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Dear Mr Vouyioukas

Focused visit to Buckinghamshire local authority children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Buckinghamshire local authority children's services on 24 and 25 February 2021. The visit was carried out by Donna Marriott, Tara Geere, Tracey Scott, Alex Dignan, Maire Atherton and Kathryn Moles, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs).

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The methodology was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out remotely, using video calls for discussions with social workers, managers, leaders and partners, carers and children. The lead inspector and the director of children's services (DCS) agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The effectiveness of management oversight and supervision to ensure that actions are completed and that children's plans are progressed.
- The effectiveness of quality assurance arrangements, promoting the involvement of practitioners in case auditing and increasing the focus on the impact of practice on children's experiences.

Findings

- The start of the pandemic coincided with the council's transition to a unitary authority. This considerable logistical challenge did not divert the council from its steadfast support of children's services. Effective emergency planning and a whole-council response enabled the smooth transfer of the service to remote working. At the time of the visit, these arrangements remained in place due to a national lockdown.
- Strong partnership arrangements have ensured the provision of support to the most vulnerable children in Buckinghamshire throughout the pandemic. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the service and have maintained a firm focus on doing the best for children and families, despite the disruption and financial strain caused by the continuing pandemic. The council has provided additional financial investment to enable the service to respond to the growing challenges for those families who have been affected.
- Leaders describe, with much pride, the enormous efforts of their staff in supporting children and families throughout the pandemic. The senior leadership team has focused relentlessly on the well-being of the workforce, remaining visible throughout. Staff value the exceptional support that they have received from leaders and managers and talked positively about working for Buckinghamshire. This improved morale was reflected in conversations with practitioners and managers during the visit and is illustrated by the decision of some agency staff to transfer to permanent contracts.
- The local authority continues to experience challenges in maintaining a permanent, stable workforce. This, coupled with significant increases in demand as a result of the pandemic, has at times reduced capacity and created caseload pressures for some teams. This has resulted in changes of social worker for some children. Leaders have worked purposefully to strengthen recruitment through a range of initiatives, including the creation of the social work academy in 2019. Some parts of the service have made progress in achieving greater workforce stability, but significant challenges remain. The recruitment and retention of a stable workforce rightly remain the top priority in the local authority's improvement plan.
- The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) has operated remotely throughout the pandemic. It provides a proportionate response to initial concerns about children. The response to referrals is more timely now that demand has returned to more usual levels, following a peak in late 2020. Information is shared effectively by partners and is used well to inform referral decisions. Management decisions are clear. Threshold decisions about the provision of early help are proportionate, and transfers between early help and children's social care are managed well.

- Most strategy meetings are held promptly. They appropriately consider the risk of harm for children, and the rationale for decisions is well evidenced. Actions arising are mostly specific and timebound. Partner attendance at these meetings is strong, supporting effective information-sharing. Resulting section 47 enquiries sometimes lack analysis; not all enquiries are clear enough about next steps or subsequent safety planning for children.
- Leaders have developed clear expectations about visiting children during the pandemic, including returning to face-to-face visiting where possible. Most children are visited in accordance with their needs; however, despite improving practice in this area, visiting is not always timely for some. The rationale for undertaking virtual instead of face-to-face visits is largely clear and defensible, but these decisions are not always signed off by managers in accordance with practice guidance.
- Children in need of help and protection, including disabled children, benefit from plans that are reviewed regularly. Some children receive creative intervention, supported by the use of a range of virtual tools. However, the quality of practice is variable as some plans are not sufficiently individualised, and some do not progress at the pace that is needed. Reviews take place regularly, and some social workers have found that the transition to virtual meetings has, in some instances, improved agency attendance.
- The local authority and schools have worked together well since the start of the pandemic, building on previous collaborative work. Appropriate monitoring of attendance information over time has helped to keep children in sight. Leaders have prioritised resources and adapted their working practices to focus on the most vulnerable pupils and on reducing the risk of them becoming lost from education. They have ensured effective oversight of children being electively home educated, despite the sharp increase in these arrangements over recent months.
- Most children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation receive an effective response. Agencies work together to mitigate risks. Leaders are aware that further work is needed to strengthen the join up between the exploitation hub and the allocated social work teams, following recent changes to the configuration of the service. Social workers have helpful conversations with children when they return from being missing, which helps to make them safer. However, not all children are offered a return home interview.
- When concerns escalate or children's situations do not improve, the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline is used effectively to safeguard children. Managers have established clear processes to oversee pre-proceedings, but further attention is needed to ensure a coherent overview of this work. Delays in carrying out specialist assessments as a result of the

