers including UASC. This includes block purchasing 'semi-independent' provision increase the supply of placements at a lower price. The Service will also continue to work with colleagues from Housing and our Housing Associations to ensure care leavers access their own tenancies in a timely and cost-effective way.

Corporate Parenting

- 3.34 As mentioned above, when a child comes into care, the council becomes their Corporate Parent. As Corporate Parents it is our collective responsibility to provide the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by us. Looking after and protecting children and young people is one of the most important jobs that councils do and when a child, for whatever reason, cannot safely stay at home, it is up to us as the local authority to step in and give them the care, support and stability that they deserve.
- 3.35 Our Corporate Parenting Panel supports the council to ensure that it is fulfilling its duties towards those children looked after corporately. It also oversees the services provided to children and young people in care. The Panel consists of a cross party group of elected Members supported by council officers as well as representatives from partner agencies responsible for aspects of working with children in care and care leavers. Children in care and care leavers engage in the Panel also.

- 3.36 During the last year, the panel has focused on the following areas:
- i. To ensure a focused approach to identifying and addressing issues relating to the health, both mental and physical of young people in the care of the local authority.
 - ii. To ensure a focused approach to identifying and addressing issues relating to housing and care leavers.
 - iii. To ensure a focused approach to identifying and addressing issues relating to education, employment and training.
- 3.37 Further updates on the progress made against the above priorities will be shared during the next Cabinet update.

Peer review

- 3.38 Buckinghamshire is part of the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP), which is a membership group of all single/upper-tier local authorities in the South East that aims to:
- Improve outcomes for children and young people across the South East.
 - Establish a culture of honest and constructive dialogue and challenge within and between authorities.
 - Demonstrate the capacity and capability of the sector to achieve a coherent and consistent self-improving system.
- 3.39 As part of the programme, local authorities routinely take part in a range of improvement activities and on 10 February 2023, the Service's senior leadership team participated in the peer challenge process, with Southampton and Slough, facilitated by a member of the SESLIP team. Feedback on the Service included:
- i. Strong leadership team that knows the service well
 - ii. Clear priorities and focus in order to improve the service.
 - iii. Progress evident since the full inspection and peer review last year.
- 3.40 The Service was very pleased with this feedback and will continue to utilise the learning from the sector led programme of support to assist the improvement journey in Buckinghamshire.

Youth Voice Bucks

- 3.41 On Thursday 23 February 2023, the first ever Bucks Youth Summit took place at the Waterside Theatre in Aylesbury. The event was planned and hosted by the young people in our county-wide Youth Forum, Youth Voice. The event invited students from schools across the county to share their voice on the biggest issues and areas of interest for young people in Buckinghamshire today. The event also acted as the launch of the Youth Participation Strategy for young people.
- 3.42 142 students from 16 schools attended and spoke about a number of key themes that matter to them, ranging from mental health, a youth-led conversation on sexual violence and access for young people in rural communities
- 3.43 The event was youth-led, exciting, lively, and empowering for the young people that took part, and the feedback has been incredible. The outputs of each conversation are being collated by facilitators and workstreams are launching to ensure action is taken in response to the young people's feedback. These workstreams will be monitored by the Youth Voice forum and young attendees will be kept updated on progress via email and the [YouthVoiceBucks website](#). Due to the event's huge success, Youth Voice Bucks and the Youth Voice forum plan to make this an annual event! The next Youth Summit will take place on Wednesday 28 February 2024, again at The Waterside Theatre.

4. Other options considered

- 4.1 N/A

5. Legal and financial implications

- 5.1 There are no specific legal or financial implications as a result of agreeing to the recommendations the paper. However, there are significant financial pressures associated with a number of areas detailed within the report, particularly pertinent to the mandated transfer scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, demand pressures faced across the Service and the reliance on agency staff due to the significant social worker recruitment challenges.

6. Corporate implications

- 6.1 Similar to above, there are no specific corporate implications as a result of agreeing to the recommendations the paper; however, changes made as part

of the Transformation Plan no doubt require additional support from corporate support services such as HR and Finance.

7. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

7.1 N/A

8. Communication, engagement & further consultation

8.1 N/A

9. Next steps and review

9.1 The next update will be provided to Cabinet in Autumn 2023.

10. Background papers

10.1 N/A



Children's Services Transformation Programme A better future for all

15 June 2023





Children's Services Vision

Keeping children and young people safe

Supporting children, young people, parents and carers to overcome their challenges

'We aim to build a better future for all children and young people in Buckinghamshire so that they realise their potential, whatever their starting point is.'

