



Report to Cabinet

Date:	Tuesday 9 May 2023
Title:	Children's Services Update
Cabinet Member:	Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services
Author and/or contact officer:	John Macilwraith, Corporate Director Children's Services
Ward (s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	For Cabinet to note the national and local developments across the Children's Services Directorate

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Since the last update to Cabinet in October 2022, the Service has received two regulatory visits. The first was a Focused Visit from Ofsted that looked at our services and support offered to care leavers, and the second was an inspection of Youth Offending Services by HM Inspectorate of Probation. Both visits went well and confirmed that the Service continues on its improvement journey and whilst there is more to do, the Service has an accurate self-assessment and understanding of what needs to be done. In addition, two of our Children's Homes are now judged to be 'Outstanding' by Ofsted and our new 4 bedded Parent and Baby residential assessment resource has just opened, following registration by Ofsted.
- 1.2 IMPOWER have now completed their analysis of the profile of demand and developed a number of recommendations outlining how the Service could improve its financial sustainability by delivering better outcomes at less cost. The IMPOWER work also concluded that the service and its partners can work differently together to meet the needs of children and young people. The findings from this analysis has helped the Service refine our self-assessment from which a whole system Children's Services Transformation Programme has been developed. This change programme will redefine the support we provide to children and families and redevelop our model to enable interventions that

are more responsive to children's needs. Our ambition is to create more opportunities for professionals, including partner agencies, to integrate services around the needs of communities and move from a process driven case management model with multiple hand off points to a relationship based, solution focused system.

- 1.3 On the horizon there are a number of significant national policy changes and the proposed changes to the way in which the Service operates are in line with national policy direction and are based on ensuring that children receive a consistent, purposeful and child centred approach wherever they are on their journey of need from early help through to being in care.

2. National Context

- 2.1 The following section gives an overview of the key national policy developments relating to Children's Services.

Children's Social Care Review

- 2.2 On 2 February 2023, the Department for Education issued its response to the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#), [the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's inquiry](#) into the murders of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and the [Competition and Markets Authority's study](#) of the children's social care market, in three consultation documents:
 - i. An overarching strategy, [Stable Homes, Built on Love](#).
 - ii. [A report proposing reforms to agency social work](#).
 - iii. [A proposed national framework](#), setting standards and outcomes for children's services
- 2.3 The Government's implementation and strategy consultation, 'Stable Homes; Built on Love', is a direct response to the Care Review, the National Child Protection Review and the Competition and Markets Authority review, all of which reported in 2022. The government's implementation and strategy consultation document is seen as phase one of implementing a whole system change to how children's social care will operate over the coming two to five years. Realising a new vision for children's social care requires long-term reform, underpinned by further investment and changes to legislation. Phase one will be between now and the spending review in two years' time and will seek to make immediate improvements while laying the foundations for whole system reform. Activity in phase two will be about embedding reform everywhere. This will require further investment, legislation (subject to

parliamentary time) and a wider programme of support to embed the reset of the whole system envisaged within the implementation plan.

- 2.4 **Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation** sets out six pillars for reform underpinned by £200m of new investment alongside related consultations on a new national framework for children’s social care and the child and family social worker workforce. The 6 pillars and summary actions are as follows:

Pillar 1: Family help provides the right support at the right time so that families stay together

Pillar 2: A decisive multi-agency child protection system

Pillar 3: Unlocking the potential of family networks

Pillar 4: Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care

Pillar 5: A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one

Pillar 6: A system that continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data

- 2.5 **Funding:** £200m in funding over two years. The care review called for £2.6bn over five years.

- 2.6 **Social work training and development:** An early career framework will be established, replacing the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, as recommended by the review. Practitioners will be supported to develop, and be assessed against, the “skills and knowledge needed to support and protect vulnerable children”, and, in years three to five, to develop into “expert practitioners”. This will be tested by a group of early adopter councils with a view to full implementation in 2026.

- 2.7 **Social work recruitment:** The DfE will “explore ways to support the recruitment of up to 500 additional child and family social worker apprentices” to help tackle staff shortages, though it has not provided details on how this will happen.

- 2.8 **Agency social work:** The DfE has proposed bringing in national rules to reduce the cost and use of agency social workers in children’s services. This would include capping the rates local authorities pay so that agency staff receive the equivalent of permanent workers doing the same role, once benefits have been taken into account.

- 2.9 **Social worker pay:** The DfE has rejected the care review recommendation for national pay scales for social workers on the grounds that this risked

destabilising the local government pay system for insufficient benefit. But it has said that it wants greater transparency in what councils pay social workers in children’s services and wants to see existing inequalities in pay for particular roles reduced.