pandemic have led to some children remaining in pre-proceedings for extended periods. Some practice shortfalls also lead to some delays that are not purposeful. The lack of timely review for some children means that these delays can go unchecked. When concerns increase, and children's safety can no longer be assured, timely action is taken to issue proceedings. Feedback from the judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) is positive and indicates improvements in ensuring that most children's cases are presented to court at the right time.

- Children in care have continued to make some progress despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. Most live in stable homes that meet their needs, with carers who are committed to them. Leaders have made very limited use of the flexibilities available to them under the amendments to regulations. They have ensured effective oversight, appropriately updating these in line with changes in restrictions. Careful steps are taken to ensure that children continue to spend time with those people who are important to them. Where appropriate, virtual contact is used to good effect.
- Foster carers spoke positively about the support they have received during the pandemic. They feel that decisions have been made in the interests of children and have taken their views into account. At times, changes of children's social workers have been too frequent. The footprint of independent reviewing officers is often visible on children's case files, but the impact of their intervention is not always evident.
- The timeliness of health assessments, dental care and strengths and difficulties questionnaires for children in care has declined during the pandemic. A more focused corporate parenting panel has put targeted work plans in place to respond to these issues, alongside a sharper focus on the emotional well-being of children. Progress has been made in reducing waiting times for children to access the child and adolescent mental health services' (CAMHS) looked after children service despite increased demand.
- Ongoing communication with children and their carers has enabled virtual school leaders to react promptly to children's emerging needs. Decisions about whether children in care should go to school or learn remotely during periods of national lockdown have been based on secure knowledge of the child and their context, taking the views of carers and schools appropriately into account. Practical steps have been taken to help some care leavers to access further education.
- The local authority is in touch with the vast majority of its care leavers. The frequency and quality of contact have improved in recent months, and leaders aim to improve this further. Case recording about care leavers is increasingly written in the first person and in a warm, straightforward style. Care leavers benefit when they have established relationships with personal advisers, but

this is not always possible given changes in the workforce. For some, this negatively affects the progression of their plans. Most care leavers have access to their health histories and receive support with their health and emotional well-being.

- Leaders have strengthened commissioning arrangements, including the accommodation offer for young people and oversight of unregulated provision. This is beginning to deliver results, with greater scrutiny of unregulated provision and the vast majority of care leavers now living in suitable accommodation. Plans for young people to move to semi-supported living are not always based on their assessed readiness but on placement availability. Work with the very small number of young people who are homeless would benefit from greater management oversight to ensure that young people receive the support they need.
- Leaders have taken action to improve managers' oversight of children's plans, but there is much more to do. Case supervision is not always regular enough, and there are gaps in actions and a lack of analysis. Although management oversight is now routinely evident on children's files, actions arising are not consistently followed up, leading to delays in some children's plans being progressed.
- A significant increase in demand created considerable pressures on the service in late 2020, leading to challenges in allocation. These pressures resulted in a well-thought-through management decision to divert activity from quality assurance to operations, resulting in a suspension in audit activity. Dip sampling, with a focus on risk assessment and visits to children in the context of the pandemic, has had some positive impact. Dip sampling, with a focus on risk assessment and visits to children in the context of the pandemic, has had a positive impact. Although dip sampling by managers and leaders has continued, the decision to focus on compliance has reduced the learning opportunities for social workers. Audit activity has resumed, and there is an audit plan in place for the year ahead. Leaders recognise the critical importance of ensuring that this activity is embedded and is completed alongside practitioners to drive quality of practice in the next stage of the service's improvement journey.
- Ofsted will take the findings of this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Donna Marriott
Her Majesty's Inspector