

Inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services

Buckinghamshire

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Age group: All

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About this inspection

1. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services in the local area towards ensuring that children and young people are properly safeguarded and to determine the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. The inspection team consisted of four of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one inspector from the Care Quality Commission. The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004.

The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:

- discussions with children, young people and parents receiving services, front line managers, senior officers including the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, elected members and a range of community representatives and interviews and focus groups of front line health professionals, managers and senior staff from NHS Buckinghamshire, Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust Oxford and Buckinghamshire Mental Health Foundation NHS Trust.
- analysing and evaluating reports from a variety of sources including a review of the Children and Young People's Plan, performance data, information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day care provision and the evaluations of serious case reviews undertaken by Ofsted in accordance with *'Working Together to Safeguard Children'*, 2006;
- a structured review of 20 case files for children and young people with a range of need and analysis of key documents from a further 26 cases selected by inspectors. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision making undertaken;
- the outcomes of the most recent annual unannounced inspection of local authority contact, referral and assessment arrangements undertaken in June 2009.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding (Grade 1)	A service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good (Grade 2)	A service that exceeds minimum

	requirements
Adequate (Grade 3)	A service that only meets minimum requirements
Inadequate (Grade 4)	A service that does not meet minimum requirements

Service information

2. Buckinghamshire has around 125,900 children and young people under the age of 19 years. This is 26% of the total population in the county. Buckinghamshire is ranked as the ninth least deprived authority nationally, with lower than national proportions of students in receipt of free school meals. Within a context of relative overall affluence there are pockets of deprivation with approximately 10% (12,000) children and young people living in poverty. The proportion of children and young people from minority ethnic groups is increasing and accounts for 20% of children and young people, while adults from minority ethnic groups account for 8% of the population in the county. Within this population the largest grouping is of Pakistani origin, with smaller populations from Indian, mixed White and Black African-Caribbean, Roma and Traveller, Eastern European and other groups.
3. Social care services are delivered through referral, assessment, care and protection and children with disability teams, each based in the north and the south of the county. The early intervention team coordinates the provision of preventive services delivered through the common assessment framework (CAF) through eight localities. There are 35 established children's centres. Services for looked after children are provided through two specialised under-14 teams covering north and south, one county-wide over-14 team and one leaving care team.
4. Across the county, children and young people are educated through mixed educational provision which includes two maintained nursery schools, 181 primary, 33 secondary, one academy and 13 special schools. There are five pupil referral units. A virtual school has been established to provide additional educational support for children and young people who are looked after.
5. Health services in Buckinghamshire are commissioned by NHS Buckinghamshire. Community provider services, including health visiting, school nursing and all acute health services are delivered by Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust, which was established in April 2010. Acute hospital services are provided through Stoke Mandeville in Aylesbury and Wycombe hospitals. Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are provided by Oxford and Buckinghamshire Mental Health Foundation NHS Trust.

Safeguarding services

Overall effectiveness

Grade 2 (good)

6. The overall effectiveness of services in Buckinghamshire in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people is good. The local authority and partners contribute well to improving outcomes for children and young people through their safeguarding and child protection work. Statutory requirements are met well. A number of effective early intervention programmes and services have been established on the basis of research and gap analysis in keeping with strategic priorities. The CAF is becoming increasingly effective. Prompt action is taken to safeguard children in need of protection, and children in cases tracked during the inspection had been effectively safeguarded. The quality of assessment, direct work and planning in social care is satisfactory although there are some weaknesses in planning for both children in need and children in need of protection. Vacancies in the children's workforce, particularly in social care, have been addressed and this is contributing to continually improving performance.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 2 (good)

7. The capacity for improvement is good. The local authority and partners demonstrate commitment to continuous improvement and have maintained a good track record of increasing service effectiveness over a number of years. There is good awareness of strengths and weaknesses in provision. The unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements undertaken in 2009 identified a number of strengths in provision and no areas for priority action. The 2010 children's services assessment judged that local children's services perform excellently and in 2009 that they performed well. Ambition and priorities are clearly articulated through all levels of planning. Safeguarding services are subject to regular internal and external audit and evaluation, which is overseen by the Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB) and the Buckinghamshire Children and Young People's Trust. Service evaluation demonstrates that services and programmes are contributing to improved outcomes for children and families.