- 2.10 **Social worker registration:** The DfE has also rejected a care review proposal for all registered social workers, including managers and academics, to spend 100 hours in direct work each year to remain close to practice. It said “it did not want to risk children facing more changes of practitioner or managers being drawn away from supervision”.
- 2.11 **Family help:** £45m will be allocated for up to 12 ‘families first for children pathfinder’ areas to trial the care review proposal to introduce multidisciplinary family help services, to provide “non-judgmental”, joined-up support for families affected by issues such as domestic abuse or poor mental health. This will bring together existing targeted early help and child in need services. As part of this, the DfE will consult on removing the requirement for social workers to lead child in need cases.
- 2.12 **Child protection:** Child protection lead practitioners, who will have received “advanced specialist training”, will be appointed to lead safeguarding cases in the pathfinder areas, as called for by the care review. As recommended by the care review, they will co-work such cases with family help teams. In addition, the pathfinders will test the national panel’s proposal to set up multi-agency teams consisting of social workers, police officers and health professionals to carry out child protection work. The DfE will also consult on new multi-agency child protection standards as part of a review of Working Together to Safeguard Children in 2023.
- 2.13 **Independent reviewing officers and child protection conference chairs:** The DfE has rejected the care review’s proposal to abolish the independent reviewing officer role. Instead, it has proposed to review and strengthen it. The strategy did not reference the care review’s separate proposal to abolish the child protection conference chair role.
- 2.14 **Involving family networks:** The 12 pathfinders will test using family group decision-making, such as family group conferences, at an early stage to support parents minimise risks to children. In addition, seven areas will test providing family support network packages providing resources to help families care for children and avoid them going into care.
- 2.15 **Kinship care:** A kinship care strategy will be published in 2023 while £9m will be spent on improving training and support for kinship carers. The government will also explore the case for the care review’s recommendations of a financial

allowance and the extension of legal aid for those who become special guardians or responsible for children through child arrangements orders.

- 2.16 **Foster care:** £27m will be spent on a carer recruitment and retention programme over the next two years focused on shortage areas, such as sibling groups, teenagers, unaccompanied children, parent and child placements and children who have suffered complex trauma. The care review called for the recruitment of 9,000 carers over three years. In addition, foster carers will receive an above-inflation rise in minimum allowances to deal with rising costs.
- 2.17 **Commissioning care placements:** The DfE has backed the care review's proposal to transfer responsibility for the commissioning of care placements from individual councils to regional groupings of authorities, regional care co-operatives (RCCs), which will initially be tested in two pathfinder areas before being rolled out. It has also accepted the Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) Study proposal to commission a national body to provide help for authorities/RCCs in forecasting demand and procurement. It said these measures would address the insufficiency of placements for children in care, improve outcomes and tackle the excess profit-making identified by the CMA among the largest providers.
- 2.18 **Financial oversight of providers:** A financial oversight regime will be introduced for the largest children's home providers and independent fostering agencies (IFAs), similar to that for adult social care, to reduce the risks of providers exiting the market suddenly.
- 2.19 **Relationships for children in care and care leavers:** £30m will be spent on family finding, befriending and mentoring programmes for looked-after children and care leavers, to help them find and maintain relationships, as the care review recommended.
- 2.20 **Support for care leavers:** The suggested grant made available to children leaving care will increase from £2,000 to £3,000, while the bursary for those undertaking apprenticeships will rise from £1,000 to £3,000, broadly in line with care review recommendations.
- 2.21 **Care experience:** The DfE has rejected the care review's call for care experience to become a protected characteristic under equality law, which would have required public bodies to tackle inequalities facing those with care experience and prohibit businesses and employers from discriminating against them. The department said it had heard significant concerns that self-declaration of care experience would increase stigma and that other measures in the strategy – including extending corporate parenting requirements to bodies other than local authorities – would have more impact.

- 2.22 **National standards and outcomes:** The DfE will consult on a children’s social care national framework, as proposed by the review, setting expected outcomes for children and families that should be achieved by all local authorities. The proposed outcomes would be for children and families to stay together and get the support they need, for children to be supported by their family network and to be safe in and out of home and for children in care and care leavers to have stable, loving homes. These will be underpinned by two “enablers”: that the workforce is equipped and effective and leaders drive conditions for effective practice. Ofsted inspections will be aligned to the national framework.
- 2.23 There is much to welcome in the Government’s children’s social care reform strategy, and we broadly support the 6 pillars and associated activities. A focus on earlier help, support that builds on the strengths within a child’s wider family network, and greater ambition for our children in care and care leavers are all areas where we can make an enormous difference. We are also pleased to see the consultation on children’s social work agencies. While there is a place for agency social work, too often we see a high churn of agency workers leading to poorer outcomes for children. That being said, the new strategy is limited in scope and appears to commit too little investment to implement a wholesale overhaul of the sector (as suggested in the MacAlister Review). The reforms also appear unlikely to reduce sustained current levels of demand for children’s home placements or properly address the severe undersupply of these placements, particularly in the short term. In addition, many of the planned reforms will also be slow to implement, beginning with long consultation processes and pilot schemes which will not help address the immediate pressures faced within the system in relation to demand, complexity, workforce and cost.
- 2.24 The strategy commits £200 million in additional funding to support children’s social care. Any additional investment is of course welcome and will be vital to implement reforms. However, LGA analysis prior to high levels of inflation indicates an existing shortfall of £1.6 billion per year simply to maintain current service levels. The Care Review recommended an additional investment of at least £2.6 billion over four years, prior to the impact of inflation, to improve the system to better meet children’s needs. And despite increasing their budgets by £708 million in 2020/21, councils still overspent their budgets by £800 million that year, indicating the scale of pressure on the system, across the country.
- 2.25 Although the strategy seemingly accepts the recommendations of the CMA’s market study, it is not particularly bold in its attempts to address the demand source for children’s services through well-funded early intervention schemes,

