

30 July 2018

Mr Tolis Vouyioukas
Executive Director
Buckinghamshire Children's Services
County Hall
Walton street
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Dear Mr Vouyioukas

Monitoring visit of Buckinghamshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Buckinghamshire children's services on 3 and 4 July 2018. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate at a re-inspection in December 2017. The inspectors were Nick Stacey and Tracey Scott, Her Majesty's Inspectors, and Maria Anastasi, Ofsted Inspector.

From a very low base, the local authority is making some early progress in improving services for children and young people who are the subject of a child in need plan.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas:

- thresholds for working with children in need
- the recognition, understanding and response to risk for children in need
- the quality of direct work with children and parents, and the links between this work and children's plans
- the quality of plans, the quality and timeliness of arrangements for the review of children's progress, and the understanding that children and their families have of these plans, and of what needs to improve
- the quality of management oversight and supervision, particularly in the following areas: assessing the impact and progress of work; support for social workers to address any difficulties in working effectively with families; and the guidance and support provided to social workers in their direct work with children
- the speed and decisiveness of the response to escalating risks
- the effectiveness of the quality assurance of social work with children in need.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case files, meetings with social workers and managers, discussions with senior leaders and analysis of relevant documentation and data.

Overview

Senior leaders have a clear and well-informed understanding of the significant weaknesses in the quality of work with children in need. Plans to improve practice are credible and well devised. Senior managers are strongly committed to moving forward at a realistic pace, and are determined to achieve rapid and sustainable improvements in children's circumstances and outcomes. Social workers reported an awareness of a developing learning culture and most said that they feel supported and 'heard' through the process of change. However, improvements are in their infancy. There is much more to do before the substantial number of children who are subject to child in need plans all receive support which is effective in helping them to overcome the neglect and poor parenting they experience in their day-to-day lives.

Caseloads are too high, and this limits the time that social workers have available to spend working directly with children and their families. This, in turn, reduces their ability to build trusting relationships with families that will provide the basis for challenge, support and positive change. The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision are too variable: managers do not consistently support and assist social workers to evaluate and build an improved understanding of the needs of children. This reduces the progress that children make. Frequent changes of managers in some parts of the service have further impeded improvements. In some cases, these changes are the result of measures that the council is taking to improve management oversight and practice standards.

Senior managers have recently undertaken a widespread review of children subject to child in need plans to ensure that children are receiving support at the appropriate level of intervention. In most cases reviewed by inspectors, children were receiving the right level of help based on their needs.

Senior managers are introducing a learning and reflective approach as an integral part of case auditing and quality assurance. While this is a positive new initiative, it is too soon to identify what impact it is having on supervision and practice.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Widespread shortfalls in the quality and effectiveness of intervention and support to children in need are further compounded by inconsistent management oversight. This finding broadly reflects the findings of the local authority's auditing and quality assurance work. However, some stronger and thoughtful practice was seen during the visit, particularly in one of the children with disabilities teams. While the impact of most social work remains too weak, there are encouraging signs of early improvement, underpinned by realistic plans to build on this foundation. An essential element of practice development is a growing culture of openness and the promotion of a learning climate.

The local authority is committed to evaluating and increasing the capacity of frontline managers and social workers in order to understand what is effective and safe social work with children in need. Senior managers are in the early stages of ensuring that improved standards of assessment, planning, intervention and review are consistently applied.

Thresholds for statutory children in need interventions are largely appropriately applied. Children's cases are stepped up to child protection plans and legal intervention when improvements in children's circumstances fail to emerge, or when risks to them increase. However, not all risks are fully recognised or understood, and this leads to failures and delays in the safeguarding of a minority of children. Some children's cases continue to be stepped down too quickly before children's circumstances and outcomes sustainably improve. Senior managers accepted these findings and have found similar shortfalls during the 'discovery' phase of their improvement programme, as they analyse and evaluate children's cases with greater rigour and frequency. Managers take urgent and appropriate measures when they identify safeguarding concerns.

The quality and timeliness of the assessments reviewed by inspectors were inconsistent. A small number of assessments are significantly delayed, and the majority are completed close to the 45-day timeline. The delays result in some children waiting too long to receive the help that they need. Most assessments are supported by information that has been provided by other agencies and provide a comprehensive description of children's circumstances. However, important information about family histories and parenting capacity is not routinely documented. While some evidence of direct work with children informing assessments was evident, they do not always document individual children's experiences, views and worries with sufficient depth and clarity. Overall, assessments are too descriptive and are not concluded with an incisive analysis of risks and needs.