Areas for improvement

8. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Buckinghamshire, the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

Immediately:

- Develop and implement a joint protocol between children's social care and the four district councils to address the needs of young

people (16–18) who present as homeless and require accommodation.

Within three months:

- Ensure that children in need and child protection plans include measurable outcomes including supporting action, timescales for achievement and contingency arrangements so that all parties are clear about required improvements and how these will be achieved, and that timescales are focused on children's developmental needs.
- NHS Buckinghamshire and Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust should monitor the attendance of staff at supervision sessions and evaluate the effectiveness of supervision arrangements for health professionals.

Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people

Children and young people are safe and feel safe

Grade 2 (good)

9. The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure children and young people are safe and feel safe is good. Children and young people who spoke to inspectors report that they feel safe at school, using public transport and in their local community. In cases analysed by inspectors, children had been appropriately safeguarded. The large majority of services and settings inspected by Ofsted do very well at keeping children and young people safe. Young people are aware of anti-bullying policies and confirm they have safe adults to turn to if there are issues of bullying at school. Awareness-raising about e-safety in schools is supporting children and young people in using the internet safely.
10. Children and young people who go missing from home, care and education are dealt with under the terms of a joint protocol in line with national guidance and BSCB procedures. The RUSafe service contributes to safeguarding young people who go missing by engaging with them on their return to offer support with any relevant issues. This service also contributes to the gathering and understanding of wider organisational intelligence about missing young people such as in relation to child sexual exploitation.
11. Complaints from service users are dealt with in a timely manner and in line with statutory guidance. A policy to address vexatious complaints is in place which contributes to the efficiency of the service. Issues arising from complaints are reported regularly to senior managers and the BSCB. An effective local authority designated officer service has developed good practice in allegations management and raised awareness of safeguarding issues across a range of agencies leading to positive outcomes in terms of children and young people's safety. Complex investigations are managed well involving all relevant agencies, including good support to the families involved. The BSCB exercises good oversight of the management of allegations in relation to adults who work with children. Safe recruitment practices meet statutory requirements and considerable training in safe recruitment has been undertaken with a wide range of agencies in response to the findings of a local serious case review.

Quality of provision

Grade 3 (adequate)

12. The quality of provision is adequate. A range of effective services has been developed to engage with children, young people and their parents at the early onset of problems, both to prevent escalation and to improve outcomes. Preventative programmes are well considered and based on

research. They include some outstanding provision which is responsive to local need, such as a play and learn group for Asian women delivered through children's centres. This provides a safe environment for mothers and children to combat social isolation and develop parenting skills, and offers a gateway to more targeted services where appropriate. Services can demonstrate that parents have been helped to improve their parenting skills and their relationships with their children. Outcomes for children include better attendance and participation at school. The Aiming High programme responds extremely effectively to the needs of disabled children and their families. The views of children, young people and their families have directly impacted on an impressive range of services provided through this programme, such as family day trips and adventure trips, which increase access to universal leisure activities.

13. Young carers are well supported by a local dedicated service. This provides good advocacy for young people and leads to increased self-confidence and less isolation. Priority is given to reducing the impact of bullying locally. A multi-agency steering group oversees the work and sets local priorities such as safety on school transport. Schools provide good information in their reporting of racist incidents and good monitoring arrangements are in place. Peer support and mentoring programmes are established across schools.
14. The use of the CAF is becoming more effective. Increasing numbers of CAFs are completed across a range of agencies resulting in improved outcomes for children and families. The early intervention team provides good oversight of the use and impact of the CAF. Early intervention panels identify children in need of additional support and put in place a team around the child. Where appropriate, cases are escalated to social care services although the number of such cases is reportedly reducing. While there is good use of CAFs among some agencies, notably some schools, others are yet to be convinced of the benefits of effective use of the CAF and express concerns about its time and resource implications. Staffing difficulties amongst health visitors and school nurses are impacting on their ability to undertake the lead professional role in CAFs.
15. Children in need of protection receive a prompt response. Managers have sufficient oversight of cases to ensure effective action is taking place. Although there have been significant staffing vacancies across social care teams which have impacted on service responsiveness, for example in the timeliness of initial and core assessments where performance has remained comparatively low, there is an improving picture and local performance data demonstrate considerably better performance in the timeliness of assessments within the current year. Good progress has been made in recruiting to vacancies over the past year and the council anticipates fully staffed social care teams by the end of the year. Arrangements for out of hours services are satisfactory, including established working arrangements with partner agencies, such as police

and health to ensure that children and young people are appropriately safeguarded outside normal working hours.