nor does it outline plans to increase supply of much-needed children's home placements. The new strategy rejects the policy direction taken in Wales and Scotland of removing profit from children's home provision, as well as the suggestion made in the MacAlister Review of a windfall tax on large providers. The establishment of a financial oversight regime (which is likely to be similar to that which exists in adult social care as part of CQC regulation) is aimed at ensuring that financial failure of providers does not negatively impact on the lives of children, and as in the case of the CQC, is not likely to represent a threat to profit-making by private providers. The CMA itself noted in its market study that it is cheaper for local authorities to commission children's home placements from the independent sector than to develop their own. Although a large part of the document is devoted to the aim of improving early intervention services for children, only £45m in funding has been committed for this (for an initial 12 pilot areas), with very little being allocated elsewhere. This means that children living in the vast majority of the country will not benefit from the additional funding that is desperately needed and the level of investment is unlikely to significantly decrease the number of children becoming looked after and requiring residential home placements. This is of concern for the service, given the significant increase in the cost of external placements.

- 2.26 One key commitment from the strategy that may impact the commissioning of placements is the establishment of Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs). These regional bodies aim to help commissioners of placements gain oversight and control of their local market and bring down placement costs by pooling resources and sharing information to better predict need and reduce the number of spot purchased placements. Implementation of RCCs is likely to be slow, with the initial pilot scheme set to cover two areas whilst a parallel consultation with stakeholders is held to define the scope and role of these bodies. The Local Government Association has also expressed concern that RCCs may represent another layer of bureaucracy and undermine localised, personalised interactions with looked after children. Wider regional commissioning groups may also clash with the government's goal of reducing placements that are at a long distance from the child's home. RCCs are unlikely to gain control of the market unless the root causes of demand for looked after children's residential placements, such as deprivation and family breakdown, are addressed and properly funded solutions are implemented. Recent years have seen a fall in government funding of early intervention and family support, whilst expenditure on statutory care services for looked after children has increased significantly. The root cause of the prevalence of long-distance placements is an undersupply of home capacity across local authorities in the region, and although regional resource pooling and information sharing may go

some way to reducing the number of out of area placements, it seems unlikely that it will be capable of fully addressing the underlying trends of sustained demand paired and a lack of local provision.

- 2.27 We would have liked to see more focus on some of those issues that lead to more children and families needing support from children’s social care, including financial deprivation and access to children’s mental health support. We agree with the assertion of the Care Review that without addressing issues such as these that are outside the remit of children’s social care, “reforms to children’s social care risk treating the symptoms and not the cause”.
- 2.28 Overall, while it is positive there is now have a clear direction of travel following last year’s reviews, the strategy points to a range of consultations over the coming year and a period of pathfinder and pilot activity. This is important for medium to long-term change; however, most of the changes signalled in this strategy will not deliver results quickly. Inflation and pressures on council budgets will only compound the difficulties facing services, while the impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis is increasing children’s need for support every day.

Schools White Paper

- 2.29 As reported in the last Children’s Services Update presented to Cabinet in October 2022, the Government published the [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#) at the end of March 2022. This White Paper set out proposed reforms to the education system focused on providing an excellent teacher for every child, delivering high standards of curriculum, behaviour and attendance, targeted support for every child that needs it and a stronger and fairer school system. Specifically, the White Paper also set out plans for all state schools in England to be in or moving towards being in multi-academy trusts by 2030 and was followed by a Schools Bill that aimed to legislate for a new system for overseeing and regulating academy trusts.
- 2.30 The Education Secretary has since informed MPs that the Schools Bill “will not progress” in the third session of Parliament, However, ministers "remain committed" to the objectives of the Schools Bill, and “parts of the government’s plan that did not need legislation changes were going to be implemented”.
- 2.31 The Service will be watching carefully as further detail emerges on which parts of the plan will be progressed in the future; however, we do feel there is a missed opportunity to integrate family support and service arrangements for vulnerable children.

SEND Green Paper Response

- 2.32 Following the consultation on [SEND Review: Right support, right place, right time](#) which proposed reforms for a single, national SEND and alternative provision system, the DfE has recently released The SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan which confirms investment in training for thousands of workers so children can get the help they need earlier, alongside thousands of additional specialist school places for those with the greatest needs.
- 2.33 The DfE report that “this plan follows extensive engagement with around 6,000 consultation responses and 175 events, ensuring the new reforms take into account the views of children, young people, parents and carers. The plan sets out a roadmap to transform the SEND and AP system and make it sustainable over the long term.”
- 2.34 Please see below a summary of the key points from the strategy below:
- 2.35 The transformation of the system will be underpinned by new national SEND and AP standards, which aims to give families confidence in what support they should receive and who will provide and pay for it, regardless of where they live.
- 2.36 There will be new guides for professionals to help them provide the right support in line with the national standards but suited to each child's unique experience, setting out for example how to make adjustments to classrooms to help a child remain in mainstream education.
- 2.37 To improve parents' and carers' experiences of accessing support, the plan will cut local bureaucracy by making sure the process for assessing children and young people's needs through Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) is digital-first, quicker and simpler wherever possible.
- 2.38 This package forms part of the government's significant investment into children and young people with SEND and in AP, with investment increasing by more than 50% compared with 2019-20 - to over £10 billion by 2023-24.
- 2.39 There will be expanded training for staff, ranging from up to 5,000 early years special educational needs coordinators to 400 educational psychologists, covering a wide range of educational needs. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will develop an apprenticeship for teachers of sensory impairments.
- 2.40 The changes are also underpinned by a strengthened local authority inspection regime joint between Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission that became effective from January 2023. The Service is currently seeking clarification on

what this means for the inspection timeline; however, we are beginning to work on our inspection readiness.

