



Report to Children's and Education Select Committee

Date:	Thursday 10 March 2022
Reference number:	for cabinet member decisions only
Title:	Ofsted Inspection Outcome
Relevant councillor(s):	Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member Children's Services & Education
Author and/or contact officer:	Richard Nash, Corporate Director Children's Services
Ward(s) affected:	All wards
Recommendations:	For Select Committee members to note the positive outcome of the Ofsted reinspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.
Reason for decision:	For information only


1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Children's Services in Buckinghamshire was judged to be inadequate by Ofsted in August 2014 and November 2017.
- 1.2 Following the November 2017 'Inadequate' judgement, Ofsted recently conducted their reinspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. As part of the inspection, inspectors evaluated:
 - overall effectiveness of the service
 - the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection
 - the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers
 - the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families

- 1.3 This inspection found that Buckinghamshire was no longer 'Inadequate', and the overall judgement of Children's Services was 'requires improvement to be good'. The report was published on Friday 11 February 2022 and can be accessed [here](#).
- 1.4 This is, in our view, a very significant achievement particularly given the long history of previously inadequate practice and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on demand for services. We would like to thank and acknowledge the considerable efforts of our staff and the contribution of partners in achieving this inspection outcome.

2. Content of report

- 2.1 Children's Services in Buckinghamshire was judged to be inadequate by Ofsted in August 2014 and November 2017.
- 2.2 As this was Buckinghamshire's second inadequate judgement, the Secretary of State appointed John Coughlan CBE, former Chief Executive Hampshire County Council, as Children's Commissioner to undertake a review to determine if the most effective way of securing and sustaining improvement in Buckinghamshire was to remove the control of children's social care from the Council. As part of the review, the Commissioner recommended that the Council should retain control of its Children's Services and that there should be no alternative delivery model in Buckinghamshire; however, some external support should be commissioned. As a result, the Secretary of State appointed Hampshire County Council, as the Council's improvement advisers. The purpose of the improvement partnership with Hampshire is to provide the service with independent advice, support and challenge. An Improvement Board, chaired by John Coughlan was also established and included representatives from the Police, Health and Education. The purpose of the Board was to drive sustainable improvement across Children's Services to address the feedback and areas of concern identified during the November 2017 inspection.
- 2.3 Between July 2018 and October 2019, Ofsted completed 4 monitoring visits. This is standard practice by Ofsted prior to carrying out a full re-inspection. The report of each monitoring visit has been published and is available via the Ofsted website. All monitoring visits reflected progress and also the general challenge in improving services and also specific challenges around recruitment and retention of social workers.
- 2.4 The fifth monitoring visit was scheduled for Spring 2020; however, this was postponed due to Covid-19. Once Ofsted commenced inspection activity again, they conducted a Covid Focused Visit in February 2021. Challenges in relation to recruitment and retention were noted again as well as the significant increase in demand as a result of the pandemic.

- 2.5 Between 29 November and 17 December 2021, Ofsted conducted their reinspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. As part of the inspection, inspectors evaluated:
- the overall effectiveness of the service
 - the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection
 - the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers
 - the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.
- 2.6 During the inspection, inspectors reviewed approximately 400 children's case files and over 350 documents. Inspectors also met with staff, partners, children and young people, care leavers, parents and carers, adopters and foster carers, as well as the Leader, Cabinet Member Children's Services & Education, Chief Executive and Senior Leaders within Children's Services.
- 2.7 This inspection found that Buckinghamshire was no longer 'Inadequate', and the overall judgement of Children's Services was 'requires improvement to be good'. The key findings as detailed within the inspection report are set out below.
- 2.8 **Overall Effectiveness: requires improvement to be good.**
- a) No children were identified at immediate, unassessed risk of serious harm and no widespread or serious failures for children were seen across the range of services.
 - b) Leaders worked highly effectively to ensure that children were safeguarded during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - c) The scale and speed of improvement work have been impeded by acute and persistent recruitment and retention difficulties of both social workers and frontline managers and the depth and extent of poor social work practice dating back to the last inspection in 2017. These challenging conditions have been compounded by the pandemic, particularly a large and persistent increase in demand for children's services following children's return to school.
 - d) Many children, particularly those receiving services from the assessment and help and protection teams, have too many changes of social worker.
 - e) Senior managers have established a comprehensive and rigorous set of performance measures, which gives them a sound understanding of the services provided for children. However, this data is not always used to full effect.
 - f) The positive impact of quality assurance work has accelerated during the last six months but has been too slow in generating widespread higher standards of practice that improve children's circumstances and experiences.
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2.9 **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good**