16. Partner agencies generally have a shared understanding of thresholds for referral to social care and processes are in place to support the consistent application of thresholds such as advice to teachers provided by the safeguarding in education team. A combination of social care staffing vacancies and generally increased demand on social care services is delaying the transfer of some cases between social care teams and means that a full assessment of a child's needs can be delayed. There are no unallocated child protection cases, although in the disabled children's team and in one assessment team a small number of children in need cases were unallocated at the time of the inspection. While these are regularly reviewed and risk assessed by managers, this inevitably leads to delay in the quality and timeliness of assessments and in the provision of appropriate services to children and their families. Work is currently being undertaken with the police to further improve the arrangements for the joint prioritisation of domestic violence notifications.
17. Initial and core assessments are of variable quality but are generally satisfactory overall. Some are of good quality and these include some reports to child protection conferences which incorporate research-based analysis and an evaluation of risk and protective factors. Similarly, learning from serious case reviews has informed assessment practice – for example in ensuring use of historical information. Assessments are generally child-focused with children routinely seen and their views taken into account. Partner agencies contribute appropriately to assessments. In general, good attention is paid to aspects of equality and diversity and the individual needs of children and families, for example through provision of specialist support staff such as interpreters, specialist advice or equipment to enable access. However, some assessments are overly descriptive with gaps in essential information and with weaker analysis including that of risk and protective factors. The council are already taking action to improve the consistency of assessments.
18. Detailed parenting assessments are undertaken by family centres within child protection and legal processes. These are satisfactory overall and engage parents within the assessment brief, and some are of good quality. Section 47 enquiries are usually comprehensively undertaken, completed within timescales and suitably focused on the welfare of the child. Family group conferences have been established for a number of years and help to achieve positive outcomes with some families reducing the need for child protection plans or for children becoming looked after.
19. Case recording is completed overall in a timely fashion and adequately indicates up to date activity in a case. Problems associated with the electronic recording system mean that core documents are not always up to date on the electronic case record, although are available in paper

format. In a number of cases seen records were not sufficiently individualised to the child in question but related to siblings. Management oversight is evident on case records although this is not always sufficiently challenging or robust. The importance of case chronologies is recognised and these are routinely used to inform legal planning meetings. However work pressures, and in some cases levels of skills and experience, are impacting on the ability of social workers to complete an effective case chronology. Aspects of equality and diversity are routinely addressed in recording and reviews.

20. Case planning for both children in need and children in need of protection is generally weak. While some plans are of adequate quality many are overly general and lack timescales and measurable outcomes, making it difficult to assess progress. This means that some children remain for too long with child protection plans which are not effective, or there is undue delay in taking decisions to make alternative plans. Comparatively high numbers of children remain subject to child protection plans for more than two years. Managers are making progress in reviewing these cases and numbers are reducing. Child protection review conferences are held within statutory timescales but do not always sufficiently challenge or measure progress of core group activity in achieving the aims of the plan.

The contribution of health agencies to keeping children and young people safe **Grade 2 (good)**

21. The contribution of health agencies to keeping children and young people safe is good. Designated and named lead professionals, including general practitioners (GPs), provide good safeguarding leadership across health agencies. Safeguarding is clearly embedded in the culture of all the healthcare agencies and included in all areas of recruitment and selection, induction of staff and ongoing training and development. A multi-agency, county-wide safeguarding group meets on a two monthly basis and includes representation from all named professionals within the provider services, ambulance service and GPs.
22. Good commissioning and performance management arrangements are in place for health services. A joint commissioning framework is well established, as are pooled budget arrangements for key priorities including CAMHS and children's disability respite services. Joint commissioning arrangements with the council have resulted in improved and more equitable CAMHS across the county. Safeguarding requirements are clearly specified in commissioning and contracting arrangements. Performance monitoring is managed by the joint commissioning group, which effectively monitors the performance of provider services against the priorities agreed within both the joint strategic needs analysis and the Children and Young People's Plan.

