



# Report to Cabinet

**Date:** 9 November 2021

**Title:** Children's Social Care Improvement Plan Update

**Relevant councillor(s):** Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Children's Service

**Author and/or contact officer:** Richard Nash, Corporate Director Children's Services

**Ward(s) affected:** All

**Recommendation:** For Cabinet to note the current progress of the Ofsted Improvement Plan and the continued impact of COVID-19 on the service.

## Content of report

1. The impact of COVID-19 has led to significant rise in demand that continues to be unpredictable. 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; however, the service's response to ensure children and young people are kept safe continues to be of paramount importance.
2. The challenges created by increases in demand which require our intervention began throughout the latter part of 2020. The service has and continues to experience a significant rise in demand creating further pressure on the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), Assessment and Help and Protection Teams. In order to manage the changes in workload safely, the service has moved resources to support the 'front door' and additional workers have been employed on a temporary basis to create capacity. The Senior Management Team (SMT) has remained focused on ensuring that staff are supported and that standards in practice are maintained. This has been achieved to date in spite of the uncertainty all local authorities face in the current environment.
3. Analysis of our data confirms the changes that the service is experiencing and what is more pronounced are the changes in 'seriousness' of incidents involving children and young people. This significant changes in casework that is complex such as sexual abuse, mental health and substance misuse, results in a disproportionate impact on the social work time required to manage each case.

4. In line with the majority of local authorities across the country, the service has experienced unprecedented changes in demand since the latter part of 2020. These demand changes include:
  - Volume changes in contacts into the service of just over 20%.
  - Strategy meeting increases of 62% in the same period.
  - An increase in child protection plans from a low of 511 to over 730 at the time of writing.
5. A significant proportion of the demand pressures highlighted above have directly impacted upon the work of the Assessment teams. This has led to gradual and increased challenges in both retaining staff and recruiting new social workers, both agency and permanent into the Assessment teams. Currently, there are 13 empty seats across our 3 Assessment Teams. Recruitment of 21 overseas social workers which started 6 months ago will assist in easing the staffing pressures in the Assessment service; however, the overseas workers do not arrive until the middle of November.
6. The senior management team have put in place a series of actions to ensure that the Assessment teams remain able to function and ensure children and young people are kept safe. These include:
  - a) Staffing: Earlier in 2021 it was decided to recruit overseas social workers on a permanent basis to the service. This recruitment was completed by an external organisation and they were commissioned on the basis that all successful candidates would receive tailored training to enable them to transition into the expected way of working in Buckinghamshire. This work has been successfully completed and they will begin work during the course of the next 6 weeks. All are expected to arrive by 1 December.
  - b) Staffing: The service intends to increase the number of ASYE staff that go through the ASYE Academy to 60 a year over two years. In order to have a sustainable flow of suitable staff it is felt that this is essential. These ASYE will be recruited on the basis that they will work in the front-line child protection teams.
  - c) Staffing: Managers, including the Service Director, have made regular, daily phone calls with social work agencies in order to urgently secure agency staff. This perseverance has resulted in new starters joining the service from now. This work will continue indefinitely until staffing levels reach capacity.
  - d) Staffing: Senior managers have spent time with Assessment team social workers and their managers and to acknowledge the difficulties, explain the actions that are being taken and explaining the need to prioritise risk well and the importance of immediate escalation of demand problems that may impact directly on children.