Improving children and young people's health and wellbeing

Providing opportunities for children and young people to meet their potential

Children's Services Transformation – Background

- Since 2020 there has been an unprecedented increase in demand within Buckinghamshire, with referral and re-referral rates significantly higher than statistical neighbours. The number of contacts made to children's social care has risen by 61% since 2020/21. In 2022/23, only 20% of the 26581 contacts received required a statutory social care assessment.
- Nationally, there has been a 32% increase in children subject to Child Protection Plans in the 10 years to 2019/20 with a forecast increase in the number of children in care from 80,000 (May 2022) to c100,000 over the next decade.
- The [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) noted that the current way of working by managing risks, responding to episodic need, and having high thresholds to access help, may be restricting the purpose of social care to 'rescuing' children, and keeping services from meeting the needs of families.
- Current structures have led to significant issues with recruitment and retention in certain Children's Services teams, particularly where staff have carried higher than desirable caseloads for a significant period contributing to an over-reliance on a high-cost agency workforce.
- Many other Local Authorities have already moved to create multi-disciplinary locality-based services as this is considered to be best practice with several good and outstanding Ofsted rated Authorities (for example, Hampshire and Herts) having already adopted their own version of this model.
- The move away from process-led referral pathways has been endorsed by the Government in their response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, '[Stable Homes, Built on Love](#)'.

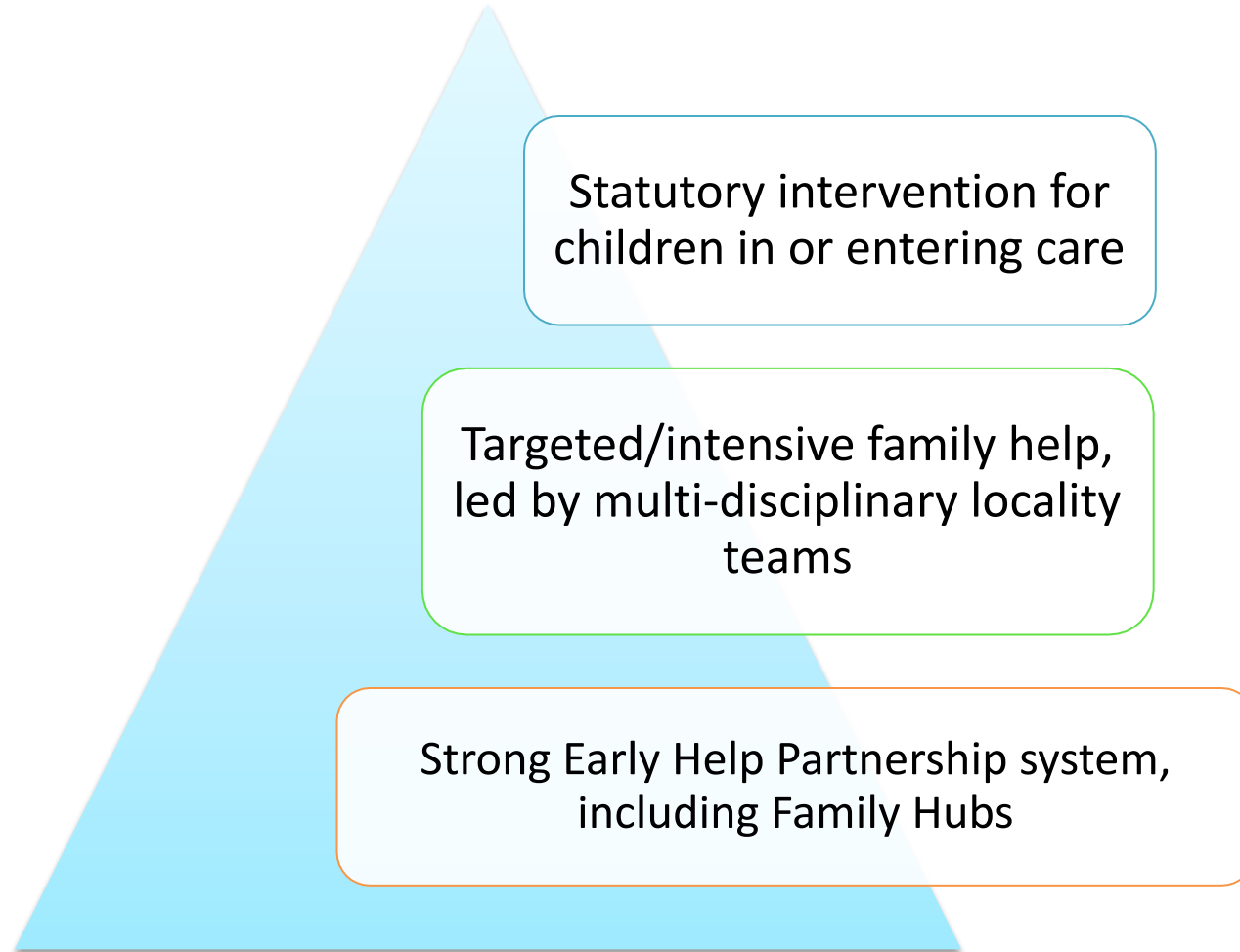
Children's Services Transformation – Context

- Buckinghamshire Council is committed to achieving a good Children's Services, having come out of DfE intervention following the full Ofsted inspection in 2021.
- There is corporate and political recognition that we must do something differently in order to realise our ambition to deliver good quality, effective services for children and young people.
- There has been a long-standing commitment to change the current delivery model for a more fit for purpose structure that puts children at the heart of everything we do and creates more opportunities for professionals, including partner agencies, to integrate services around the needs of communities.
- Opportunity for whole system change and to redefine the support to children and families, including redeveloping our model to be more responsive to children's needs.
- Currently developing a comprehensive programme of change based on a series of key principles.