23. Health professionals report good access to a range of safeguarding training within the NHS trusts or through the multi-disciplinary training provided through the BSCB. Supervision is reportedly available for staff on an individual, peer or group basis, although there has been no monitoring of supervision or evaluation of its quality. Health professionals contribute well to child protection conferences and core groups either by attending or submitting reports.
24. Within the acute trust emergency care for children and young people is provided in a safe, dedicated environment at the paediatric decisions unit at Stoke Mandeville hospital. The paediatric liaison health visitor reviews children and young people's attendance as well as attendances at the medical emergency centre in Wycombe and elsewhere across the county on a daily basis. In-patient admissions are also reviewed by health visitors attached to GP practices in eight localities. Health visiting and school nursing vacancies are high and this has led to capacity issues resulting in fewer universal services offered as child protection work is prioritised.
25. An established children's disability therapy team includes community nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapy, and speech and language therapy services. Good partnership arrangements across agencies secure improved access for children and young people within the home and in mainstream education. Provision of equipment has improved as a result of strengthened joint commissioning arrangements. Speech and language therapy services are very accessible through schools for statemented children and through drop-in sessions across the county for children aged under five. There has been a waiting list for assessments. In order to improve accessibility and outcomes the service is currently being jointly retendered with the primary care trust.

Ambition and prioritisation

Grade 2 (good)

26. Ambition and prioritisation is good. The local authority and partners demonstrate a clear strategic commitment to safeguarding made explicit at all levels of planning from the corporate level through to the multi-agency Children and Young People's Plan and individual team plans.
27. A mature Children's Trust, chaired by Buckinghamshire County Council's Chief Executive, is focused on outcomes supported through good partnership working and provides good leadership in respect of ambitions and priorities for children. Partners view the track record as effective and have unanimously decided to continue with the Trust arrangements, despite no longer being required by central government to do so. Buckinghamshire County Council's Chief Executive, Director of Children's Services and senior managers demonstrate clear ambition and priorities which are effectively implemented across the partnership through clear expectations and targets against which partners are held to account.

28. The lead member for children and elected members of the corporate parenting group demonstrate a commitment to the needs of children and young people, particularly the most vulnerable, and work to champion and promote their needs.

Leadership and management

Grade 2 (good)

29. Leadership and management are good. A thorough children's services workforce plan has been developed to ensure that the children's workforce has the capacity and skills to meet future needs. This has resulted in a common induction package and development opportunities across different sections of the workforce linked to career pathways. Innovative developments include the post-graduate certificate in applied commissioning, developed in partnership with a local university.
30. Training and development opportunities are good, based on needs analysis, and most staff are positive and enthusiastic about the opportunities and support available for their training needs. The council has recently implemented a mentoring scheme for social care team managers. This is in the early stages of addressing the developmental needs of this key group of staff. Social care staff report that they are well managed and effectively supervised.
31. Significant progress has been made over the last year in addressing social care and children's centre workforce vacancies. The number of vacancies has been significantly reduced and full staffing in social care is anticipated by the end of 2010. Staffing pressures amongst other groups such as health visitors, school nurses and police are recognised. Agencies collaborate to minimise the impact of capacity and resource pressures and escalate issues through the appropriate channels.
32. Service users help shape service development in a range of ways. User views are regularly sought across a range of settings and services, including those in the health, voluntary and community sectors. Young people have been actively involved in the commissioning of services such as those commissioned through the Aiming High for disabled children initiative.
33. Resources are used effectively to ensure best value for money while maintaining a child-focused approach. Within the council's 'Transformation' programme a proactive and systematic approach to reviewing a range of teams and projects has been adopted, with savings identified, and where appropriate reinvested according to priorities and pressures. A responsive approach is evident to increasing pressures and resource demands within safeguarding services, which reflects the priority afforded to safeguarding by the council and partners. Within an overall context of in-year budget cuts, resources have been found to address unanticipated increased demands within the service.

34. Very effective commissioning arrangements have been developed and are firmly established with a properly resourced commissioning team. A joint children's services and primary care trust commissioning post is in place and has had a positive impact in securing more effective and responsive CAMHS as well as in the commissioning of research-based early intervention services. Commissioning processes ensure that appropriate services are developed in line with strategic priorities and are child-focused, and that safeguarding standards are clearly specified and monitored.