- 2.41 The SEND and AP system needs a reset to make it work better for all children and families, to strengthen accountabilities and to reduce the insurmountable costs that threaten the financial sustainability of local authorities. Improving the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND is a joint endeavour and so we welcome the strengthened role and commitments of health partners as outlined and more consistent offers of support for children and young people who need it. However, the plan must go much further and faster in a number of areas. While the response is largely focused on children in school, there is more we must do to re-set the system so it has a sharp focus on outcomes, not just for children today but also for the adults they will become in the future.
- 2.42 The additional funding being made available to support the proposals is welcome, but with high needs budget deficits rising there is still not enough money in the system to meet the level of need being seen. The costs associated with the current SEND system are significant and this this must be addressed.

Spring Budget 2023

- 2.43 One of the greatest opportunities to make a tangible difference to a child's life is when they are very young and the recent Budget announcement provides some welcomed extra funding to support childcare providers.
- 2.44 Significant reforms to the childcare system will result in an extension to those eligible for free childcare. By September 2025, 30 hours of free childcare will be available for every child over the age of 9 months with working parents. This will be introduced in phases, with 15 hours of free childcare for working parents of 2-year-olds coming into effect in April 2024 and 15 hours of free childcare for working parents of 9 months – 3 years old in September 2024.
- 2.45 This extension in free hours will be very supportive for working parents as it will provide a consistent and substantial package of support which covers the entire period following paternity leave to when their child starts school. The extension of the 30 hours free childcare offer will mean more children and families can benefit from this policy, but government must ensure the hourly funding rate for providers significantly increases so it is closer to the actual costs of delivery. The government has committed to increase the funding by £204 million from this September rising to £288 million next year; however, there are concerns within the early year sector that the measures will not go far enough to address financial pressures facing providers.

- 2.46 The childcare sector, both nationally and locally is facing problems with recruitment of staff at all levels. Maintaining qualified staffing levels within the sector continues to be a priority and in order for the expansion of the free hours to be successful, additional financial support will be required to help the early years sector recruit, and retain, the high-quality workforce it desperately needs.
- 2.47 In addition to the free childcare extension, schools and local authorities will be funded to increase the supply of wraparound care, so that parents of school age children can access flexible childcare between 8am and 6pm – tackling the barriers to working caused by limited availability of wraparound care. In Buckinghamshire, our Early Years team actively support schools to work with the private, voluntary and childminder sector to provide sufficient wraparound care that meets the needs of parents, and we have a number of excellent examples of where successful partnership working within the sector has supported working parents outside school hours. This work will continue, and the team will support schools to strengthen its wraparound offer to parents where there is an identified need.
- 2.48 Whilst some of the proposals lack detail at this early stage, more children having access to high quality, affordable childcare is something the Council welcomes and will give children a better start in life as well as playing a crucial role in levelling up outcomes and closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. The service is awaiting further detail and will explore how this initiative will benefit and align to ‘Opportunity Bucks’.

3. Local Context

- 3.1 The following section gives an overview of the key developments in Buckinghamshire Children’s Services.

Children’s Services Transformation

- 3.2 Since 2020, the Service has experienced an unprecedented increase in demand, with referral and re-referral rates significantly higher than statistical neighbours. which will be contributing to demand pressures. The level of demand experienced at the front door (MASH) continues to remain high and this high volume of work has impacted the timeliness of contact and referral activity. Inconsistencies in the quality of referrals and understanding of threshold across the partnership are also contributing to the demand pressures and the further work is ongoing with our partner agencies to address these areas. Causes of volume are being managed, but this surge has also led

to significant increases in the child protection cohort and changes to the profile of children who become looked after with more adolescents entering care. This is having a significant impact on the directorate's budget.

- 3.3 This increase in demand is mirrored across other areas. Nationally, there has been a 32% increase in children subject to Child Protection Plans, in the 10 years to 2019/20. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care projects an increase in the number of children in care from 80,000 (May 2022) to approximately 100,000 in a decade.
- 3.4 In late 2022, IMPOWER was commissioned to support further analysis of the profile of demand and develop recommendations outlining how the Service could progress the transformational journey to increase financial sustainability through delivering better outcomes at less cost. The findings aligned to the Service's self-evaluation and consolidated what was known around key issues which included:
 - i. Opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of support provided by improving collaboration through better sharing of information and increased system-wide multi-disciplinary ways of working.
 - ii. Opportunity to target need variation through locality specific services and community offers.
 - iii. Opportunity to reduce the numbers of children and families supported through statutory services by promoting a focus on "family first".
 - iv. Reflection of the dominant "social care" culture with partners driving an increase in demand in statutory services through a very high number of unsuitable referrals. There was clear evidence to demonstrate that a risk averse culture at the front door is a core driver of demand and that this should be addressed through implementation of 'early help first' thinking during triage of cases to decrease the number of children and families escalating to unnecessary levels.
 - v. The need to rebalance from process and performance to longer term demand management with system-wide support that can reduce avoidable demand by focusing on the most prevalent presenting needs.
 - vi. Services need to be targeted at both the most prevalent needs and towards families most at risk of their needs escalating into requiring a more intensive social care intervention.
- 3.5 On the horizon there are a number of significant national policy changes (as mentioned in section 2) that have enabled the service to consider the way in which both social care and education services are designed and delivered to