Key Principles for Children's Transformation

- Ensure that Children and Young People are at the centre of our thinking and decision-making.
- Opportunity to innovate, appropriately address demand and respond to new and emerging threats.
- Reduce hand off points, minimise assessments and enable the system to respond to changing risks.
- Ensure there is alignment between services and seamless transition at all points of the child's journey.
- Introduce and embed a clear practice model and methodology that is all about nurturing relationships with children and families.
- Ensure that the most trusted lead professional is working with the child and family.
- Support the continuous professional development of staff.
- Multi-disciplinary locality based teams working closer to the communities and supporting effective relationships with partner agencies to enable better outcomes for children.
- Ensure there is a balanced system across preventative and statutory services.
- Ensure families are supported to access effective early help services, reducing the need for more intrusive interventions.

The Proposed Operating Model



Early Help Partnership

- Development of the Early Help Partnership, including the establishment of an Early Help Partnership Board:
 - Families that do not require statutory intervention are supported effectively within communities.
 - The Early Help system, boosted by the contribution of partners and the voluntary & community sector, recognises the fluidity of threshold, stepping the right services in for families at the right stage without overreliance on local authority services.
 - Preventative activity is tailored and targeted, through the local partnerships, to ensure it reaches families at the earliest point.

Locality Family Support Teams

- Small, cohesive **teams of skilled, multi-agency professionals** that are attuned to local need and deliver a range of interventions.
- A **trusted lead professional** that works with the child and family to ensure the best possible offer of support at the right point in time.
- Building of **strong collaboration with local partners**, (including the Voluntary and Community Sector) that can target need variation through locality specific services.
- **Reduced hand-offs** between teams that mean families don't need to continually repeat their stories.
- Sense of **one team, one service** leading to enhanced supervision, support and continuous development.

Development of a new operating model

Phase 1- Early intervention, prevention and support

- Reorganisation of key internal services into smaller locality teams. Indicative timescale of November 2023.
- Initial focus on early help pathways, the initial child's journey and prevention of escalating need.
- Specifically looking at early information and advice and case holding interventions with children and young people.

Development of a new operating model

Phase 2- Wider services

- Further review of other teams within Children's Services / wider Council Services and engagement with external partners and the Voluntary and Community Sector. Seeking where possible, alignment to the new operating model.
- Initial, early discovery work has commenced and will run parallel to phase 1 activity.
- Developing longer term transformation roadmap.
- Opportunity to enhance the support provided by improving collaboration through better sharing of information and increased system-wide multi-disciplinary ways of working.

Culture & Workforce

- Develop a cultural framework across the system to embed a whole service identity and way of working.
- Produce a workforce development strategy for Children's Services which includes progression routes and training and development opportunities.
- Develop dialogue and forums to create a learning culture across the service.
- Embed a clear practice methodology across all services including trauma informed approaches and motivational interviewing.
- Development of a recruitment and retention strategy to position Buckinghamshire Children's Services as a lead employer within the South East region.
- Ensure values are embedded within a behavioural framework which underpins the vision.

Strategic Commissioning

- A Placement Sufficiency Strategy that accurately reflects the volatile and unpredictable external placements market.
- Increase in availability of good quality local provision for children and young people that meets their needs and provides them with a safe place to live and thrive.
- A robust recruitment campaign and retention package for our fostering service and residential service.
- Launch of our Regional Adoption Agency with our Voluntary Adoption Agency Partner.
- A responsive menu of edge of care interventions to reduce the number of adolescent children in high-cost provision and prevent further admissions to care through earlier preventative work.

Governance

- Children's Services Transformation Board established to oversee progress against transformation priorities.
- Engagement with key partners and the voluntary and community sector critical to shaping the future operating model.
- Ensuring effective links with other service transformation activity across the Council.
- Regular updates on progress to Cabinet and the Children's and Education Select Committee as required.
- Dialogue at regular intervals with the Department for Education and Ofsted around Transformation Programme.

Questions / Discussion?



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**Children's & Education
Select Committee
Review of Pathways for Children with
SEND**



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Introduction

I am the Buckinghamshire Councillor for Wing and a Member of the Children's and Education Select Committee. In November 2022 I was asked by the Select Committee to set up a scrutiny review into how parents of children with SEND gain initial access to the information they might need to commence gaining help for their child. The review group was established, and I was joined in this by Councillors James, Kayani, Turner and Ward.

