



Buckinghamshire County Council

Children's Social Care & Learning  
Select Committee

# **Improving Children's Social Care Inquiry**

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## **The Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee**

The Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee is appointed by Buckinghamshire County Council to carry out the local authority scrutiny functions for all policies and services relating to these areas.

### **Membership of the Education, Skills & Children's Services Select Committee which carried out the review:<sup>1</sup>**

Mrs M Aston  
Mr J Chilver  
Mr D Dhillon (VC)  
Mr P Gomm  
Mr P Irwin  
Mrs V Letheren (C)  
Mrs W Mallen  
Mr M Shaw  
Mr R Stuchbury  
Mr D Watson  
Ms K Wood

### **Co-opted Members**

Mr D Babb, Church of England Representative  
Mr M Moore, Roman Catholic Church  
Ms M Nowers, Primary School Sector

### **Powers**

The Committee is one of the Buckinghamshire County Council Select Committees, the powers of which are set out in Buckinghamshire County Council Constitution. This is available at [www.buckscc.gov.uk/constitution](http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/constitution)

### **Publications**

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by Buckinghamshire County Council by Order of the Committee. All publications of the Committee are on the Internet at [www.buckscc.gov.uk/scrutiny](http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/scrutiny)

### **Committee support staff**

The committee is supported by the Member Services team. The current Committee Adviser is Reece Bowman.

### **Contacts**

The telephone number for general enquiries is 01296 382615. Email [democracy@buckscc.gov.uk](mailto:democracy@buckscc.gov.uk)

Further information on the work of select committees can be found online at

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<sup>1</sup> The Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee now undertakes the role of the ESC Select Committee



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## Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is:

- To provide the public and stakeholders with a record of our scrutiny activity between Sept 2014 -March 2015 in light of the [Ofsted report into children's social care and the Safeguarding Children Board](#).
- To demonstrate our work to date and set out how we will be fulfilling our role in holding decision-makers to account for the improvements in Children's Services.

2. The Committee has focussed extensively on the improvement programme instigated by Children's Services in the wake of last year's Ofsted inspection, which resulted in an 'inadequate' rating. An aspect of that work was the setting up of an Inquiry into the subject, which concentrated our efforts and enabled us to make a more in-depth analysis of the issues, particularly around social work and the shortage of in-house carers and concern about high expenditure on external placements in the fostering service.

3. This report summarises the findings of the work undertaken in the Inquiry group. Our next step has been to bring all of the scrutiny work of the improvement programme back onto the agenda of the full Select Committee. This is appropriate at this stage as we have completed the Inquiry group's 'deep dive' into the issues and we are ready to present our findings in the sections to follow in this report.

4. The work undertaken in public by the Select Committee is a matter of public record, with webcasts of all of the meetings available at: <http://www.buckscc.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

We have chosen not to make any recommendations to Cabinet in this report. The reason for this is that we have feed in and contributed to the improvement journey throughout this time period. We have done this in 3 main ways:

- a) Questioning and commenting on issues at public sessions of the Select Committee with decision-makers such as the Cabinet Member, Leader and Chief Executive.
- b) Directly to Cabinet as a whole. For example, in our letter to Cabinet in Nov 2014 where we commented on the draft improvement plan and improvements to the draft.
- c) Via informal discussions with senior Member and partners to influence and engage in shaping improvements.

The issue of child safeguarding is of such central importance to the Council that we felt it would be more constructive to feed in directly as the Improvement Plan developed which we have done, and



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will continue to do so through mainstreaming this issue as a core part of the Select Committee's work in the year ahead.

### **Background Context**

5. Children's services throughout England are overseen by a web of governance and accountability arrangements which are in large part defined by central government. Whilst each area will implement the arrangements differently, at a fundamental level they are based on the same template as imposed through various statutory requirements. It is important for the CSCL Select Committee to have a clear understanding of where accountability and responsibility for improvement resides, so it is able to focus its efforts in the most appropriate way.