Performance management and quality assurance

Grade 2 (good)

35. Performance management and quality assurance are good. The council and partners demonstrate good awareness of strengths and areas for development. A culture of evaluation is evident, with an established and thorough performance management framework which is used effectively to identify weak areas of performance and drive improvement. A comprehensive safeguarding service plan pulls together areas for improvement identified through both external and internal evaluation and audit processes with identified targets and processes for monitoring progress. Clear reporting and accountability systems are in place from team level through to senior management board and BSCB and Children's Trust reporting requirements.
36. While the development of the electronic integrated children's system has presented some challenges, as has been the case nationally, improvements have been secured including the availability of regular management information for first line managers to support improved performance at all levels of the service. Thorough multi-agency case file audits were undertaken on the cases pre-selected for analysis during the inspection although regular case file audit at operational team level in social care has been less thorough. This has already been recognised by senior managers with action taken to address the issue, although impact is not yet seen.
37. Services are routinely evaluated and include the experiences of children and families to achieve improvements and address gaps in service provision. The BSCB has effective multi-agency systems and processes to manage and challenge safeguarding performance across agencies. The board commission audits of services to analyse safeguarding practice, such as the audit of 'front door' services. There are good processes for actioning recommendations and monitoring progress.

Partnership working

Grade 2 (good)

38. Partnership working is good. Partners are well engaged in both strategic planning and delivery through Children's Trust and BSCB arrangements.

Time and resources have been invested to develop and increase the capacity of the voluntary and community sectors, who confirm that their contribution to safeguarding in terms of both expertise and service delivery is valued and supported across the partnership.

39. The BSCB has ensured an appropriate focus on child protection within the wider safeguarding agenda and demonstrates good leadership and challenge in safeguarding matters with clear expectations of partners. A thorough approach is taken to ensure the sharing of lessons arising from serious case reviews and that the necessary changes to practice are secured, for example strengthening arrangements for pre-birth assessments, and followed up through audit and evaluation.
40. Good partnership working is demonstrated and confirmed by a wide range of agencies and the impact is evidenced both at Children's Trust board level and through a range of other strategic partnerships such as the domestic violence strategy group. The strategic approach taken by this group has improved the coordination and effectiveness of services to support children and families at risk from domestic abuse. An evaluative approach is taken to the commissioning of a range of services with a focus on outcome reporting to the relevant strategic partnerships. Work in relation to disabled children demonstrates particularly good partnership working.
41. Information sharing protocols are appropriately established across the partnership, for example in respect of missing children. However a protocol between district housing providers and social care to support an effective joint response to homeless young people has not yet been developed.

Services for looked after children

Overall effectiveness

Grade 2 (good)

42. The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children is good. Statutory requirements are well met by the local authority and partners. The majority of outcomes for looked after children are good and demonstrate ongoing improvement. Very good outcomes in relation to 'enjoy and achieve' have been promoted by the establishment of outstanding virtual school arrangements for looked after children. Looked after children feel safe in their placements and feel that their needs are promoted well by their carers and by dedicated looked after children and leaving care team workers who work in effective partnership with other key agencies. Sound joint commissioning processes have developed cost effective services to support looked after children and to prevent children unnecessarily becoming looked after.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 2 (good)

43. The capacity for improvement is good. There is a good track record of improving outcomes for looked after children and some high quality services have been developed to support and sustain good outcomes. Workforce planning has ensured that the appropriate resources are in place within social care teams and partner agencies to safeguard and promote the needs of looked after children. The council and partners show good understanding of the needs of the looked after children population and have been proactive in the identification and anticipation of future levels of need although, in common with the national picture, there have been unanticipated increases in the numbers of looked after children. Despite this, numbers of looked after children remain comparatively low. Looked after children have opportunities to influence service design and development in a number of ways with evidence of positive impact. Ambitions and priorities for looked after children are seen as integral to safeguarding and are evidenced well at all levels of strategic planning.

Areas for improvement

44. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for looked after children and young people in Buckinghamshire, the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

Within three months:

- Ensure all pathway plans contain clear and specific outcomes for young people and describe measurable actions and timescales to achieve those outcomes.

Within six months:

- Develop and widen the membership of the 'We do care,' children in care council, to strengthen its representative role for looked after children including the development of effective links with key strategic groups such as the corporate parenting group.

How good are outcomes for looked after children and care leavers?

