



Children's Services Priorities Select Committee

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Priorities – Children’s Social Care

1. Service Improvement

Since the November 2017 ‘Inadequate’ Ofsted re-inspection, Ofsted have completed 4 monitoring visits (July 2018, December 2018, May 2019 and October 2019), the fifth was due in May 2020; however, all planned inspection activity was cancelled due to COVID-19. In February 2021, Ofsted remotely completed a Focused Visit that evaluated our response to the pandemic. In summary, improvements have been made to date and the overall progress has been acknowledged by inspectors. That said, the quality of practice in some teams still remains inconsistent. All reports following each visit have commented on the strong political support, the leadership teams accurate understanding of what needs to be done, and that our improvement activity is appropriately targeted. In addition, all our self-assessments presented to Ofsted have been accepted in full and Ofsted have not identified any areas of concern the service was not aware of and had not identified already.

Priorities – Children’s Social Care

2. Responding to the growing and unpredictable demand as a result of COVID 19

The impact of COVID-19 has led to a significant rise in demand both locally and nationally. This coupled with an increase in the complexity and seriousness of situations that children and young people find themselves in, is having a substantial impact on workloads and our workforce. The service’s focus remains on ensuring children and young people are kept safe; however, the unpredictable and unknown longer term and lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on families will no doubt present further risks.

Priorities – Children’s Social Care

3. Recruitment and retention of social care workforce

One of the main contributing factor which is hindering the pace of progress in some teams is the significant difficulties in recruiting high quality, experienced social workers and managers. A clear priority for this year is to increase the number of permanent social workers and managers, in turn reducing our reliance on agency staff.

Retention is just as important as recruitment, and we should not underestimate the impact of the pandemic on our front-line staff. It is clear that the combined impact of working remotely for a significant period, the increased exposure to disturbing scenarios involving children and the increases in demand all have an impact on our staff. Staff support continues to remain extremely important.

Priorities – Children’s Social Care

4. Recruitment of in-house foster carers

As shown in the table below, over the last two years we have made good progress in relation to fostering placements for our looked our children. We want to build on this success and further increase our in-house capacity to improve local placement choices for looked after children, reducing our reliance on independent and more costly placements.

| | 31-Mar 2019 | 31-Mar 2020 | 31-Mar 2021 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Number of looked after children | 513 | 492 | 512 |
| Number and % of children in care living with foster families | 342 67% | 350 71% | 360 70% |
| Number and % of children placed with a Buckinghamshire /in house carer | 155 45% | 189 54% | 186 51% |
| Number and % of children placed with an Independent Fostering Agency | 187 55% | 161 46% | 174 48% |
| Number and % of children in care living outside the local authority area | 272 53% | 227 46% | 270 53% |

Priorities – Education

1. SEND Delivery and Improvements

In preparation for our local area SEND inspection, we have an Improvement Plan in place to improve our SEND service and in particular, the quality and timeliness of Education, Health and Care Plans. A priority for this year is to continue to improve the service to ensure that children and families received the help and support they need. A key priority in this area is the Preparing for Adulthood agenda.

In the early part of this financial year, the SEND Sufficiency Strategy will be consulted on and published.

Priorities – Education

2. Improving Education Provision and Educational Outcomes

It is our ambition to provide all children and young people with access to a high quality, inclusive education by adopting an all age approach, from supporting access to early years provision through to the delivery of a diverse curriculum offer for young people post 16. Currently over 95% of early years providers are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, and 90% of Buckinghamshire pupils attend a good or outstanding school. Our priority is to support those providers and schools that are not yet good or who need support to remain good in order to realise our ambition of the highest quality education for all children of Buckinghamshire.

In order to narrow the attainment gap between the most vulnerable and their peers, we will also continue to focus on improving the educational outcomes for disadvantaged children, especially those in care, those eligible for free school meals, those with special educational needs and those from minority ethnic groups and traveller heritage. This is an even greater priority post COVID.

Priorities – Education

3. Work with schools to ensure that young people have access to good mental health support

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone's mental wellbeing, particularly vulnerable groups such as children. It is difficult to gauge the full impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing; however, we know that pupils' experiences of the pandemic have been very varied. Some, despite restrictions, have felt safe and mostly enjoyed their time. For others, it has been challenging and in some cases traumatic. Schools and teachers are used to supporting their pupils through challenges that they face in life, but the current situation has and will continue to amplify those situations many times over. Throughout the course of this year, it is vital that we continue to support our schools via specific and sustained training in this area so that good mental health and wellbeing becomes embedded into the culture of every school.

Priorities – Education

4. Early Help

The Early Help Strategy and Improvement Plan will be refreshed this year. There will be a greater focus on the whole system including partnerships in schools and health.

Outcomes for children and families as a result of involvement from the Family Support Service will be important as part of preparation for the Children's Services Ofsted Inspection.