6. The Council Leader and Chief Executive hold ultimate accountability for the County Council's children's services, with the Lead Member (LMCS) and Director of Children's Services (DCS) having specified roles under Sections 18(7) (Director of Children's Services) and 19(2) (Lead Member for Children's Services) of the Children Act 2004. The statutory guidance states that this provides a 'clear and unambiguous line of political and professional accountability for children's well-being'.<sup>2</sup>

7. The Buckinghamshire County Council Select Committees discharge the statutory duty under Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000 to review and scrutinise the Buckinghamshire County Council Executive (Cabinet). Within the terms of the County Council's Constitution, the Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee holds particular responsibility for scrutiny of the Children's Services and Education & Skills portfolios. Therefore both the DCS and the LMCS fall within the oversight of the Committee.

8. The Chief Executive has a role in appointing, removing and holding to account the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). To that extent it is the Chief Executive that is accountable for the performance of the LSCB. The Director of Children's Services is always a member of the LSCB and the Lead Member is a 'participating observer' at meetings, giving he or she independence to challenge any of the LSCB members as necessary.<sup>3</sup>

9. The role of scrutiny (the CSCL Select Committee in Buckinghamshire) in relation to the Local Safeguarding Children Board is not clearly outlined in the legislation or the statutory guidance. There is a brief mention of the role of the Lead Member for Children's Services (LMCS), which states that the LMCS, 'where appropriate', will be drawn upon by the Chief Executive to hold the independent Chair of the LSCB to account.<sup>4</sup> Therefore it can be safely assumed that in matters relating to the

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<sup>2</sup> [\*Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services\*](#), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11

<sup>4</sup> [\*Working Together to Safeguard Children\*](#) (2015), paragraph 14, p. 70.



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LSCB, the focus of the CSCL Select Committee is the Lead Member for Children’s Services and the Chief Executive.

10. Whilst upper tier authorities (county and unitary councils) play a lead role in the provision of children’s services, it is important to note that they are just one aspect of a whole system which involves grass roots organisations right the way up to statutory partners such as the police and NHS. The engagement of all of these partners is therefore vital to make the systemic improvements required. Some critical aspects of the system are of national significance, most notably the current UK-wide crisis in social worker recruitment and retention; this, coupled with the growth in demand for social care services, creates an acute issue of both supply and demand that requires urgent and concerted attention from both central and local government.

### **Overview of Scrutiny Activity (Sept 2014 to March 2015)**

11. The Committee have held 8 dedicated evidence sessions and have attended many more meetings as observers; a schedule of meetings is at Appendix A Throughout this phase of our work we have engaged with a wide-range of stakeholders including:

- Leader of the Council
- Chief Executive
- Cabinet Member for Children’s Services
- Cabinet Member for Education & Skills
- Chairman of the Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board
- Director of Children’s Services
- Service Director – Child & Family Services
- Head of Children’s Care Management
- Interim Head of Children’s Care Services
- Detective Chief Inspector - Protecting Vulnerable People, Buckinghamshire
- Cllr David Simmonds, Cabinet Member for Education and Children’s Services, Hillingdon Borough Council and Chairman of the Local Government Association’s Children and Young People’s Board
- Director of Education, Bucks Learning Trust
- Head teachers and Chairmen of Governors of Buckinghamshire Schools
- Foster carers

### **Reflections on Improvement Activity to date**

13. Work undertaken in the Inquiry group was complemented by the monitoring of progress against a selection of the improvement work streams at each of our public meetings of the Select



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Committee. The tasks of the work streams have been mapped against the points made by Ofsted in its report, which has provided a neat and relatively straightforward way of defining what the work streams each have to achieve and is in accordance with suggestions The Committee made in previous correspondence with the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services.