Being healthy**Grade 2 (good)**

45. Health outcomes are good. Well organised health files include good chronologies of significant health events and health care plans. Where children or young people do not attend health assessments or appointments there is effective and timely follow up. At currently just over 90%, a good proportion of looked after children and young people have their health needs assessed annually compared with similar authorities. There has been a steady quarterly increase in this performance. There is a similarly good picture in respect of dental checks and immunisations. Looked after children and young people are given priority access to speech and language therapy services.
46. A comprehensive database relating to the health needs of looked after children and young people is maintained. This records key demographic and health information of each child and young person and supports good understanding of health needs and how these are being addressed. Appropriate information sharing protocols are in place with other agencies to support good health outcomes. A 'no wrong door' protocol has been developed between health partners and social care to ensure that wherever a young person presents for services or health care they are appropriately redirected.
47. The looked after children health team of designated nurse and doctor has recently been enhanced by the appointment of a nurse specialist whose role is to engage with children and young people who are harder to reach, including those who are placed out of the county.
48. CAMHS provide a targeted service with fast track access for looked after children, with a commitment to assessing their needs within one week. Effective earlier emotional health intervention and support are reportedly beginning to impact on the level of more complex interventions required. While some professionals report a lack of flexibility from CAMHS in engaging with young people, inspectors also saw evidence of a sensitive and flexible approach to communicating and engaging with young people to enable them to access CAMHS.

Staying safe**Grade 2 (good)**

49. Safeguarding arrangements for looked after young people are good. All young people who spoke with inspectors or responded to the survey undertaken for this inspection reported that they feel safely looked after in their placements and the communities in which they live. Children and young people report that they are supported well by their carers and that they can talk to them and feel listened to. There are good management and monitoring arrangements in place for looked after children placed out of the county or in independent placements. The majority of these are placed close to Buckinghamshire.
50. Independent reviewing officers provide robust, suitably independent scrutiny and challenge to the progress of care plans to ensure a child's identified needs are being met. Where reviews are held outside of recommended timescales there is a good understanding and analysis of the reasons for this and a strong commitment to hold reviews within these timescales or more frequently, dependent on need. Partner agencies confirm that they are held to account for meeting their responsibilities whenever this is required. Reviews are child-focused and children are encouraged to participate effectively in the reviewing process and express their views in a range of ways which are most appropriate to their needs.
51. An established advocacy and independent visitor service has been commissioned, which offers support to all young people who need or wish to access the service including those placed out of the county, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and those with mental health needs. Young people confirm that they have been supported by advocates to promote their views. Children and young people confirm they are aware of how to complain and are confident that they will be supported by their carers if needed.
52. The four local authority children's homes have been judged as good in their most recent inspections and have a track record of good judgements. The management of two of these homes has recently been transferred to the voluntary sector. Both local authority fostering and adoption services were also judged as good at their last inspections.

Enjoying and achieving**Grade 1 (outstanding)**

53. Enjoy and achieving outcomes for looked after children are outstanding. Very effective support for looked after children and young people is provided by the well established education of children in public care (ECPC) team. The virtual headteacher appointed in 2009 provides outstanding leadership and excellent management oversight of the education provision for looked after children and young people from their early years into adulthood. Both the team and the virtual headteacher have excellent knowledge of the cohort and of the strengths and areas for development of the provision.

54. The ECPC team adopt a proactive approach and are highly regarded by children, young people and other professionals including foster carers, who are well supported to help young people achieve the best possible outcomes. Very good attention is paid to the individual needs of children and young people with individually tailored packages of support. The team includes an excellent range of specialist professional expertise for areas such as early years or key stage support and children with disabilities are supported well, including those placed out of the county. Designated teachers feel well supported by regular liaison groups and an annual conference which includes both social workers and foster carers.
55. Looked after children and young people attend school regularly and exclusions are low with good arrangements in place to track the attendance of those placed out of county. No young people were permanently excluded in 2009. The use of fixed term exclusions is also reducing and is at its lowest level ever.
56. The resources committed to this aspect of looked after children's lives are resulting in increasingly good educational outcomes for looked after children. Good progress is being made in narrowing the gap in attainment between looked after children in Buckinghamshire and all pupils nationally. A good proportion of looked after children make the progress expected of all children in English and mathematics between Key Stage 1–2. At Key Stage 4 in 2009, progress in English by looked after children was better than the national average for the general cohort. There is a strong focus on improving outcomes in mathematics. The proportion of young people achieving five GCSEs including English and mathematics compares to the England average with good improvement shown in 2009. The gap in attainment at Key Stage 4 remains wide but is closing, and the most recent published data for 2009 show a marked improvement. The progress of individual children and young people is effectively monitored through personal education planning and reviews which are used well to plan individually tailored support and review progress. The use of personal education allowances is increasing and they are effective in supporting a wide range of activities to motivate and support children and young people in both personal and social development and educational attainment.
57. Children and young people confirm that they have access to a wide range of leisure and recreational activities both in and outside of school. There is entitlement to a leisure credit card, a scheme developed in response to feedback from children and young people, which can be used to pay for a wide choice of activities. Family leisure cards are also made available.

