

16 September 2016

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Dear David

Monitoring visit of Buckinghamshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Buckinghamshire children's services on 16 and 17 August 2016. This was the first monitoring visit under this arrangement since the local authority was judged inadequate in August 2014. The inspectors were Linda Steele HMI, Donna Marriott HMI and Tara Geere HMI.

The local authority is making progress to improve services for its children. This has been particularly evident in the last six months. However, the pace of improvement in the quality of some social work practice, the management of allegations against professionals and the response to privately fostered children are too slow.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made, with a particular focus on four themes:

- the quality of management decision making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and the application of thresholds for statutory intervention
- assessment and planning processes for children in need of help and protection
- the arrangements in place to respond to children missing and at risk of child sexual exploitation
- management oversight.

Inspectors also considered:

- the management of allegations against professionals working with children
- the effectiveness of response to private fostering arrangements.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of social workers undertaking referral and assessment duties and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

Summary of findings

- All children who require a statutory social work assessment and intervention have an allocated social worker. This is a significant improvement from the findings of the inspection in August 2014.
- A permanent senior management team is now in place and has developed a comprehensive understanding of the key priorities for improvement.
- Staff report that senior managers are more visible and communication has improved.
- Children's social care services are now a firm priority for the council.
- There are positive signs that the recruitment and retention strategy, combined with a sharper focus on poor performance, is beginning to have an impact on recruiting permanent staff.
- Appropriate management oversight, comprehensive performance management, and quality assurance processes are now in place. These have improved compliance significantly.
- Practice improvement managers are highly valued by social workers. These managers have been instrumental in highlighting practice shortfalls and strengths, as well as raising the standard of social work practice.
- Social work practice in the first response and children in need units is now of better quality than it was during the last inspection.
- Further work is still required to strengthen the quality of child in need and child protection plans.
- Child protection enquires are timely and informed by discussions at strategy meetings which include the participation of a range of partner agencies.
- Attendance by partners at child protection conferences and core groups has significantly improved.
- Direct work by social workers using resources appropriate to children's individual needs continues to be of variable quality.
- The MASH and partnership working has improved considerably. The partnership has been working effectively to strengthen a common understanding of thresholds.
- There is too much delay in progressing some referrals. This is particularly evident when the MASH is seeking information through partner agencies.

- There are ongoing pressures on police capacity to progress and screen domestic abuse notifications. This is adversely affecting the capacity of the children's social care service.
- Processes for responding to children who go missing from home are clear, but children do not consistently receive a timely return home interview.
- The quality of work within private fostering remains too variable.
- Capacity to manage allegations against professionals working with children remains insufficient.

Evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified that in the last six months the pace of improvement has accelerated in some areas. However, progress has not met expectation in all areas. Senior managers now need to continue to focus on improving consistency in the quality of social work practice.

Political leaders have prioritised improvements in children's services to make sure that the infrastructure is in place to support effective social work practice. This renewed focus has resulted in improved capacity across the workforce, with sufficient social workers and managers to respond to demand. At the time of the monitoring visit, all children who required assessment or a statutory social work service had an allocated social worker.

The investment in children's services is particularly evident in the development of the MASH and child sexual exploitation SWAN unit, as well as in the significant increase in social work capacity across the service. The MASH is effective and partnership working has improved considerably, with partners now working together to strengthen professionals' understanding of thresholds. However, re-referral rates remain high. Senior managers are conducting an analysis to understand the reasons. This has so far revealed some errors in recording but has yet to conclude.

Since June 2016, ongoing pressures of police capacity have caused delays in screening domestic abuse referrals. At the time of this visit, 450 notifications were waiting to be screened by police, with the oldest dating back to 31 July 2016. Senior managers had escalated these concerns to the local safeguarding children board and the police subsequently implemented a plan to manage the associated risks and reduce the backlog. Police prioritise all notifications where children are present and refer to the MASH for managers to assess whether intervention is required. However, because the police have not screened all notifications in advance, children's social care service has less information to inform effective decision making about the need for intervention. Additionally, this has impact on the capacity of the children's social care service.

Social workers now visit children regularly and see them alone. This has resulted in increased opportunities for children to build and sustain positive relationships with

their social workers. However, the purpose of visits is not always clear. In all cases, social workers know children well, although some children have experienced too many changes of social worker.

The recruitment and retention strategy, combined with a sharper focus on poor performance, is beginning to show a positive impact and reduced turnover of social workers. However, a particularly high turnover of frontline managers in the children in need units remains. Practice improvement managers are highly valued by social workers, and have been instrumental in highlighting practice shortfalls and strengths, as well as raising standards in social work practice. Staff welcome the practice standards, which have brought clarity of expectations and professional accountability.

Social workers now consistently undertake all statutory assessments. Completion timescales have improved, but more work needs to be done to ensure that all assessments are of a consistently good quality. Assessments now include historical factors, parenting capacity and analyse risk and strengths, but the voice and experiences of children are not always present. Partner agency engagement in strategy discussions, child protection conferences, and core groups has improved significantly. Professionals' views now inform decision making about how plans should progress. Considerable work is still required to strengthen the quality of child in need and child protection plans.

The quality of private fostering work remains too variable. Improvement is still required to ensure scrutiny of the suitability of each placement and ensure that placements are supported, with regular visiting and robust assessments. Awareness raising has taken place and has resulted in an increase in private fostering notifications from four to 24. However, more needs to be done to improve the quality of the service.

Capacity to manage allegations against professionals working with children remains insufficient to respond effectively to all referrals; consequently, tracking outcomes and closing cases are delayed. The development of an allegation management system is not fully completed.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Linda Steele
Her Majesty's Inspector