The aim of the group was to investigate how parents, when considering that their child might have special educational needs, might find and access the relevant information in order to gain the advice, help and support that they need on the journey to gaining support for their child's special needs.

I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues on the review group, the dedicated Children's Services staff whom we spoke to, as well as to the Cabinet Member for Children's and Education for her contribution. I would also like to thank Andrew Howard of FACT Bucks, Laura Gomersall of Autism Early Support, Inger Richardson of ADHD and Autism Support and the staff of four schools that shared their views with the group.

Finally, I would like to thank the parents who freely gave their time to share their experiences of what was often a difficult journey to find the support that their child or children needed.

Councillor Diana Blamires
May 2023



Cllr James



Cllr Kayani



Cllr Turner



Cllr Ward

Aim of the Rapid Review

The review was set up with the aim of investigating the pathways to finding information for children and young people with SEND when first trying to access services and support. This involved a) assessing views from different sources with regards to the availability and accessibility of information required by parents to gain support from services for their children and b) gaining understanding on information for services specifically relating to three different scenarios as follows:

1. Getting help before a diagnosis of Autism
2. Getting help before a diagnosis of ADHD
3. Getting help with anxiety and depression

Through looking at the ways parents had accessed the pathways to information to help their children and young people, the review aimed to gain the following:

1. Improved clarity for parents of children with SEND on what help is available and how to access it through appropriate resources and information sources (as per the scenarios outlined above)
2. Greater understanding for parents on the roles and responsibilities of professionals working to support children and young people with SEND
3. Suggest Improvements to the help and guidance available for families on the SEND Local Offer
Suggest improvements to the pathways to help shape and inform the development of a more cohesive strategy

Methodology

In order to gather evidence, the review group held several meetings with Buckinghamshire Council Officers, representatives of local organisations, staff from a range of primary, secondary and special schools and with several parents as follows:

Between November 2022 and February 2023, the review group held 10 meetings with a Council Officers in a variety of roles in service commissioning, working on the Written Statement of Action, Educational Psychology, the Local Offer team, Improvement and Transformation team and areas relating to the provision of SEND services for children and young people.

During February and March 2023, the group made visits to four schools which included a primary, a secondary, a grammar and a special school to gain a range of views and perspectives on this issue. The group also spoke to lead professionals from local organisations providing services relating to special educational needs. The final stage of research conducted by the group was one-to-one meetings with parents to gain an insight into their own specific experiences of accessing relevant information and then of finding appropriate services for their children with needs relating to autism, ADHD, anxiety and depression.

National Context

The Government has been focused on the national need to improve SEND services illustrated by the publication in March 2023 of its plan; “SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan “Right Support, Right Place, Right Time. The plan outlined the Government’s aim of providing “a single national system that delivers consistently for every child and young person with SEND and in alternative provision”.

The plan also set out the Government's intention to create local SEND and alternative provision partnerships, set up a National SEND and Alternative Provision Implementation Board, develop a standard template for Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs), and create a three-tier alternative provision system. The plan provides a welcome focus on rebuilding support for SEN children.

The paper also recognised the importance of earlier identification of needs in an inclusive system and highlighted the need for timely, high-quality services and support in mainstream settings.

Earlier identification of needs relies on parents being able to access help in a timely and clear way to seek identification and understanding of their own child’s situation and bring about appropriate support. It was noted by the group that 90% of parents who believe their child has one of these conditions turns out to be right because this is the reason it’s so important to do much more when parents first believe their child has a condition.



Local Context

Between 28 February and 11th March 2022 the Care Quality Commission and Ofsted jointly inspected the services provided for children and young people with special educational needs (SEND) in Buckinghamshire. The aim of the inspection was 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. It was noted that the Covid pandemic had created various impacts into service provision including an increase of children and young people presenting with neurodiverse conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalcula and Tourettes.

Children & Families Act 2014 - Highlights



In response to the inspection, the council and the Integrated Care Board provided a written statement of action (WSOA), which was submitted to Ofsted in August 2022 which gave details of the local area’s extensive plans to address the three areas highlighted as requiring improvement.

As part of the WSOA one of the outcomes the authority wished to achieve was that “families are well informed about available services and support and report positively on their experience of their child’s needs being identified and met.” The council, Integrated Care Board and its many partners began extensive work to achieve the actions stated in the WSOA in many areas of its service provision. This work is overseen by the Children’s Services SEND Improvement Board which provides external challenge to drive improvements at pace and scale.

The review group therefore, sought to investigate what the experiences were for both parents and professionals when finding or sign-posting information about services in the initial stages of parents’ journeys into SEND services. This access to services was found to be

through a variety of places; schools, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators, health services, parent groups, the “Local Offer”, by word of mouth and referrals.

Summary of Recommendations

The Children’s and Education Select Committee review group wish to recommend that:

Availability of Information

Recommendation 1

The review group supports the ongoing and review on Buckinghamshire’s “Local Offer” to be customer-focused for children, young people and their parents. We recommend a more user-friendly approach with simple language, and suggest the inclusion of inserted videos, clear links to first port-of-call contact lists for each area of diagnosis and examples of pathway diagrams.