Making a positive contribution, including user engagement

Grade 3 (adequate)

58. Arrangements for making a positive contribution are adequate. Regular consultation with a wide range of looked after children and young people takes place in the review and development of service delivery such as the commissioning of the advocacy and independent visiting service. A children in care council, the 'We do care' group, has been developed although as yet this is still at early stages of development and involves a small number of young people who report improvements in their confidence and personal and social development. This group have been involved in developing the Children's Pledge and welcome packs for children and young people. Nevertheless, links between the corporate parenting body and the 'We do care' group are not yet developed and there is a lack of clarity as to how the children's council will be enabled to act as a representative voice for looked after children.
59. There are low rates of offending by looked after children, with the latest published data indicating that 4% of looked after children aged 10 and over were cautioned or convicted. This is significantly lower than comparator areas and the national average. Local analysis indicates that about half of offences committed by children and young people who are looked after occur in residential care. Residential care staff members have participated in training in restorative justice approaches and have links with allocated police officers.

Economic well-being

Grade 2 (good)

60. Economic well being outcomes are good. Good support for individuals underpins the very good proportion of care leavers in education, employment and training. A dedicated worker in the leaving care team works in a targeted way with young people from the age of 14 to support them in future positive career options. The Prince's Trust provides mentors for 25 young people in care who are most vulnerable. There is good individual support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
61. The ECPC team provides very good support to young people with the potential and aspirations to attend university, for example through the summer university which provides excellent opportunities for young people to experience a wide-ranging curriculum. Feedback shows how highly they value this experience. There are currently 11 care leavers at university.
62. A good proportion of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. There is a good range of accommodation for young people included supported accommodation and a four-bedroom training house with training in independent living provided according to need. Despite this good level of support, which is confirmed by the young people who spoke to inspectors, the quality of pathway plans is variable and overall weak. Plans are

insufficiently specific about outcomes, actions, responsibilities and contingencies.

Quality of provision

Grade 2 (good)

63. The quality of provision is good. The council and partners demonstrate good awareness of the needs of their looked after children population. Effective commissioning strategies, based on analysis of need and on relevant research, have led to the development of services increasingly responsive to the needs of looked after children and to providing more effective support to children at risk of becoming looked after. Services such as the Community Childminding Network provide an innovative and effective resource with targeted support to children who are at risk of becoming looked after and their families. Plans for other innovative targeted services are well developed, for example a service to provide targeted crisis support to adolescents at risk of family breakdown.
64. Three dedicated looked after children teams (two for those aged under 14, one for those aged over 14, and one leaving care team) enable the needs of looked after children to remain a priority, despite increasing pressures on social care services. Looked after children are transferred to the dedicated looked after teams from the care and protection teams once the final care order is made, often after protracted legal proceedings. This can mean that at the earlier stages of becoming looked after children do not receive the same level of dedicated support, because of workload pressures within the planning and assessment teams. At the age of 14, looked after children are transferred to one of the 14+ teams. This results in greater workload pressure in this team, and this arrangement is currently under review to ensure that resources are better matched to need.
65. Placement stability remains comparatively good in relation to similar authorities, with an improving rate of longer term placement stability during 2009–10. A placement strategy has been developed to support the main aim of ensuring that only those young people who need to become looked after, and to ensure the development of cost effective placements that put the needs of children first. A foster carer recruitment campaign is in place to improve placement choice and is on target to increase the pool and range of local authority carers with 22 additional carers recruited during 2010. Recruitment of black and minority ethnic carers remains a challenge for Buckinghamshire and some neighbouring authorities. Consequently regional approaches to recruitment are being explored. In the meantime additional support is provided to placements which are not ideally matched to children's needs, such as mentoring input for children from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds as well as advice and support to carers.