the children and young people of Buckinghamshire. The proposed changes to the way in which the Service operates are in line with national policy direction and are based on ensuring that children receive a consistent, purposeful and child centred approach wherever they are on their journey of need from early help through to being in care. The following key principles have already been agreed and will inform the new delivery model and address some of the barriers that exist currently:

- i. The new model will be based on multi-disciplinary locality-based working that is closer to the communities, boosting the contribution of partners.
- ii. We will reduce hand off points and minimise assessments for families and enable the system to respond to changing risks.
- iii. There will be alignment between services and seamless transition at all points of the child's journey.
- iv. We will introduce and embed a clear practice model and methodology that is all about nurturing relationships with children and families.
- v. We will ensure that the most trusted professional and lead professional is working with the child and family.
- vi. A workforce development strategy will be developed to support the continuous professional development of staff.
- vii. A menu of evidenced based interventions will be available.
- viii. We will work to mature and improve the children's system across the county.

3.6 In addition, the current structures with the Service have led to significant issues with recruitment and retention in certain teams, particularly within Help and Protection, where staff have carried caseloads that are higher than we would like, for a significant period. Across these teams, the high caseloads continue to contribute to over-reliance on a high-cost agency workforce and the teams have struggled to achieve the stability necessary to deliver high quality support for children and families. Our social work qualified agency rate across the service is currently 26%; however, is higher in our front line child protection teams. Mitigating activity, including the introduction of the Social Work Academy, has supported the stabilisation of the service and there is clear evidence that for some teams, such as Children with Disabilities, this has been impactful with the team now benefitting from a skilled, predominantly permanent workforce. However, for Assessment and Help and Protection, the benefits have not been fully realised due to high demand for services,

complexity of work and pressured caseloads. That being said, results from our most recent workforce survey data shows that:

- 84% feel motivated to do my best
- 82% happy working at the BC
- 88% positive working relationship
- 88% trusted and enabled to do my job

- 3.7 Many Local Authorities have already moved to create multi-disciplinary locality-based services as this is considered to be best practice within the field of Children's Services with several good and outstanding Ofsted rated Local Authorities (for example, Hampshire) having already adopted their own version of this model. The move away from process-led referral pathways has been endorsed by the Government who is intending to pilot this new approach with a select number of local authorities in the coming months. Moving to the locality-based model will support the Service's expression of interest in participating in the pilot.
- 3.8 Without a move to a more streamlined model, which prioritises the development of supportive and enabling relationships between families and professionals, the service will struggle to improve practice further and may not progress beyond the 'requires improvement to be good' Ofsted judgement. In addition, our ability to secure a permanent and stable workforce will remain limited. The move to a locality-based model of delivery also presents the opportunity to rebalance the skills and knowledge of the workforce equitably to ensure children and young people receive the right support from appropriately qualified practitioners that meets their needs.
- 3.9 The move to a locality-based model will also support the service to address the financial pressures and to deliver services within the financial envelope of medium-term financial plan (MTFP).
- 3.10 A Children's Transformation Board will be established that will support the implementation of the inter-linked workstreams for the re-design of the delivery model across Children's Services. The Transformation Board will provide the strategic input and oversight to ensure that the changes planned are implemented as set out in the individual plans.
- 3.11 The Board will make evidenced based decisions whilst ensuring that there is creativity and innovation during the delivery of the programme and the robust tracking of milestones and outcomes. The oversight will include monitoring of the transformation programme and the way we work to ensure that we use our human and financial resources wisely on those things that work best for children and families. The transformation programme will be aligned to

delivering the priorities and efficiencies identified within the medium-term financial plan and report into the Council’s Better Buckinghamshire Board.

Demand levels

3.12 Demand levels across Children’s Services remains higher than pre-pandemic levels; however, despite an increase in contacts during the last 6 months, the number of children and families that are open to children’s social care has reduced slightly compared to the previous 6 months. The number of children supported by our Family Support Service continues to rise and does the number of children with an Education, Health and Care Plan.