Recommendation 2

The Cabinet Member for Children’s and Education and the Chairman of the Children’s and Education Select Committee write jointly to the Government to recommend a change of name of “The Local Offer” in order to make it easier for parents to find when searching websites for their first access to information.

Communications Planning

Recommendation 3

The county-wide communications plan being developed for SEND should include promotion of our Local Offer, and this must include further promotion via social media.

Recommendation 4

A neurodiversity resource pack should be developed with key contact information about the Local Offer, charities, relevant organisations and health professionals so that it could be given to parents by all agencies as an initial signposting tool.

Recommendation 5

The neurodiversity resource pack should be promoted in all relevant forums e.g. Headteacher and Governor network meetings and it should also be shared with all Councillors in order to assist them in their casework with residents.

Training and Network Development

Recommendation 6

The Council support the implementation of the training qualification for all SENCOs as stated in the Government's SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan.

Recommendation 7

The SENCO meetings network be extended to ensure that all SENCOs have the opportunity to attend regular meetings for the purposes of sharing best practice and timely information.

Recommendation 8

The Cabinet Member for Children's and Education and the Chairman of the Children's and Education Select Committee write jointly to the Government to recommend a substantial increase in the number of university degree places for Educational Psychologists nationally, to enable educational psychologists to give greater support to schools on work relating to neurodiversity in children and young people.

Recommendation 9

A programme of neurodiversity in-school training be developed for all teachers and wider school and nursery staff.

Recommendation 10.

All secondary schools should be encouraged to deliver neurodiversity talks in school to foster a greater awareness and understanding of neurodiversity amongst pupils.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Following careful consideration of the information received during discussions and by gaining the viewpoints of officers, organisations and parents, the review group wish to report the following observations, key findings and recommendations.

In several meetings the review group heard details of how during the Covid pandemic there had been a substantial increase in demand for services which, along with difficulty in recruiting in some areas, resulted in additional challenges for providers.

A “whole system” approach was being taken to address the issues found by the SEND inspection and this encompassed education, health and social care. The work focussed on a needs-led approach, early intervention, assessment and diagnostic pathways and post assessment/diagnostic support. Parent dialogue groups were being consulted on the detail of the actions in the written statement to gain their perspective of the work.

The review group heard from the officers from different areas and services as follows;

- Buckinghamshire Council SEND Improvement Programme, Educational Psychology, Local Offer team and Comms Team
- Autism Early Support
- ADHD and Autism Support
- Oxford Health Foundation Trust
- Buckinghamshire Healthcare Trust
- Families And Carers Together Buckinghamshire (FACT Bucks)
- Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), headteachers and teaching staff from special, primary, secondary and grammar schools
- A specialist teacher
- Parents of children and young people with autism, ADHD and anxiety/depression.

As part of the early research for this review the group considered the Portsmouth Model of service provision for SEND services which was held up as an example of good practice. The model included:

- A “Profiling Tool” based on 9 dimensions (sub-profiles) that can be used by non-clinicians in a wide set of contexts alongside families to help assessment of need
- A Training programme - 100s of trained professionals across the children’s system to use the profiling tool alongside children and families
- A bank of resources and strategies for families to use - shaped to the child’s neuro-profile
- A reduction in demand for formal diagnosis - but not a ‘switching off’ as many families will continue to benefit from formal diagnosis
- A multi-disciplinary team that can provide help, advice, support and guidance

Following its implementation, feedback was very positive, with comments from parents to say that both the parents and teachers understood their child's differences much better than before. It was considered that the "bank of resources" and a wider training programme should be part of Buckinghamshire's approach.

Availability of Information

The Council provides the "Local Offer" detailing many areas of help for parents of children and young people with SEND and information for professionals. However, many people we spoke to had not initially heard of it. One parent commented that she didn't know of the local offer so didn't know to look for it. In the end another parent told her about it but she felt that the name was off putting. This view was reiterated by others hence the review group looked at the Local Offer site in further detail.

Through analysing several other local authorities' versions of the "Local Offer" and by speaking to parents, organisations and officers, the group gained an overall sense that "The Local Offer" on Buckinghamshire Council's website, although award-winning and full of useful content; needed to be revised thoroughly to make it more user-friendly for both parents and professionals. Other local authority versions of the Local Offer had inserted videos of key members of the SEND officer team and the service Director, stating their role and part in the mission to help parents of children with SEND. This was considered by the review group to be very reassuring and gave an understanding of the local authority's aims to help children.

Schools and staff from organisations reported that information was difficult to find and the site difficult to navigate. From a networking perspective it was difficult to find which SENCO was attached to each school and where other key contacts were listed.