14. Structuring the work in this way is effective from a planning point of view and from the point of view of meeting the points raised by Ofsted; whether it will necessarily result in better outcomes for children remains to be seen. A key part of our new phase of scrutiny has been to assign members of the Select Committee to sit as observers on each of the Improvement Programme work streams; this is beneficial in two ways:

a) Firstly, we can keep the people we hold to account focussed on outcomes. As stated, the Committee believe that mapping the objectives of each of the work streams directly across to the points raised by Ofsted makes sense in many respects, but there is a slight risk that this may detract from a focus on outcomes for children. We can— correctly - only observe at meetings of the work streams, but we can reinforce this point with decision makers at meetings of the full Select Committee.

b) Secondly, as scrutiny members we will be better informed of what is going on ‘on the ground’, with practitioners on the work streams, to achieve the necessary improvements. This is an excellent complement to the strategic overview that we get from service directors and partners at our public meetings of the Select Committee.

Key finding 1: The improvement work should remain outcome focussed by building the involvement of service users into the programme, where possible, using them to suggest changes and ‘reality check’ any perceived improvements. Our meeting with three current foster carers was particularly useful.

15. Allowing Select Committee members to attend the work stream meetings of the Improvement Board is a welcome development that will enhance our ability to scrutinise and review the improvement journey. However, we were surprised the Select Committee, or even just the Chairman, was not permitted to observe the meetings of the Improvement Board itself.

16. This seems illogical as the Board receives reports which are available to the Select Committee: the monthly progress report to the Board is presented to the Select Committee and the aforementioned observers from the Select Committee have access to the highlight reports from the work streams that each of them attend.

17. The majority of the material under discussion at the Improvement Board is available to the Select Committee and its members, so it seems inconsistent to prevent members of the Committee from attending to observe.



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18. We will be requesting a meeting with the new Chairman and will be formally inviting him to attend the next meeting of the Select Committee.

19. Several key documents in relation to the improvement programme have been released since the beginning of the year, including the finalised Bucks Safeguarding Children Board Improvement Plan and the findings of the consultancy appointed by the Secretary of State to assess progress up until that point. The latter report was clearly of major significance in several respects, including the verdict that the council should remain in control of its own improvement programme and that an independent chair should be appointed to the Improvement Board.

20. Such findings are of direct concern to elected members of the Council, particularly to those sat on the Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee. Therefore there should be an assumption of disclosure to elected members of all such key documents, as soon as is practicable, in order to allow them to properly discharge their statutory roles and responsibilities. Documents should only be withheld by exception.

21. We questioned the Chief Executive on this point in a public meeting of the Select Committee following the unplanned release to head teachers of a significant report, prior to its release to elected members. This left Select Committee Members uninformed and we have requested that this should not happen again. We received assurances from the Chief Executive that this would not happen again.

Key finding 2: Members of the Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee should be included in the distribution of all key documents relating to the improvement of Children's Services and the Safeguarding Board. If documents are confidential then they should be marked as such to prevent onward distribution or publication into the public domain.

22. We now present more specific findings that emerged during our Inquiry; these are the issues that appeared to us to be amongst those in greatest need of priority action, both in terms of quality and cost to the authority. Our comments in this report pertain to the fostering service and social work, particularly around practice issues, workforce composition and recruitment and retention.

23. We now present more specific findings that emerged during our Inquiry; these are the issues that appeared to us to be amongst those in greatest need of priority action, both in terms of quality and cost to the authority. Our comments in this report pertain to the fostering service and social work, particularly around practice issues, workforce composition and recruitment and retention.

### **Foster Carers**

24. We commend everybody that chooses to foster in Buckinghamshire. The work of such individuals is valuable in many respects, not least from the point of view of the child for whom they care, but



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also from the point of view of the local authority, which receives better outcomes and value for money from the placement.

25. This became apparent not only from the figures,<sup>5</sup> but also from the testimony we received directly from foster carers themselves during a session we held with them in the autumn. Our reflections on the session include recognition that there has been improvement in the service provided to them by Buckinghamshire County Council, but that there is also much work still to be done.