- a) Children are identified when they are at immediate risk of serious harm and prompt action is taken to protect them. No widespread or serious failures were identified that left children exposed to serious continuing harm. This is a tangible improvement on the position at the last inspection in 2017. It has been achieved while addressing the considerable additional challenges entailed in safeguarding children during the pandemic.
- b) The work carried out in targeted and universal early help services results in discernible improvements in many children's circumstances. These services prevent many children's difficulties worsening and escalating.
- c) Children referred to the MASH needing urgent safeguarding responses are immediately identified and decisive actions are taken to protect them. Strategy meetings are held quickly, with relevant partner agencies attending or providing information.
- d) Too many children and families are re-referred who are not at significant risk of harm but require skilled help to improve their circumstances.
- e) Some assessments are too superficial. They often list histories of previous referrals and interventions, but do not evaluate these in conjunction with current concerns to provide a coherent picture of children's circumstances over significant periods of time.
- f) A sharp increase in the number of strategy meetings and initial child protection conferences (ICPCs) has led to delayed ICPCs. Inspectors did not find any avoidable harm arising for children because of delays, and most of the children had tight initial safety plans in place.
- g) Children on a plan are seen regularly by their social workers and many receive help that improves their circumstances and helps to keep them safe. However, the quality of direct work with many children often has little purpose. Emerging indications of improving practice were seen with some children on CP plans over the last six months which redressed previously entrenched patterns of drift and delay.
- h) Most child protection advisers (CPAs) regularly seek updates on children's progress, but their scrutiny is not always incisive enough when plans are floundering.
- i) When concerns about children's safety and well-being increase, work in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) is effective.

- j) Decisions to remove children from parental care are careful and in the best long-term interests of the child.
- k) Some children aged 16 and 17 years old who present as homeless are not well supported when they present to children's social care.
- l) The local authority has suitable oversight of most children not currently placed full-time in education.

2.10 The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

- a) Some older children wait too long for permanency arrangements to be confirmed and associated drift is not always effectively challenged. Direct work with children often lacks a clear purpose and is fractured by changes in children's social workers. A small number of care leavers live in unsuitable accommodation.
- b) Some older children wait too long for permanency arrangements to be confirmed and associated drift is not always effectively challenged. Direct work with children often lacks a clear purpose.
- c) Many care leavers valued the support provided to them during the pandemic and most children are living in secure and stable foster families.
- d) Diligent early permanence work is conducted with children who have recently entered care, particularly during care proceedings.
- e) Work with some children living with their parents under a care order requires strengthening. Some children have well-considered assessments and plans; however, for others, weaker planning and drift leads to avoidable delays in discharging their care orders.
- f) Most children in care are settled and feel safe where they live.
- g) Review meetings for children in care take place on time and with the appropriate people.
- h) The regular footprint of the IROs is present on children's files, but formal escalations are not consistently recorded to address drift in care planning.
- i) Care plans are refreshed regularly; however, the effectiveness of some care plans is limited as they contain generic rather than individualised actions.
- j) Children in care have their routine health needs met. Some children receive support with their emotional health and well-being, but others experience considerable delays in waiting for child and adolescent mental health assessments or interventions.
- k) An established Children in Care Council provides opportunities for some children in care and care leavers to have their views heard on the services they receive.

Children in care can access the support of advocates if they wish, and a small number do so.

- l) The quality of a small number of foster carer assessments is weak and delays are evident in the completion of some connected person assessments.
- m) Prospective and approved adopters are well supported through regular visits and effective communication.
- n) Care leavers are visited regularly by their PAs and are able to establish trusted relationships that are valued by most young people. Not all care leavers are routinely informed of their rights and entitlements.
- o) The virtual school works collaboratively with the care leavers team to actively promote young people's engagement in education, employment and training (EET).