Feedback from parents included that the Local Offer should be designed with an awareness of how the parents might be feeling when they first embark upon research with a view to finding appropriate services for their SEND child. The FACT Bucks survey of 2022 recorded quotes from parents which included: "It feels like we are constantly having to fight to get the right support for our child" and "It's always so stressful" referring to how hard it is to get to the service information required.

The group heard many elements of feedback supporting this issue and points included that the Local Offer pages were very hard to navigate, that contact lists were not easy to find in the website, and it was not clear where to go for support for the different aspects of neurodiversity. One parent suggested that it would be helpful to have links to You Tube videos and that information could be grouped according to the type of neurodiversity.

In the FACT Bucks parents survey of 2022, it was noted that: an increased proportion of respondents had heard of the local offer (66% vs 56% in 2021), though about the same number (75%) had never used it. Those who had used the Local Offer at least once gave mixed and worsening responses about the helpfulness of the information in it. When asked to rate it on a scale where 1 was "not helpful at all" and 5 was "very helpful", 37% [29% in

2021] rated it 1 or 2 and 16% [35% in 2021] gave a rating of 4 or 5.” It is noted that a new survey has been carried out in 2023 and so these figures may have changed.

Requests for development from parents and officers included;

- the use of video clips of our professionals to introduce “The Local Offer” and explain their own particular roles in supporting parents (such as the Surrey example)
- visible front page contact lists
- diagrammatic examples of pathways that children and young people follow from the first point of contact
- grouping information for parents to access according to the issues experienced such as “what to do if your child does x...” or “my child can’t pronounce words...”

The group considered that these would speed up the process of the parent accessing appropriate information for their child and feeling supported more speedily.

Parents also suggested that easy-to-use guides and example clips of conversations would be really helpful in accessing key information. This would help raise awareness of issues and provide reassurance as well as providing some strategies and support whilst waiting for an assessment and formal diagnosis. Another parent noted about the Local Offer that “clarity is the key for the concerned parent”. The group agreed with this statement, noting that knowing where to go initially for relevant information would help to alleviate the stress of “not knowing where to go” as stated by another parent.

The group were pleased to support the on-going work through the Local Offer Advisory Group to regularly update the Local Offer and noted that the inclusion of additional new content was driven by the SEND Improvement Plan. The review group commended the monthly work by the group and the team of officers supporting it, to check website content, amend broken links and regularly take user feedback into account. It was noted that the Local Offer contained a wealth of information from many sources and that keeping it up to date required some shared responsibility with the relevant organisations and outside sources of information.

However, from the user’s point of view, as outlined above, there are improvements that could be made to enhance the website experience and ensure that parents feel more reassured and more confident about their next steps in securing support for their child or children. The review group therefore recommend that:

Recommendation 1

The review group supports the ongoing and review on Buckinghamshire’s “Local Offer” to be customer-focussed for children, young people and their parents. We recommend a more user-friendly approach with simple language, and suggest the inclusion of inserted videos, clear links to first port-of-call contact lists for each area of diagnosis and examples of pathway diagrams.

The name “Local Offer” had been set nationally by central government. However, parents, organisational representatives, and Officers all told us that the name “Local Offer” was not only ambiguous but also not indicative of the site’s purpose, which meant that it was extremely difficult to find as a parent searching for information to help their child in the first instance. Its existence is not well known amongst relevant professionals; *“as a teacher, it is not helpful that I had not heard of this until I was seeking support for my child, and a friend pointed me in the direction of The Local Offer”*.

Many other councils had kept the name as it was, as the Government had stipulated but one had inserted the words “for SEND” which the group felt was appropriate.

Reviewing the name to include the word “SEND” would enable parents to find the Local Offer and the information it contains more readily in Google searches and thus increase the likelihood of earlier intervention leading to better outcomes. It would also make it more obvious what the Local Offer pages related to.

Recommendation 2

The Cabinet Member for Children’s and Education and the Chairman of the Children’s and Education Select Committee write jointly to the Government to recommend the change of name of “The Local Offer” in order to make it easier for parents to find when searching for their first access to SEND information.

Communications

The lack of awareness of the Local Offer was stated as a national issue and could be addressed both by changing or developing its name as outlined above, but also by raising awareness of it through promotion via social media as well as more traditional routes such as training. It was also suggested that it should be advertised in school planners and via newsletters/Headteachers Bulletins.

The group were aware that work was underway by the council’s officers to develop a communications plan, although the group were not aware of the details. The group considered that this should be co-ordinated with other agencies and charities to allow for clarity of shared information and support. Therefore the review group recommend that:

Recommendation 3

The county-wide communications plan being developed for SEND should include promotion of our Local Offer, and this to include further promotion via such elements as social media, training and advertising to include school planners.

Communications needed to be “palatable, easily accessible and co-ordinated” stated a lead officer from a local organisation. Many professionals are involved in the communications links around children and young people with neurodiversity; educational psychologists, school staff and SENCOs, health professionals and the officers working for local

organisations, national charities, and the council. However, school was often the first port of call for parents.

