

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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John Macilwraith
Corporate Director for Children's Services
The Gateway
Gatehouse Road
Aylesbury
Buckinghamshire
HP19 8FF

Dear Mr Macilwraith

Focused visit to Buckinghamshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Buckinghamshire children's services on 12 and 13 October 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Claire Beckingham and Tracey Scott.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for care leavers.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

The support to care leavers in Buckinghamshire has improved since the last inspection. While progress is evident, there remain inconsistencies in the quality of practice.

Younger care leavers and those in education are encouraged to be successful and ambitious by committed workers, managers, leaders and the lead member for children, who are proud of the young people's achievements. An increasing number of children are benefiting from remaining in care until they are 18. Few care leavers over the age of 21 receive active support and there is more to do to increase participation and knowledge of the care leaver offer for these young people. Until recently, care leavers were supported by a stable workforce, with many young people having a consistent personal adviser with whom to build a trusting and supportive relationship. While care leaver participation has been strengthened in Buckinghamshire, their voices at corporate parenting panel are inconsistent.

Senior leaders made a decision to target quality assurance activity at the aspects of the service that they considered posed the greatest risk. As a result, the quality and impact of audit for care leavers is not yet embedded, with only a small number of care leavers' records having been subject to formal audit in the past six months.

However, leaders in Buckinghamshire have an understanding of the strengths of the service, the areas for development and the future challenges.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The number, quality and impact of audits and the extent to which care leavers' voices are included in this work to help underpin learning.
- The number of 22- to 25-year-olds who are aware of the local offer and accessing support.
- The consistent voice of care leavers at corporate parenting panel.
- The sense of permanence and stability for care leavers in staying put arrangements.

Main findings

Personal advisers (PAs) are allocated to children at the age of 17 and a half. PAs actively visit and get to know the children, facilitating a smoother transition from their social worker to the leaving care service. The frequency and purposefulness of visits to care leavers are variable. Many visits are regular, proportionate and carefully planned, while others lack purpose or focus only on the current pressing issue for the care leaver. Caseloads for some practitioners who are supporting care leavers are high. This makes it more challenging for them to undertake meaningful direct work with young people.

Pathway plans are written confidently and warmly with, and to, the care leavers. Their achievements and progress are recognised, and further encouragement is contained in the plan. The young person's voice and experience are well captured. While most pathway plans are reviewed six monthly, they are not routinely updated when young people's circumstances change. Care leavers are strongly encouraged to engage in education and training. This is a real strength in Buckinghamshire. Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation where they feel safe and which meets their needs. Leaders have recognised increasing demand for accommodation and taken steps to strengthen the offer to care leavers. This has included developing their commissioning arrangements for, and oversight of, supported accommodation. Increasing numbers of care leavers continue to live with their foster carers post-18 and staying put is actively encouraged.

The inconsistent application of a three-monthly review of staying put arrangements for young people means that some lack certainty about their longer-term living arrangements.

Most care leavers have access to universal health services and, when needed, are supported by their PAs to attend key health appointments. Care leavers are encouraged to access appropriate support for substance misuse and with their mental health. Gaps in service provision, different thresholds between children and adult services or insufficient planning mean that some care leavers' emotional health

needs are not met in a timely way. The multi-agency work to strengthen this has been slower than senior leaders would like and has been hindered by staffing capacity within the partnership. Health histories are reportedly sent directly to all care leavers by health professionals, but not all workers could confirm whether care leavers had received them.

Care leavers, including those over 18 who are at risk of or experiencing exploitation, benefit from effective multi-agency risk management meetings and specialist, meaningful direct work via the exploitation team.

A very small number of 22- to 25-year-olds access support from the care leaving service and there is inequity between those in education and those who are not. Care leavers told inspectors they believe that if they stay in education, they will get to keep a PA. One care leaver said that she does not think this is fair. This is consistent with the findings of this visit, with some care leavers stating that they wanted support to continue beyond 21. Senior leaders recognise that there is more to do to ensure that they are in regular contact with older care leavers and that they are aware of the ongoing support available to them while they are still vulnerable young adults.

