

Title	Children's Services Update
Date	22 July 2021
Report of:	Richard Nash, Corporate Director Children's Services

Purpose of this report

To provide the Health and Wellbeing Board with an update following the service's Ofsted Focused Visit February 2021.

Content of report

1. On 17 March 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Ofsted suspended all routine inspections and introduced an interim inspection framework. As part of this framework, Ofsted conducted a Focused Visit in Buckinghamshire on 24 and 25 February 2021. During the course of this visit, inspectors evaluated the quality and impact of key decision-making in the following practice areas:
 - children in need of help and protection
 - children in care and care leavers
 - impact of leaders
2. Inspectors specifically looked at what had happened for children and families during the 6 months prior to the visit in order to understand children's experiences and review our local response to the pandemic. As part of the inspection activity, I was interviewed as Lead Member, as well as the Chief Executive, Corporate Director, our Department for Education appointed Commissioner, the Chair of our Safeguarding Partnership and the local judiciary. In addition, a range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, discussions with social workers and their managers and other supporting documentation. The full report can be found [here](#); however, a summary of the findings is shown below:
 - a) The start of the pandemic coincided with the council's transition to a unitary authority. This considerable logistical challenge did not divert the council from its steadfast support of children's services. Effective emergency planning and a whole-council response enabled the smooth transfer of the service to remote working.
 - b) Strong partnership arrangements have ensured the provision of support to the most vulnerable children in Buckinghamshire throughout the pandemic
 - c) Leaders have an accurate understanding of the service and have maintained a firm focus on doing the best for children and families.
 - d) The senior leadership team has focused relentlessly on the well-being of the workforce. Staff value the exceptional support that they have received from leaders

and managers and talked positively about working for Buckinghamshire.

- e) The recruitment and retention of a stable workforce rightly remain the top priority in the local authority's improvement plan.
- f) The council has provided additional financial investment to enable the service to respond to the growing challenges for those families who have been affected.
- g) The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) provides a proportionate response to initial concerns about children.
- h) Threshold decisions about the provision of early help are proportionate, and transfers between early help and children's social care are managed well.
- i) Leaders have developed clear expectations about visiting children during the pandemic, including returning to face-to-face visiting where possible. Most children are visited in accordance with their needs; however, despite improving practice in this area, visiting is not always timely for some children.
- j) The local authority and schools have worked together well since the start of the pandemic.
- k) The pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline is used effectively to safeguard children; however, some practice shortfalls lead to some delays that are not purposeful.
- l) Children in care have continued to make some progress despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. Most live in stable homes that meet their needs, with carers who are committed to them.
- m) Care leavers benefit when they have established relationships with personal advisers, but this is not always possible given changes in the workforce. For some, this negatively affects the progression of their plans.
- n) Leaders have strengthened commissioning arrangements. This is beginning to deliver results, with greater scrutiny of unregulated provision and the vast majority of care leavers now living in suitable accommodation.
- o) Corporate parenting panel has put targeted work plans in place to respond to these issues, alongside a sharper focus on the emotional well-being of children.
- p) Although management oversight is now routinely evident on children's files, actions arising are not consistently followed up, leading to delays in some children's plans being progressed.
- q) Audit and quality assurance activity needs to be embedded and completed

alongside practitioners to drive quality of practice.

3. Overall, we are pleased with the feedback and the recognition given from Ofsted on the progress made during the last year despite the unprecedented challenges faced. Since the Ofsted Focused Visit in February, we have strengthened our quality assurance framework and audit activity. There is a detailed schedule of activity planned for the year ahead that includes a menu of different approaches such as case file auditing, dip sampling, learning reviews and practice observations. In addition, in April 2021, a programme of three weekly 'check and challenge' sessions with individual teams commenced where team managers and assistant team managers review performance data and practice issues in conjunction with the children's services leadership team.
4. The team has a clear plan in place and is working at pace on the areas of improvement identified. Progress against our improvement plan continues to be monitored every six weeks at the Children's Service Improvement Board, chaired by John Coughlan as the DfE appointed Improvement Adviser. At the last Board (8 June) meeting, the Board acknowledged that improvement activity has continued, and performance has been maintained despite the significant increases in demand and complexity.