The Review Group believe that a simple resource pack or sheet signposting to relevant and helpful links e.g., to the “Local Offer”, and to local organisations and national charities would be really helpful for parents to be given when they first realised, they might need to access assistance, and to see where they might go to access the wealth of information available to them. This would complement the information found from further investigation by parents/professionals and would form part of the raft of resources such as had been successful in Portsmouth.

The review group would like the resource pack to be available to all agencies to hand out in hard copy format. The group acknowledge that hard copy can become out of date but suggest that this could be minimised by the provision of minimal information such as names/ links and would help accessibility for all parents.

Recommendation 4

A neurodiversity resource pack should be developed and used across all agencies as an initial signposting tool to e.g. The Local Offer, charities, relevant organisations and health professionals.

The review group considered that the resource pack should be promoted via relevant school-related and health partner forums. It would also be helpful to share it with all Buckinghamshire Councillors to enable them to sign-post residents to appropriate information when dealing with relevant SEND casework or enquiries.

Recommendation 5

The neurodiversity resource pack should be promoted in all relevant forums e.g. Headteacher and Governor network meetings and that it should be shared with all Councillors in order to assist them in their casework with residents.

Training and Network Development

The review group heard from a lead officer from an organisation that “the experience a child has with SEND at school depends on a key factor: how the school understands and deals with SEND issues “. The level of understanding of a child or young person’s SEND needs by their SENCO as well as other teaching and support staff is therefore key to good outcomes for children and young people.

The group heard from parents of support they received from SENCOs and this was crucial to them. For example, we heard of an instance where a SENCO realised that other students in the same class as one autistic child did not understand their autistic traits and so training was arranged for pupils in school to help their understanding. Through the meetings with

parents and staff the group were made aware of the high level of demands on SENCOs and the high level of care often given by them.

However, it was considered important that all SENCOs (and other professionals) gained up to date information on for example, diagnoses for different elements of autism. One parent noted that their child's indications of autism were missed, and another's behaviour was dismissed as being "naughty". The group considered that this training could only benefit everyone.

The implementation of the SENCO training qualification referred to in the Government's plan, to be rolled out uniformly across the county's SENCOs is a key part in ensuring the training level is consistent and supportive to the county's SEND children. Staff's ability to refer children onto the right pathways for diagnosis, as well as both signpost and give support within school is crucial. Sometimes there can be more than one condition which present together such as anxiety and autism, so it is vital that SENCOs understand complex behaviours and co-existing conditions and, in our view, training will support this. With this in mind, we recommend that:

Recommendation 6

The Council support the implementation of the training qualification for all SENCOs as stated in the Government's SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan.

The SENCOs that the group spoke to found the SENCO network meetings to be highly beneficial but it was noted that they did not consistently cover the whole county. As SENCOs play such an important support role it was considered that the network should be developed as this would help to ensure that information sharing is consistent. For example, there was a growing understanding of autism in girls, and more information could be shared on this. One parent noted how a specific type of autism "pathological demand avoidance" was not accepted by some professionals to exist. Information sharing on such issues would not only help the professional development of SENCOs and the teaching staff that they work alongside but ultimately the children who they are there to support.

It was considered that meetings could be held on-line and recorded to ensure consistency of information sharing as it was noted that the demands of the role meant that SENCOs might not always be able to attend in person.

Recommendation 7

The SENCO meetings network be extended to ensure that all SENCOs have the opportunity to attend regular meetings, for the purposes of sharing relevant and timely information.

Waiting times for diagnosis were a key frustration for parents. The review group heard how £1.1m funding had been committed to reduce waiting times for children to see a Community Paediatrician to improve the situation, as more support was needed for assessments.

The group heard from many sources how educational psychologists play a key and valued role in assessing children and young people. The work of trainee educational psychologists was particularly valued by school staff who reported that having more assistance by the trainees would assist the children and young people concerned and would speed the process up to a formal diagnosis. It was noted that 90% of children and young people referred to educational psychologists for assessments of SEN where a neurodiverse condition is potentially indicated as part of their assessment go on to receive a formal diagnosis from the relevant health professional. This high percentage was supported by work undertaken earlier in a child's timeline to assess their needs, and trainee educational psychologists contributed to this work.

The group heard that the council had to apply for trainee Educational Psychologists each year to the university consortium. Central government had pledged an extra £21million to train 200 educational psychologists nationally per year with an incentive of a doctorate for those who work for a local authority for at least two years after graduating. However, many more students awaited places. 12 universities and one NHS trust were running the government scheme. However, as an authority, we would have to bid to recruit trainees as would other local authorities.

It was noted however that the increase in work for educational psychologists in this authority in the last year alone was 61%, which followed an increase in 2021. This meant that our small number of trainees allocated to Buckinghamshire by the university consortium, as well as the qualified educational psychologists, had to focus their time on the statutory input required on the Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), rather than the work alongside SENCOs on assessments. It was also noted that it was very difficult to recruit full time educational psychologists but easier to recruit agency locum staff.