26. Overall we believe that foster carers should be more highly valued in order to become more effective at recruiting and retaining them. We base this view on the fact that Buckinghamshire County Council needs them, as it is able to accommodate only a remarkably low proportion of its looked after children 'in house', which we find deeply concerning; figures in relation to this given to us for Buckinghamshire and comparable authorities are as follow:

- Buckinghamshire <50%
- Oxfordshire 80%+
- Hertfordshire 90%+
- Milton Keynes 75% +

27. There will be a direct benefit to the county should the recent recruitment campaign for foster carers be successful, as there are significant pressures on the service both in terms of demand for placements and the supply of foster carers. In terms of supply, the following figures were presented to us:

- Less than 15% of carers are from a BME background, which has implications for the placement of some children
- 85% of Buckinghamshire carers are aged 50 or over; 25% are aged 60 plus years old
- There is only one fostering inquiry per 1000 households
- There are only 1.5 foster carers per 1000 households in the county

28. Of the approximately 430-440 children in care in Buckinghamshire, just over 60% are placed in foster care. The choice of placement in most cases is either an 'in-house' (i.e. Bucks CC arranged) or Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) carer. Significantly, from the point of view of cost, more children within Buckinghamshire are placed with IFAs than in neighbouring local authority areas.

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<sup>5</sup> All of the following figures were provided by the service to the Select Committee in a briefing held on 7<sup>th</sup> April



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29. A placement with an IFA costs the authority in the region of £750 - £800 per week, whereas the equivalent in-house placement is approximately £450 per week, although this does not reflect the cost overhead associated with operating an in-house service. However, the case for in-house placements is strong and the efforts made around this are welcomed. Savings realised from increasing the rate of in-house placements should be reinvested in better rates of remuneration for the carers themselves. This would both more accurately reflect the value they add and potentially increase interest in the role.

30. We were pleased to note from the figures supplied that there had been a surge of interest in fostering since the launch of the campaign in September 2014. However, to complement this more should be done to improve the conversion rate from initial enquiry to becoming a foster carer. We were informed that the rates in Buckinghamshire were low relative to national averages, with a 7% conversion rate for in-house carers and a 1%-2% rate for IFAs.

31. We are of the view that the work underway to bring former foster carers back to the role should be of value in increasing the numbers overall, but the potential means of increasing the conversion rate for first applicants should be identified and reviewed as a priority. Carers from within the child's family group should also be encouraged using every appropriate means possible.

32. We noted that the current Head of Children's Care Services is an interim appointment; we are of the view that this, as with other key positions within Children's Services, should have a permanent member of staff in the role.

### **Social Work**

33. Amongst the most significant issues facing children's social care is the shortage of experienced qualified social workers in the marketplace, with demand from potential employers far outstripping supply. The implication of this is that there is a strong incentive for social work professionals to operate as self-employed temporary workers, sourcing work through agencies. This type of working attracts a high premium for the services of the professional to compensate for the lack of non-cash benefits of a permanent role such as paid leave and access to a workplace pension scheme.

34. Whilst many temporary staff members make an outstanding contribution, their cost to the organisation is significant when compared to their permanent equivalent. There is also reason to believe that temporary staff members shift more between employers and therefore have less of a stake in the organisation in which they work. Notice periods for temporary staff members are generally non-existent, meaning that they can have their employment terminated at zero notice; they in turn can leave the organisation at very short notice.

35. A worker leaving at short notice can have a very significant impact. Caseloads and other work have to be handed over to a colleague, who may already be overloaded. This creates the risk that



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something will be missed in the handover, and that a worker receiving the handover who is already at capacity becomes dangerously overstretched. This can then increase workplace stress which leads to heightened sickness absence rates, which compounds the problem and ultimately places children at risk.

36. The Committee was interested to hear the measures being taken to reduce the number of temporary staff. Financial and other incentives (such as the latest smartphones) are being offered to new recruits as a way to attract further interest in a career in social care within Buckinghamshire. These methods may be required to attract talent, but the key risk is that it feeds the already overstimulated market for qualified social workers. Government intervention is required to fully address this issue.