Transfer processes are not always timely or smoothly managed. Duty social workers from the help and protection teams often attend child in need meetings as a handover point, rather than the new social worker who is to be allocated. This means that many families experience a number of different social workers and that time is lost in newly allocated social workers understanding family situations and in maintaining the momentum of child in need plans. A recent restructure of the service is intended to reduce the handover points and the number of changes of social worker that families experience, enabling a greater level of consistency and continuity in progressing child in need plans. Most of the social workers who spoke with inspectors were supportive of this restructure.

Caseload pressures are too great and the volume of allocated work in the help and protection teams is too high for a significant number of social workers. Some social

workers say that this workload is difficult to manage, and that they often need to work additional hours during evenings and weekends. There are sudden upward spikes in workloads when social workers leave, due to the redistribution of their caseloads, adding to the pressure on remaining social workers. Overall, social workers' caseloads are too high to enable senior managers to create the conditions for improved quality of practice that they are actively seeking to achieve.

The quality of direct work with children is mixed. Inspectors saw some evidence of meaningful, interactive and influential direct work with children that was closely linked to the objectives in children's plans. However, inspectors also saw numerous examples of direct work that lacked purpose and structure and that was not leading to the improved circumstances or well-being of children.

Most child in need plans lack focus and specificity and do not achieve purposeful, timely and measurable outcomes for children. Most contingency plans are too vague and generic and are not tailored to individual children's circumstances. However, inspectors saw some stronger plans that contained coherent child-centred objectives and measurable and achievable outcomes. These positive features are particularly prominent in one of the children with disabilities team.

Reviews of child in need plans are held regularly, but the majority are not attended by frontline managers and managers appear to have little involvement or oversight of these meetings. This is a missed opportunity for managers to evaluate the progression and pace of joint work with other agencies, and to mitigate any drift, delay or ineffective practice. Social workers organise, chair and minute the reviews, and this is a considerable additional burden when many are managing high caseloads. Schools often attend reviews, but the attendance of other agencies is more intermittent. Minutes are helpful records of the discussions, but they rarely evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, measured against the principal objectives of children's plans.

A recent external review of child in need cases has provided senior managers with assurance about the safety of this large group of children and has also led to more plans being progressed in line with children's needs. Inspectors agreed with the local authority's own audit findings in the small number of cases that were selected by inspectors for closer tracking, with the exception of one case. Most of the local authority's audit recommendations are being implemented, and the findings are helping social workers to reflect on the quality and impact of their practice.

Overall, supervision and management oversight are not strong enough to consistently help social workers to better understand children's circumstances, and to purposefully progress children's plans. Only a minority of supervision records seen during the visit evidenced the child being central to the discussion and demonstrated reflection and analysis. The majority of records seen were compliance-orientated updates of circumstances with task-based directions. In these meetings, social

workers had rarely been challenged or supported to consider alternative hypotheses, or to develop and test new ideas and approaches in their direct work. The support provided to social workers to explore different ways of engaging families who are resistant, avoidant or hostile is insufficient. It is not always clear whether previous actions have been reviewed or completed and supervision is often an isolated event, rather than a continuous, ongoing evaluation and measure of progress in children's outcomes. Some social workers and children are benefiting from reflective supervision sessions with the principal social worker. This is helping them to think more analytically about children's lived experiences.

Senior managers fully recognise the vital and difficult role that front-line managers play in creating the right environment for achieving improved practice standards and outcomes for children and so are investing in the training and development of this group. The recent implementation of a development centre to assess and enhance the ability of frontline managers to provide enabling, reflective and challenging case supervision is an important part of this early stage of improving social work practice. This is particularly pertinent as the workforce has a large number of social workers who are at the beginning of their social work career, many holding complex and difficult statutory work. The workforce is comparatively stable and permanent with relatively low vacancy levels, turnover rates and use of agency social workers. This workforce stability is a firm foundation for senior managers to build practice improvements upon.

Senior managers have introduced a participative, coaching-based audit model, designed to develop stronger and better integrated learning and development for social workers and frontline managers. However, this model is in the early stages of implementation and is not yet having a widespread impact on practice.

The majority of social workers who spoke with inspectors said that they have opportunities to express their views, and that recently appointed permanent senior managers are more visible, responsive, approachable and practice orientated. Staff expressed cautious optimism that practice is slowly improving, and that the culture is increasingly transparent.

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

Yours sincerely

Nick Stacey
Her Majesty's Inspector