- e) Demand Management: Section 17 work and specific tasks such as chronologies have been completed by qualified social workers in other teams other than assessment. This has been carefully managed so that individual cases do not become 'lost in the system' and that the right outcomes for children are secured.
  - f) Demand Management: Where appropriate Early Help teams have taken Section 17 cases at an earlier stage than they otherwise would have and where it is safe to do so transfers out of Assessment have been pushed through to create capacity.
  - g) Quality Assurance: Inter-connecting daily, weekly and three weekly processes are in place to monitor key metrics of each team. This includes caseloads, timeliness of visits to children and child protection performance. These happen at supervision group level, team level, service level and are reported to the Corporate Director every three weeks via the 'Check and Challenge' quality assurance cycle.
  - h) Quality Assurance: Dip sampling and audits have continued throughout this period to ensure that despite the pressures children are safe and protected. For example, of 167 child protection cases dip sampled, 8 were escalated for action. All escalations were to complete outstanding recording tasks and none required children to be immediately seen because of unaddressed risk.
7. There is evidence to be more optimistic in relation to new staff joining the service. The overseas permanent staff will make a difference and agency staff are also joining in greater numbers than before. However, current and existing staff are working incredibly long hours to maintain the service and the seriousness and disturbing nature of the casework will also have impact. Senior managers remain very mindful of these issues and will continue to provide individual and team level support.
  8. All of the available evidence indicates that the Assessment teams have done incredibly well to manage the unprecedented demand for services as well as they have. The quality assurance systems that have been built over the last 12 months are effective and have enabled the service to respond quickly to areas of concern. They have good oversight on visits to children, knowledge of open Section 47 enquiries and risk.
  9. The number of cases open in the Help & Protection teams has increased over the last 12 months. The number of children with child protection plans has risen from 533 in April 2021 and there are as at end of September 2021 is 716. The general seriousness of children's circumstances and complexity of casework, particularly in relation to young people self-harming continues to be a challenge. Similar recruitment challenges exist in this part of the service as they do in Assessment Services. All three Help and Protection teams are holding vacant posts, and this means caseloads are higher than the service would want them to be.
  10. Very similar actions have been put in place to support the work of Help & Protection in relation to recruitment, demand management and quality assurance. The Check and Challenge quality assurance weekly meetings have provided strong evidence of the grip
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and control exercised by Team Managers and Assistant Team Managers. This includes a clear understanding at team level of what children have not been seen within timescales, the actions that are in place to address this and a good understanding of risk. Generally, performance in management oversight is compliant with the practice guidance and teams all work hard to ensure this is within timescales. The demand pressures have meant that child protection work and prioritising risk has had to happen. Dip sampling of cases where a child has not been seen in time all demonstrate management oversight on the case file and actions for social workers. At check and challenge on 13 October 2021 all Help and Protection managers were able to describe in detail the actions they are taking to ensure nothing is missed, that were a visit is out of time they know what the actions are and the system in place to make sure those actions do happen in reality.

11. The contrast between our Children in Care, Leaving Care and Disability Service with our child protection teams in terms of demand and staff stability is stark. Whilst there have been some changes in terms of complexity of casework, particularly in relation to self-harm, there is no comparison. Consequently, the pace of improvement for both looked after children and care leavers has been consistent. The metrics in terms of visits, care planning, pathway plans, education, employment and training demonstrate positive trajectories. Quality assurance processes have enabled much improved performance with management oversight, and this greatly assists in securing positive outcomes for children and young people.
12. Audit activity and dip sampling demonstrate that allocated workers know their children well and steadily improving the quality of care plans and pathway plans. It is clear that the grip and control is strong and that managers are able to provide support to staff as well as accountability. Specific areas of practice including children with care orders at home, quality of placements, use of semi-independent placements are well managed. There is evidence of improved placement planning with the Placements Service.
13. The morale of staff and managers is mostly positive despite the long hours being worked. The interactions with social work teams and management groups from senior managers and HR colleagues have proved valuable. Staff remain hopeful that recruitment actions that are in train now will 'ease the pressure' that they have been under.
14. Overall, given the dramatic changes in activity experienced by Assessment and Help and Protection coupled with the severe staffing difficulties, it is extremely positive that these teams have coped as well as they have. The actions of the Service Director and her team to check and double check that children and young people are being protected in line with their presenting risk and that drift and delay does not become a strong feature of casework have been effective. It is vital that the service continues to ask the right questions, use performance management data to initiate lines of enquiries and where necessary bring in staff from different parts of the service to support front line work. Whilst demand has had an impact on improvement pace it is clear from all the available evidence that the service remains safe.

15. The latest improvement plan (Appendix 1) is an improved position and currently, there are no areas that are judged to be red. This indicates that the service is maintaining and making progress; however, there is no complacency on the part of managers and staff and it is clear that there are risks to progress, particularly in relation to recruitment and retention, demand changes and service resilience. The unwavering focus of senior leaders is to continue to understand the service in terms of the impact and performance of each first line manager and provide support, learning and challenge to their work to ensure outcomes for our children and young people consistently improve. It is clear that if first line managers deliver highly effective levels of direction and support then the work will be consistently of the standard that we need it to and have a positive impact for children and young people.

16. The recruitment of both qualified social workers and first and second-line managers remains the top priority for the service. 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.

17. The service continues to prepare for the Ofsted re-inspection following the last full inspection in November 2017. We anticipate that this will take place in the coming months.

**Other options considered**

N/A

**Legal and financial implications**

N/A

**Corporate implications**

N/A

**Consultation and communication**

N/A

**Next steps and review**

N/A

**Background papers**

Appendix 1 – Improvement Plan