Leaders are aware that the cost-of-living crisis is impacting on care leavers. PAs are proactively accessing support through outside agencies and charities. Leaders were planning for the hub to support care leavers to open in October 2022.

Buckinghamshire's recent work with vulnerable care leavers in custody is beginning to see impact, with greater engagement between care leavers and their PAs and more in education or training. PAs ensure that they keep in touch meaningfully with care leavers who are in custody, through regular visits. PAs show care for these young people at what can be a frightening time in their lives and they also support them well on their release.

The new participation strategy was launched in May 2022 and there was a plan for it to be relaunched for children in the autumn. Care leavers are increasingly being engaged on issues such as strategy development and planning for services and are also involved in recruitment of staff. Despite this, care leavers do not have a strong, consistent voice at corporate parenting panel and leaders recognise this as a continued area for improvement.

The three-monthly frequency of supervision for PAs is within Buckinghamshire's practice guidelines. However, there is limited evidence that changing the frequency of discussions to respond to changing risks or the young person's level of need has been considered. The analysis, reflection, quality and impact of supervision are variable. While all supervisions review previous actions and set new actions, some actions are carried over from one supervision to the next with little impact or change.

Care leavers who are parents are supported effectively by their PAs. Pathway plans reflect a relevant mix of their needs and those of their children. Inspectors saw

recognition of safeguarding concerns for unborn children, appropriate referrals to children's services and cross-team working.

Disabled care leavers receive a comprehensive and thoughtful service from PAs who take the time to educate themselves on the young people's needs and communication styles. Transitions to adult services are slow and cause frustration and worry to some care leavers and their support network.

Buckinghamshire is now taking a more proportionate number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) through the national transfer scheme. This has led to a significant increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers they are supporting. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers receive the same level of support as Buckinghamshire care leavers and there is a strong focus on helping them to build links in the community. Leaders understand the challenges faced by these vulnerable young people, however, the knowledge and confidence to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers through the legal process of applying for asylum is inconsistent. The local authority recognises this and intends to create a specialist team to ensure that their needs are understood and met effectively.

Comprehensive performance data is used to support the progress of work effectively across the service. Check and challenge meetings help to provide leaders with an additional line of sight to practice. Performance is considered alongside contextual issues within the service. Attendance and discussion at meetings strengthen the visibility of managers and recognise positive practice and areas for improvement, while also seeking to understand and respond to challenges.

Senior leaders made a conscious decision to target quality assurance activity at areas of greatest risk within the wider children's service. Subsequently, a very small number of care leavers' records have been subject to formal audit in the past six months. While there is evidence of dip sampling by senior managers to seek to understand and influence practice, the low number of records subject to formal audit is a missed opportunity to identify practice changes, formalise learning and contribute to a learning and feedback loop.

The quality of the limited audit that is undertaken is variable. Positively, the audit tool is focused on the child's experience and impact rather than compliance. Some audits are completed collaboratively with practitioners, but there is limited reflective narrative or evidence of audits being discussed in supervision. Children and families' feedback is not a feature of audits and this limits the potential for insight into the care leavers' experience of services. Leaders recognise the need to strengthen audit practice and have told inspectors this is a priority for the next 12 months.

Solutions and developments implemented for the care leaving service, such as bidding for housing in new builds, setting up a new UASC team and setting up a hub building where care leavers can attend to use facilities, socialise and learn skills, are largely in their infancy or approval stages. Although the impact for care leavers is not

evident, it is clear that leaders are anticipating challenges and taking proactive steps to secure resources.

The revised care leaver offer is clear and accessible and includes an aspirational emphasis on education. Most care leavers are aware of their rights and entitlements, despite their records not showing that the local offer has been shared or discussed with them. Care leavers spoke positively about their PAs and the local offer, with some saying that they felt they had received financial and practical support that exceeded offers for care leavers in other areas. One care leaver told inspectors, 'I feel so lucky to be a Bucks care leaver.'

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Claire Beckingham
His Majesty's Inspector