	Apr 2022 – Sept 2022	Oct 2022 – Mar 2023
Contacts	12,895	13,686
Referrals	7,363	4,721
Section 47 enquires	1,458	1,393
Children subject to a child in need plan	1,170*	990*
Children subject to a child protection plan	630*	541*
Looked after Children	498*	509*
Children open to the Family Support Service (Council Early Help Team)	831*	1,045*
Children with an Education, Health and Care Plan	5,698*	6,034*

*as at 31 March 2023

Ofsted Focused Visit

3.13 In October 2022, in line with the inspection of local authority children’s services (ILACS) framework, Ofsted conducted a Focused Visit that looked at our services and support offered to care leavers. Whilst this was not a graded inspection, Ofsted has now published their findings from this visit. The full report can be accessed [here](#); however, please see the key headlines below:

- i. 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.
- ii. 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.
- iii. Many visits are regular, proportionate and carefully planned, while others lack purpose or focus only on the current pressing issue for the care leaver.
- iv. 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.
- v. While care leaver participation has been strengthened in Buckinghamshire, their voices at corporate parenting panel are inconsistent.
- vi. Leaders in Buckinghamshire have an understanding of the strengths of the service, the areas for development and the future challenges.
- vii. Pathway plans are written confidently and warmly with, and to, the care leavers. 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.
- viii. Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation where they feel safe and which meets their need
- ix. Most care leavers have access to universal health services and, when needed, are supported by their PAs to attend key health appointments.
- x. 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.
- xi. 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.

- xii. 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.
- xiii. 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.
- xiv. The revised care leaver offer is clear and accessible and includes an aspirational emphasis on education. 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.'

3.14 Inspectors also identified the following areas of practice that need to improve:

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

3.15 Of course, there is always more to do and the Service we will remain focused on progressing Ofsted recommendations as well as further improving the service in our drive towards delivering the council's ambition to provide consistently good services for Buckinghamshire's children and young people.

Youth Offending Service Inspection

3.16 In January 2023, HM Inspectorate of Probation published their findings following an inspection of [Youth Offending Services \(YOS\) in Buckinghamshire](#).

3.17 Overall, Buckinghamshire YOS was rated as 'Good'. As part of the inspection, inspectors also reviewed the quality of resettlement policy and provision, which was separately rated as 'Outstanding'. This is a very significant achievement and the outcome is testament to the hard work, dedication and

skill of our colleagues within the YOS as well as across the Council and partner agencies.

3.18 A summary of the key findings from the report can be found below:

- i. The governance and leadership of this service is strong.
- ii. The youth justice plan has been developed with input from board members and is based on detailed understanding of the profiles of children and their needs.
- iii. Board arrangements are effective, and mechanisms are in place to oversee the delivery of the strategy.
- iv. Comprehensive data reports about the profile of children, as well as YOS performance enable the board and management team to oversee service delivery.
- v. We were pleased to see the focus on addressing ethnic disproportionality being driven at board level.
- vi. Children have access to a range of services and interventions that meet a spectrum of needs and they are supported to access these.
- vii. The positive feedback we received from children confirms that they are getting the support and help they need.
- viii. A skilled, stable, highly motivated, staff team are supported by a competent management team that promotes a culture of learning and development.
- ix. There are excellent training and development opportunities and a strong connection between operational delivery and strategic priorities.
- x. All aspects of post-court work are excellent.
- xi. Case managers take a holistic approach to their work. They balance children's desistance, and safety and wellbeing needs, with an equal focus on protecting the public where a risk of harm has been identified.
- xii. The consistent quality of statutory work was impressive. However, the services delivered to children who receive out-of-court disposals is not of the same quality as that received by children on court orders.
- xiii. Assessment of children's own safety and wellbeing and planning to manage and reduce the risk of harm they may present to others require improvement.
- xiv. Information sharing and joint work with social care is strong; however, further work is needed to ensure information within out of court disposal assessments consistently reflects social care input.

- xv. Leaders also need to better understand the reintegration rates for children who are not in mainstream education to make sure every child has the best possible education placement.
- 3.19 As a result of our inspection findings, the following recommendations were made.
- i. Monitor the reintegration rates of YOS children into mainstream education to make sure that children return to full-time mainstream education in every case where this is appropriate.
 - ii. Ensure information within out of court disposal assessments consistently reflects social care input and that the roles and responsibilities for each service area are clearly identified within a children's plans.
 - iii. Improve the quality of assessment and planning for out-of-court disposal work to focus on the safety and wellbeing of children and the management of risk of harm to others.
 - iv. Review the out-of-court disposal guidance so that it sets out explicitly how the service intends to meet all diversity, safety and wellbeing needs, and risk of harm to others.
 - v. Strengthen out-of-court disposal assessment processes so that children and families are engaged at the earliest opportunity and ensure their views routinely contribute to disposal decisions
 - vi. Consistently ensure that suitable supervision arrangements for children completing reparation and expand the number of projects available.
 - vii. Seek to proactively diversify the pool of volunteers so that it reflects the children and families the service works with.
- 3.20 An action plan has been developed in response to the above and the Service will of course continue to stay focused on further improving the service and ensuring that our services to vulnerable children and young people are the best that they can be. Progress against the plan will be overseen by the YOS Strategic Partnership Board.

Local Area SEND Inspection

- 3.21 As report previously, in March 2022 Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspected the services provided for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in Buckinghamshire. Following inspection, the Local Authority and the Integrated Care System (formerly the CCG) were jointly responsible for submitting an action plan to

Ofsted, detailing how the following 3 areas of significant weakness would be addressed.

- i. The lack of a cohesive area strategy to identify and meet the needs of those children and young people requiring speech and language, communication and occupational therapy
- ii. Waiting times for assessments on the autism and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder diagnosis pathways and the system-owned plans in place to address this
- iii. Waiting times to see a community paediatrician.