37. A further measure has been to recruit in Romania for social care practitioners willing to come and work in the county. Our questions around this related to the quality of the candidates, any practice differences between Romania and the UK and how these might be surmounted, and how to retain the staff once they were employed by Buckinghamshire County Council. On each line of enquiry we received sufficient assurance around the measure – the language barrier and retention within the employ of Buckinghamshire County Council remain our key outstanding concerns, but otherwise we welcome this initiative.

38. The appointment of Contact and Referral Officers (CAROs) to man the telephones at the ‘front door’ in the First Response Team is a very positive development and – assuming the post is graded at the correct level – should result in properly skilled workers providing more effective triage and demand management. The front door to the whole system is critical to its overall effectiveness and specialised workers are a necessity for it; under no circumstances should the role be undertaken by business support officers that are not in possession of the necessary skills and expertise to make recommendations around thresholds – even supervision by a qualified colleague does not mitigate the risk involved in using unsuitable staff.

39. We are fully in support of the unit model of social care which has been developed in Buckinghamshire. This model should, if functioning correctly, offer high levels of support to busy professionals within the units, providing an effective ‘team around the child’ approach. However, the model should be subject to continuing review, especially given the concerns raised by Ofsted around leadership and management. The numbers of temporary staff also has a direct impact on the effectiveness of the units.

### **Early Help**

40. It is correct to emphasise the importance of early help as a means to both alleviate demand on social care and to prevent the breakdown of families. Therefore we were interested to learn about



the development of the Early Help Panels. However, we understand there are several issues around the implementation of them, including chairmanship of the panels and the proposed frequency of their meetings (alternate weekly for half a day). We are of the view that the frequency is high, and a half day commitment will impact significantly on the workload of those attending. Using independent chairpersons will be expensive, but that is balanced against the need for the chairs of the panels to be at the requisite level of expertise. We therefore endorse the current level of thought being put into how best to implement the panels, but look forward to a speedy decision.

41. We are also keen to understand the pathway to the consideration of a case by a panel. Presumably the first point of contact will remain the First Response Team, which will triage incoming cases before referring them on. The focus of the panels will be the lower levels of need, in which case we need to understand how the panels will fit into the whole pre-social care system including MASH, Family Resilience and others. This should be outlined in a process map as early as possible to avoid creating confusion amongst staff and partners.

### **Next Steps in Scrutiny Activity**

42. The Committee will continue to focus on the Improvement Programme until Children’s Services in Buckinghamshire are performing to an acceptable standard; we will do this by:

- a) Covering the Improvement Programme at each of our meetings, ensuring that the Cabinet Member and senior officers are held to account for progress made.
- b) Receiving all key progress reports arising from the Improvement Programme
- c) Assigning Committee members to observe the Improvement Board work stream meetings – this allows us to be in receipt of the very latest information and insights from the frontline
- d) Commencing an inquiry into the prevention of child sexual exploitation in Buckinghamshire – this is of fundamental importance to some of our most vulnerable residents and is a high priority of children’s services.

43. The Committee has recently secured the support of expert adviser Maurice Emberson, who will help us to ensure that our work is well informed and effectively targeted. We look forward to working with him to drive improvement in children’s services.



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***Schedule of meetings:***

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*Select Committee evidence gathering:*

[7 October 2014](#)  
[14 October 2014](#)  
[4 November 2014](#)  
[19 November 2014](#)  
[9 December 2014](#)  
[27 January 2015](#)  
[10 March 2015](#)  
[7 April 2015](#)

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*Letter from Select Committee submitted to Cabinet:*

- Cabinet's response:*

[20 October 2014](#)

20 October 2014
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*Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board:*

17 March 2015

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*Improving Leadership, Governance & Partnerships  
(Improvement Board work stream 1):*

26 March 2015

28 April 2015

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*Improving the Quality of Social Work Practice  
(Improvement Board work stream 2):*

16 April 2015

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Buckinghamshire County Council  
Select Committee

Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee

## Letter of recommendation from the Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee

**Title:** The Children's Services Improvement Plan

**Date:** 15<sup>th</sup> October 2014

**To:** Mrs Angela MacPherson – Cabinet Member for Children Services

**From:** Valerie Letheren - Chairman of Education Skills and Children's Services Select Committee

### Summary

The Education Skills and Children's Services Select Committee has considered the draft Improvement Plans of the County Council and the Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB). At its meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2014, the Committee decided to put forward the key points outlined below on the Improvement Plans to assist the Cabinet in its consideration of the matter on 20<sup>th</sup> October.