2.11 The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

- a) Leaders and senior managers have achieved important improvements in practice over the last year for children in most parts of the service following two inadequate inspection judgements in 2014 and 2018.
- b) Several strengthened elements of leadership are in place, but much more needs to be done to ensure that children receive consistently positive standards of social work intervention in all parts of the service.
- c) A knowledgeable and highly committed new senior management team is providing highly focused practice leadership.
- d) Managers at every level have worked tirelessly and collectively to ensure that children are safeguarded in the face of the unique and continuing challenges generated by the pandemic.
- e) Social workers' workloads in the assessment and help and protection teams are relentless and highly demanding. Persistently high workloads and staff turnover continue to impede senior managers' efforts to substantially improve the quality of social work practice.
- f) Senior managers are determined and persistent in their efforts to recruit and retain more social workers.
- g) Improved strategic engagement with partners has secured much greater confidence in the local authority's decision-making and responses concerning work in the front door.

- h) Quality assurance of social work with children is still at an embryonic stage and is not yet a powerful determinant in improving practice standards, although its influence and scale have gained pace and traction over the last six months.
- i) Senior managers are determined and persistent in their efforts to recruit and retain more social workers.
- j) A detailed and accurate performance management system provides managers with frequently updated and rigorous metrics about performance in most parts of the service.
- k) Children's services are at the centre of the recently unitarised council and considerable additional investment has been provided to children's social care services. Regular scrutiny provides the leader of the council and cabinet member for children with an informed understanding and they both have an inquisitive eye.
- l) Most social workers receive regular case and personal supervision and management oversight. Case supervision is predominantly functional rather than reflective and developmental. Heavy workloads in the front door teams leaves limited time to critically reflect on the progress of plans and the influence of direct work on helping children.
- m) Social workers and frontline managers attend a wide range of pertinent training and development opportunities.
- n) Despite the intensive workload demands, most social workers spoken with during the inspection like working in Buckinghamshire and reported that their managers support them and help them prioritise their work.

2.12 **What needs to improve?**

- a) The understanding, and reduction of, a high rate of re-referrals and assessments that result in no services being provided for children and their families.
- b) The consideration and cumulative impact of earlier interventions and family histories in children and family assessments.
- c) The quality of social workers' direct work with children.
- d) The support provided to children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless.
- e) The impact of independent reviewing officers (IROs) in decisively escalating children's cases when there is drift and delay in the progress of their care plans.
- f) The quality of case supervision for social workers in order that it promotes consistently effective work with children.
- g) The engagement and participation of children in care in the corporate parenting work of the council.

3. Other options considered

3.1 N/A

4. Legal and financial implications

4.1 In light of the positive Ofsted judgement, the Statutory Direction issued to the Council in relation to Children's Services under Section 487A(4B) of the Education Act 1996 is in the process of being revoked by the Secretary of State.

4.2 There are no financial implications associated with the outcome of this inspection.

5. Corporate implications

5.1 N/A

6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

6.1 N/A

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

7.1 N/A

8. Next steps and review

8.1 The service is currently in the process of developing an Improvement Plan in response to the Ofsted recommendations. This plan must be submitted to Ofsted by Wednesday 25 May 2022.

8.2 Local authorities judged as 'requires improvement to be good' at their most recent inspection will receive standard inspections by Ofsted. The standard inspection will usually take place about 3 years after the previous inspection. In between inspections, the local authority will receive up to 2 focused visits.

8.3 An independently chaired Board will continue to meet every two months. The Board will maintain oversight of the progress being made against the Ofsted recommendations and other improvements required across the service. John Coughlan, CBE, will continue to be the Independent Chair.

9. Background papers

[June 2014: Ofsted Inspection Report](#)

[November 2017: Ofsted Inspection Report](#)

[July 2018: Ofsted Monitoring Visit](#)

[December 2018: Ofsted Monitoring Visit](#)

[June 2019: Ofsted Monitoring Visit](#)

[December 2019: Ofsted Monitoring Visit](#)

[February 2021: Ofsted Focused Visit](#)

10. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

- 10.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone [] or email []