66. All children have an allocated social worker and a current care plan. This is reviewed regularly and ensures that the progress of care plans is focused on meeting identified objectives. Children and young people say they are well supported by social workers and carers, understand what is happening to them and can identify better outcomes as a result of becoming looked after. Health, education and other services regularly contribute to assessment and provision of services according to the needs of looked after children to promote best outcomes.
67. Care plans and case records evidence the progress children have made in meeting their identified objectives. Care plans and reviews take into account children's views, and children are supported by advocates and independent visitors where required. Care plans involve staff from a range of other agencies that provide support to improve outcomes for children. Children and young people feel involved in their care plans and are aware of what is happening to them.
68. The quality of written care plans and pathway plans is variable. Some are overly descriptive and insufficiently specific about actions, outcomes and accountability. However outcomes for young people as evidenced in case files and review records are good, and agencies are aware of their responsibilities.
69. Case records are generally up to date but delays in ensuring that key documents are on the electronic recording system can impact on the timely transfer of looked after children from the care and planning teams to the looked after children team.

Ambition and prioritisation

Grade 2 (good)

70. Ambition and prioritisation are good. Vision and ambition for looked after children are clearly expressed through a range of plans linked to the five strategic priorities for children's services within the Children and Young People's Plan. Corporate commitment to priorities such as closing the gap is evidenced through resource allocation, for example to secure the best possible educational outcomes for looked after children. Within its overall priority and focus on child protection outcomes, the BSCB have retained an appropriate focus on looked after children with a view to challenging and improving performance issues, for example by undertaking analysis of the numbers of children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds who enter the care system.

Leadership and management

Grade 2 (good)

71. Leadership and management are good. The children's services workforce plan has addressed workforce capacity issues in respect of looked after children services. Turnover and vacancy rates within looked after children's teams have impacted less than in other social care children's teams and resulted in greater service consistency. Professionals including

social workers working with looked after children report that they have access to a good range of training and development opportunities. Foster carers confirm they are well supported and there are good opportunities for their development and training. Social care staff report that they are well managed and effectively supervised.

72. Effective partnership working at both strategic and operational levels promotes good outcomes with established systems and processes in place for joint working and information sharing. Joint training events are held in order to promote inter-agency cooperation and develop and review ways of inter-agency working. Managers across services meet regularly to develop and shape good practice. The remit and membership of the strategic corporate parenting group has been recently strengthened and this group is developing a clearer role in championing and promoting wider awareness of corporate responsibilities for looked after children. The lead member and elected members on the corporate parenting group demonstrate commitment to championing the needs of looked after children.
73. As with safeguarding, good commissioning processes are focused on high quality outcomes for children and cost effectiveness. Strong cross-regional working partnerships and arrangements are in place. The Keys project for children which has been jointly commissioned with neighbouring local authorities to provide for the placement needs of children with complex needs is due to open in January 2011. A robust and child-centred approach to the recommissioning of short breaks provision has been adopted, with good use of voluntary and community sector capacity. Effective use of resources is further demonstrated in the commissioning of the supervised contact service for children. This has resulted in greater consistency for families and contributed to improved reporting to courts on the ability of parents to meet their children's needs.

Performance management and quality assurance

Grade 2 (good)

74. Performance management and quality assurance arrangements for looked after children services are good and mirror the arrangements in place for safeguarding. These include the securing of independent service evaluations such as analysis of trends and future placements needs for looked after children as well as feedback from service users. Performance management and quality assurance of looked after children services are integrated into safeguarding service planning. Independent reviewing officers provide additional independent scrutiny of plans and reviews and make an important contribution to service quality. The virtual school headteacher and team exercise good oversight of individual pupil progress through personal education plans and provide effective challenge where necessary.

Record of main findings:

Safeguarding services	
Overall effectiveness	Good
Capacity for improvement	Good
Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people	
Children and young people are safe and feel safe	Good
Quality of provision	Adequate
The contribution of health agencies to keeping children and young people safe	Good
Services for looked after children	
Ambition and prioritisation	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Performance management and quality assurance	Good
Partnership working	Good
Equality and diversity	Good
Services for looked after children	
Overall effectiveness	Good
Capacity for improvement	Good
How good are outcomes for looked after children and care leavers?	
Being healthy	Good
Staying safe	Good
Enjoying and achieving	Outstanding
Making a positive contribution, including user engagement	Adequate
Economic well-being	Good
Quality of provision	Good
Services for looked after children	
Ambition and prioritisation	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Performance management and quality assurance	Good
Equality and diversity	Good