The Committee noted that its previous recommendations to the portfolio holder on improving the cross reference linkages to the Ofsted Inspection report in the Council's Improvement Plan have now been incorporated and thanked the Cabinet Member for accepting this recommendation. The Committee also welcomes the appointment of David Johnston as Managing Director for Children's Social Care and Learning.

The Committee recommends that the Cabinet consider the following issues raised by the Select Committee:

#### Leadership, Governance and Partnerships

1. The Committee requests that the delivery of the project plans arising out of the six work stream activities is monitored regularly, not only by Cabinet, but also through the Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee.



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2. The Committee believes that partnership working is critical to the success of the Improvement Plans and statutory partners all need to be signed up to the BSCB Improvement Plan. The Committee believes that the BSCB Improvement Plan needs to link clearly with other agency plans and should link more clearly with the Children's Services Improvement Plan. The BSCB needs to drive the co-ordination of a single joined-up programme for improvement and make sure that there are not uncoordinated separate plans and implementation.
3. The Committee was disappointed by the lack of specific deliverable targets and more detailed measures in the draft BSCB Improvement Plan. The Committee would like to see greater clarity and more detailed and challenging measures of success, including "SMART" performance indicators/targets in the plan.
4. The Committee was not convinced that the BSCB governance arrangements were robust. The Committee was concerned that delegation to the various subcommittees/working groups may not be sufficient to provide effective partnership working.
5. The Committee believes that strong leadership of the BSCB is critical and in particular, the role of chairman is key to bringing partners together to deliver the improvement plan.

#### Social Work Practice Quality & Recruitment

6. The Committee were concerned that both Implementation Plans, but particularly the BSCB Improvement Plan, do not provide urgent action to ensure a common understanding of case referral thresholds and to make sure these are understood by all partners and used in practice.
7. Recruitment of quality social workers (non-agency) is critical to service improvement; however, the Committee were not convinced that the targets for this are achievable in the timescales stated. The Implementation Plan should provide for how this will be achieved. The Improvement Plan should also provide for analysis of whether the employment packages offered are attractive enough to deliver the recruitment of staff required and of exactly how this will be achieved.
8. The recruitment and retention of experienced staff is particularly important. The Improvement Plan and supporting project plans should include more detail for how the Council will retain experience and target the recruitment of more experienced social workers.
9. The Improvement Plan should show more detailed plans to improve management of existing staff, especially for staff continuity, caseload planning and staff wellbeing and staff sickness absences.
10. The Implementation Plan should provide greater clarity on the quality and monitoring of standards of social work practice.



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### Fostering

11. The Committee would like greater clarity on how targets for increasing in-house foster carers will be achieved and recommends that the clarity on this is provided in the monitoring of the implementation of the Improvement Plan.
12. The Improvement Plans should provide clearer prioritisation of care leavers for the help they receive at 16/18 and transition in adult social care.

### Budget

The portfolio is asking the Cabinet to agree to a further £1.737m for 2014/15 and further one-off and on-going budget forecasts for 2015/15.

13. The Committee recommends that Cabinet considers the extent the newly identified budget investments are deliverable; contingent upon projected savings arising from actions to reduce demand; and that a robust assessment has or will be made on the programme risks.

The Select Committee looks forward to maintaining regular oversight of the Implementation Plans throughout their implementation.

I will be available to answer any questions raised at Cabinet on 20<sup>th</sup> October if required.

Yours faithfully,



**Valerie Letheren**  
**Chairman – Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee**



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