3.22 The action plan, known as a Written Statement of Action (WSOA) was co-produced with key stakeholders across education, health and care services including voluntary and community sector organisations and parent representatives. The WSOA was submitted and approved by Ofsted in August 2022.

3.23 Since finalising the WSOA significant work has been undertaken to establish the infrastructure and monitoring mechanisms. This has included:

- i. The development of detailed operational plans with metrics to capture the specific activity and targets that underpin the published high level WSOA.
- ii. Alignment of activity with the wider SEND improvement programme to prevent duplication, ensure interdependencies are understood, and wider priorities continue to be addressed.
- iii. The development of a dashboard to track Key Performance Indicators and visually evidence progress.
- iv. Allocation of a dedicated project manager to oversee progress and escalate issues where this is insufficient. An additional health funded project support officer role is also in the process of being created.
- v. Establishment of a WSOA governance structure, including a monthly meeting with leaders across education, health, care and parent representatives, as well as a SEND Improvement Board that will scrutinise progress and ensure accountability.
- vi. Wide scale mapping of existing resources and support available across the local area for children and young people with SEND.
- vii. An under 5s Task and Finish Group has been created, with key professionals across the Local Area to identify key improvement actions, prioritising early identification of need, by providing the

right support at the right time for children under 5 regardless of wait times.

- 3.24 As part of ongoing monitoring, our first meeting with the DfE to review progress within the WSoA was held in December 2022. This was an opportunity to provide an update on each action identified within the WSoA, to ensure progress is being achieved at pace and reflect any evidence available, demonstrating a positive impact to the lived experience of children and young people.
- 3.25 Feedback following this meeting was positive; however, progress needs to be maintained within all workstreams to ensure improvement work continues at pace. Progress against the WSoA will continue to be monitored through day-to-day project management, monthly reporting to the WSoA Group, and presentations at the SEND Improvement Board which continues to meet every 6-8 weeks.
- 3.26 To support progress in this area, colleagues across our local area partner organisations, schools and parent/carer representatives all came together at an event held on Tuesday 7 March 2023 to talk about co-production. Co-production is about developing equal working partnerships between children and young people who use services, their families, carers and professionals. The aim of the event was for colleagues to find out more about the benefits of co-production, what is currently happening in Buckinghamshire and how we can all play our part in championing co-production in SEND services. During the day, the Buckinghamshire SEND Co-production Charter was launched. The Charter is the agreed shared principles and way of working for co-production in SEND services across the Buckinghamshire local area. We also launched the Buckinghamshire Co-production Promise, a way for people to sign-up to support the Buckinghamshire Co-production Charter. The event was very well attended with almost 100 colleagues coming together to hear guest speakers share examples and case studies of co-production they have worked on with children and young people with SEND and their families. Attendees also took part in a group workshop activity, the outputs of which will feed into the ongoing SEND improvement work programme. Feedback from attendees about the event was extremely positive. Alongside the event, resources are being developed to help co-production embed across the local area; including a co-production toolkit, aimed at anyone working with children and young people with SEND and/or their families. The toolkit will give a practical understanding of what co-production is, how effective it can be and how to do it well. We plan to continue the co-production conversation during National Co-production Week in July 2023 and on an ongoing basis.

Placements for Looked After Children

- 3.27 Looked After Children (LAC) are the responsibility of the local authority where they ordinarily reside. That local authority has the legal responsibility for placing their LAC in either registered (with Ofsted) foster placements or registered children's homes. Buckinghamshire, like all local authorities, utilises a mixture of internal placements, those run by the Council, and external placements run by private organisations.
- 3.28 Currently, the service has 18 residential beds available across our 4 children's homes, this includes 4 beds within our newly establish parent and baby unit, Sunflower House. The quality of provision across our homes is also extremely high with 2 of them now rated by Ofsted as 'Outstanding'. One of the homes is rated as 'Good' and Sunflower House is yet to be inspected.
- 3.29 Since October 2021, it has become increasingly difficult to find placements, particularly for children aged 12 plus with complex needs. Until recently, this Council had never placed a young person in unregistered provision and it is always our intention not to do this. However, as the availability of placements for the most complex children and young people became virtually non-existent, this has led the Council and all other local authorities in the country to be faced with using provision that is not Ofsted registered for some under 16-year-olds. At the time the report was written, there were 6 young people in unregulated placements. All of whom have carefully planned arrangements that are monitored and agreed by the Service Director. Once the child is placed, the allocated social worker will visit weekly and our commissioners will undertake, within 4 weeks, an unannounced visit where they will speak to the child, the manager and check paperwork such as child's records, staffing rotas and staff DBS records. In addition, the service is currently developing, with legal colleagues a set of practice standards for children and young people in such placements. Where we have young people in unregistered provision, staff in children's placements, commissioning, allocated social workers and senior officers work relentlessly to identify alternative registered provision. This includes encouraging the unregistered provider to register with Ofsted and find alternative solutions that cost less and will be safe for the individual young person.
- 3.30 The solutions to the complex scenario of a young person with high needs, difficult behaviours and an unregistered provision take a considerable time to create and manufacture. One potential solution for some of the young people involved is for satellite homes to be created that are linked to our own registered children's homes. This is something that the service is actively exploring. In addition, we are developing a Placement Sufficiency Strategy that accurately reflects the current position and clearly articulates the service's

plans to increase the availability of provision for our children and young people that meet their needs and provides them with a safe place to live and thrive within Buckinghamshire.