The Review Group believe that the Council should lobby Government for an increase in the total number of trainee places nationally to combat the increased demand, therefore we recommend that:

Recommendation 8

The Cabinet Member for Children's and Education and the Chairman of the Children's and Education Select Committee write jointly to the Government to recommend a substantial increase of the number of university degree places for Educational Psychologists nationally, to enable educational psychologists to give greater support to schools on work relating to neurodiversity in children and young people.

The group heard from both parents and officers that early intervention and the awareness level of teachers could be pivotal to a child's success. Awareness of the different profiles and indications of a neurodiverse condition was crucial. The group also heard from Officers how important it was to educate peers about neurodiversity.

One parent stated that her child felt misunderstood and was "treated as naughty" in year nine. However, following an inset day training for the teaching staff in the child's school on neurodiversity, on entering year 10 the child felt that the teaching staff's attitude towards them was more positive and that the everyday support presenting in the classroom had improved. This was crucial to the child's wellbeing, attendance levels and their academic progress in school. Another example was given where a SENCO acted quickly to refer a child to CAMHS as they recognised both the child's need and that they would soon be too old to qualify for the CAMHS service.

Recommendation 9

A programme of neurodiversity in-school training be developed for all teachers and school and nursery staff.

The review group heard how schools were addressing the education of children on neurodiversity via the "circle of friends" approach and education on anti-bullying. Members also heard from schools of valuable examples of talks presented in person in school, which had made a considerable difference to the attitude of peers to their neurodiverse colleagues.

It was considered that links could be explored to the work already being undertaken e.g., the National Autistic Society's "early bird" training programme or the training linked to the roll-out of the Autism Standards in Schools.

One SENCO gave an example of an older pupil who chose to deliver a talk in their school about their experiences with neurodiversity which had a beneficial impact on the whole school's understanding of the difficulties of the condition and encouraged a wider acceptance amongst pupils of their neurodiverse peers. Whilst not all children would want to speak about their own neurodiversity, it might be possible that some of the older children or alumni would do so. Some schools have a Neurodiversity Committee where children are able to share their experiences and feed back to school staff on adjustments. This additional level of two-way communication helps to give support to the neurodiverse pupils in the school.

Recommendation 10.

All secondary schools should be encouraged to deliver neurodiversity talks in-school to foster a greater awareness and understanding of neurodiversity amongst pupils.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the review group considered that across both the council and its partner agencies, a wealth of hard work was underway to improve access to the information around SEND service provision, including much through the work on the SEND Improvement plan. The group noted that crucially, the improvements needed to be co-ordinated with all services and partners to close the gaps in information provision.

The review group hopes that their recommendations will be welcomed, and that even if these can only make a small difference to the provision of information to SEND, then that will be beneficial.

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Select Committee Work Programmes 2023/24

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

Date	Topic	Description & Purpose	Lead Officer	Contributors
15 th June	Children's Services 6 month Update	An Update report with specific focus on Children's Social Care reforms, SEND and Alternate Provision	John Macilwraith Richard Nash Simon James	
	Children's Services Transformation	Overview and Case for change	John Macilwraith Errol Albert	
	Review Group report on Pathways for Children with SEND and Disabilities	To receive the report of the review group and hear the Officers' response.	Katie Dover	Cllr Diana Blamires & Review Group
	Children's & Education Select Committee Work Programme	To receive the draft work programme for the forthcoming year	Katie Dover	Cllr Julie Ward
7 th September	Placement Sufficiency Strategy	This strategy sets out a summary of the action we will be taking over to make sure that we can provide placements for all children who need care.	Richard Nash Sandra Carnall	
	Principal Social Worker Annual Report	To provide a progress report on the work during 2022/23 of the Principal Social Worker to promote and improve the quality of social work practice, highlight the achievements for this year and identify priorities for the coming year.	Richard Nash	
	Update on Ofsted Work	Update on the outcome following the Ofsted Annual Engagement Meeting	John Macilwraith	
2 nd November	Bucks Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report	This edition of the Safeguarding Children Partnership's Annual Report covers the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. It highlights the progress made during the last year against the	Walter Mcculloch Joanne Stephenson	

		BSCP's priorities as well as setting out future plans		
	SEND Improvement Programme follow up paper	To update the Committee on progress made	Simon Jones Caroline Marriott	
	Children's Services Transformation	To update the Committee on progress made	John Macilwraith Errol Albert	
25 th January	Education Standards Paper	To share with the committee the latest educational outcomes achieved by the children and young people of Buckinghamshire.	Simon James Gareth Drawmer	
	Youth Offending Team	Progress update one year on from YOS inspection	Richard Nash Aman Sekhon-Gill	
	New attendance duties	To provide the committee with an update on the new attendance duties and the implications for Buckinghamshire.	Simon Jones Gareth Drawmer	
7 th March	TBC			
	TBC			