- 3.31 Buckinghamshire Council has now, along with all other local authorities, been mandated to take Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) when they are referred via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). In addition, the Council is also now required to continue to receive referrals until it reaches 0.10% of the child (0-18) population (128 individuals for Buckinghamshire) compared to the previous ask of 0.07%, 89 individuals for Buckinghamshire. At the time of writing, the Service supports 73 UASC, an increase from 48 in September 2022.
- 3.32 These decisions by central government are having a significant impact directly and indirectly on the Council's budgets. The direct impacts are on placement costs and on subsistence payments. Indirectly, the impact on placement availability for all children has and continues to decrease supply, hence why this Council as well as all other local authorities in the country are having to use unregulated provision.
- 3.33 A number of commissioning actions are underway to procure increased provision for care leavers including UASC. This includes block purchasing 'semi-independent' provision increase the supply of placements at a lower price. The Service will also continue to work with colleagues from Housing and our Housing Associations to ensure care leavers access their own tenancies in a timely and cost-effective way.

Corporate Parenting

- 3.34 As mentioned above, when a child comes into care, the council becomes their Corporate Parent. As Corporate Parents it is our collective responsibility to provide the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by us. Looking after and protecting children and young people is one of the most important jobs that councils do and when a child, for whatever reason, cannot safely stay at home, it is up to us as the local authority to step in and give them the care, support and stability that they deserve.
- 3.35 Our Corporate Parenting Panel supports the council to ensure that it is fulfilling its duties towards those children looked after corporately. It also oversees the services provided to children and young people in care. The Panel consists of a cross party group of elected Members supported by council officers as well as representatives from partner agencies responsible for aspects of working with children in care and care leavers. Children in care and care leavers engage in the Panel also.

- 3.36 During the last year, the panel has focused on the following areas:
- i. To ensure a focused approach to identifying and addressing issues relating to the health, both mental and physical of young people in the care of the local authority.
 - ii. To ensure a focused approach to identifying and addressing issues relating to housing and care leavers.
 - iii. To ensure a focused approach to identifying and addressing issues relating to education, employment and training.
- 3.37 Further updates on the progress made against the above priorities will be shared during the next Cabinet update.

Peer review

- 3.38 Buckinghamshire is part of the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP), which is a membership group of all single/upper-tier local authorities in the South East that aims to:
- Improve outcomes for children and young people across the South East.
 - Establish a culture of honest and constructive dialogue and challenge within and between authorities.
 - Demonstrate the capacity and capability of the sector to achieve a coherent and consistent self-improving system.
- 3.39 As part of the programme, local authorities routinely take part in a range of improvement activities and on 10 February 2023, the Service's senior leadership team participated in the peer challenge process, with Southampton and Slough, facilitated by a member of the SESLIP team. Feedback on the Service included:
- i. Strong leadership team that knows the service well
 - ii. Clear priorities and focus in order to improve the service.
 - iii. Progress evident since the full inspection and peer review last year.
- 3.40 The Service was very pleased with this feedback and will continue to utilise the learning from the sector led programme of support to assist the improvement journey in Buckinghamshire.

Youth Voice Bucks

- 3.41 On Thursday 23 February 2023, the first ever Bucks Youth Summit took place at the Waterside Theatre in Aylesbury. The event was planned and hosted by the young people in our county-wide Youth Forum, Youth Voice. The event invited students from schools across the county to share their voice on the biggest issues and areas of interest for young people in Buckinghamshire today. The event also acted as the launch of the Youth Participation Strategy for young people.
- 3.42 142 students from 16 schools attended and spoke about a number of key themes that matter to them, ranging from mental health, a youth-led conversation on sexual violence and access for young people in rural communities
- 3.43 The event was youth-led, exciting, lively, and empowering for the young people that took part, and the feedback has been incredible. The outputs of each conversation are being collated by facilitators and workstreams are launching to ensure action is taken in response to the young people's feedback. These workstreams will be monitored by the Youth Voice forum and young attendees will be kept updated on progress via email and the [YouthVoiceBucks website](#). Due to the event's huge success, Youth Voice Bucks and the Youth Voice forum plan to make this an annual event! The next Youth Summit will take place on Wednesday 28 February 2024, again at The Waterside Theatre.

4. Other options considered

- 4.1 N/A

5. Legal and financial implications

- 5.1 There are no specific legal or financial implications as a result of agreeing to the recommendations the paper. However, there are significant financial pressures associated with a number of areas detailed within the report, particularly pertinent to the mandated transfer scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, demand pressures faced across the Service and the reliance on agency staff due to the significant social worker recruitment challenges.

6. Corporate implications

- 6.1 Similar to above, there are no specific corporate implications as a result of agreeing to the recommendations the paper; however, changes made as part

of the Transformation Plan no doubt require additional support from corporate support services such as HR and Finance.

7. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

7.1 N/A

8. Communication, engagement & further consultation

8.1 N/A

9. Next steps and review

9.1 The next update will be provided to Cabinet in Autumn 2023.

10. Background papers

10.1 N/A

11. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by email [democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk]