Supporting the emotional health and well-being of children in Buckinghamshire
Executive Summary

The Emotional Health and Wellbeing of our children is a huge priority, here in Buckinghamshire and also nationally. Children and young people need self-esteem, resilience and social skills to succeed in life.

Emotional health and wellbeing means:
‘Having the emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of wellbeing and an underlying belief in our own and others’ worth.’

Health Education Authority, 1998

In terms of emotional wellbeing, children can be more vulnerable at times of change, for example, when starting nursery school, moving from primary to secondary school, going through family life disruption and dealing with serious illness. The Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee decided to review how the emotional wellbeing of two specific groups – young carers and pre-school children – is supported in Buckinghamshire.

Whilst acknowledging that a number of service areas and agencies impact on the support of young carers, this review attempts to highlight the important part that schools can play, in collaboration with support agencies, particularly in identifying young carers. The Committee has made a number of specific recommendations around encouraging schools to provide a supportive environment in order to help these young people to achieve their full potential.

The Committee recognised that there are two key drivers in raising emotional health and wellbeing in pre-school children. These are the Childcare Act 2006, which places a duty on local authorities to provide quality and sufficient childcare places, and Children’s Centres, which provide universal services and have an increasingly important role in signposting vulnerable families to targeted support. There is much development taking place in this field. The report details what the Committee has learned so far and states that this area of work will remain an ongoing priority on the Committee’s work programme. In particular, Members will be keen to ensure that the Children’s Centres are fulfilling their role in ensuring that children have the best start in life.
The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends:

In relation to young carers

I. That schools are encouraged to improve the identification of young carers by providing an environment which supports young carers and encourages disclosure of their caring role by a range of means, including, for example, by
   - displaying a Young Carers notice board,
   - designating a member of staff to act as co-ordinator for all young carer activities and support, and first point of contact for young carers and support agencies,
   - raising awareness sensitively in schools through assemblies, PSHE and SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning).
   (paragraphs 22-29)

II. That schools are encouraged to consider ways to minimise the anxiety of young carers during the school day, for example, by making arrangements to permit them telephone access during school hours in order to maintain contact with sick parents. (paragraph 30)

III. That schools are advised to set up training and awareness-raising of school staff and governors, to encourage
   - early identification of young carers
   - awareness of the needs of young carers
   - confirmation of staff roles and responsibilities
   - access to services available to support young carers (paragraph 32)

IV. That local authority services consider ways to ensure that young carers are involved in any decision-making that may impact on their wellbeing and support. (paragraph 33)

V. That consideration is given to the designation of a named officer within Achievement and Learning to act as a county-wide young carers’ champion within schools.
   (paragraph 39)

In relation to pre-school children

VI. That guidance on developing a range of communication skills in children is made readily accessible for Early Years professionals and teachers.
   (paragraph 45)

VII. That information, support and advice on developing children’s communication skills at all stages is available to parents (paragraph 45)

VIII. That an action plan is produced detailing how the recommendations will be implemented, and brought before the Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee in October 2009.
Introduction

1. The Health Education Authority in 1998 defined emotional wellbeing in the following way:

‘It means having the emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of wellbeing and an underlying belief in our own and others’ worth.’

2. Emotional health and wellbeing is seen to be crucial for every aspect of a child’s life, impacting on health, educational achievement, friendships and future prospects. Early social and emotional problems can affect children’s life chances, however early intervention can prevent the need for remedial treatment later. There are a number of recognised risk and resilience factors which impact on a child’s emotional wellbeing. (Appendix 1)

3. In a recent UNICEF report\(^1\), the UK’s children were assessed as having the worst emotional wellbeing in the developed world. When emotional wellbeing deteriorates unchecked, the result is often the onset of mental health problems. There is also an impact on an individual’s physical health and an impact on communities.\(^2\)

4. Emotional health and wellbeing is crucial to achieving each of the five Every Child Matters outcomes:
   - Be Healthy – i.e. enhance children and young people’s wellbeing, particularly at key transition points in their lives
   - Stay Safe – i.e. children have security, stability and are cared for
   - Enjoy and Achieve – children achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation, are ready for school, and attend and enjoy school
   - Make a Positive Contribution – children develop self-confidence and successfully deal with significant life changes and challenges
   - Achieve Economic Wellbeing – engage in further education, employment or training on leaving school\(^3\)

5. The review, undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Children’s Services, provided an opportunity to explore the provision in place in Buckinghamshire to support the emotional health and wellbeing of vulnerable children and to highlight the importance of this area to schools and families.

Aims of the review

6. Whilst recognising that any young person can become vulnerable as a result of changes in circumstances, the Committee chose to concentrate on two groups – young carers, who are perceived to be a vulnerable, ‘hidden’ group for whom the Local Authority has

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\(^1\) UNICEF 2007 ‘Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well Being in Rich Countries’

\(^2\) NCH Briefing June 2007

\(^3\) Every Child Matters Outcomes Framework, [www.children.gov.uk](http://www.children.gov.uk)
responsibility, and pre-school children, whose life chances are improved by quality childcare and early education.

The review aimed to identify
- the support that is available to young carers in Buckinghamshire
- and the support and opportunities available to ensure that young children are emotionally resilient when they start school.

Methodology

7. The review took place over a period of six months and evidence was obtained from a range of contributors, including officers of the Council, Carers Bucks, a focus group of young carers, schools, parents, Parents as First Teachers and representatives from the Primary Care Trust. A full list of contributors is available on page 13. The Committee carried out a number of visits to schools and Children’s Centres. To get a wider feel for how schools support young carers, school staff were encouraged to complete an online questionnaire. In addition, consultancy expertise was provided to the Committee by a representative from NCH The Children’s Charity. Comparisons with other local authorities were made by examining examples of good practice from our statistical neighbour group. (Appendix 2)

General findings

8. The report will describe the key findings for each of the two groups separately.

Part One - Young Carers

9. In Buckinghamshire, children and young people do well, but those less likely to do so tend to be in vulnerable groups, young carers being one such group. There are a range of strategies in place to support vulnerable groups, including the Preventative and Early Intervention Strategy, the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programmes in primary and secondary schools, the Behaviour and Anti-Bullying Strategies and the Healthy Schools Initiative.

Who are ‘young carers’?

10. The definition of a young carer is ‘a young person (aged 5 – 18) who helps to look after someone in their family who has an illness, disability, physical or mental health problem or a problem with drugs or alcohol’. Carers Bucks

They can be described as an ‘invisible group’ needing
- identification, recognition of their role and early intervention,
- promotion of school attendance and educational attainment,
- promotion of physical, mental health and emotional wellbeing,
- reduced stigmatism and bullying,
- opportunities to take part in out of school activities,
• support at transition points in their lives
• and access to the workplace as they enter adulthood.

Local Context

11. According to the 2001 Census, there are approximately 1029 young carers in Buckinghamshire of whom 528 have been identified by Carers Bucks. Approximately 60% live in areas of deprivation, 40% live in single parent families and 19% are from minority ethnic groups.

12. In Buckinghamshire, support for young carers is offered:
• via Carers Bucks
• through the Healthy Schools programme, which requires the identification of vulnerable groups, including young carers, and assessment of their needs,
• and via the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) (see Appendix 3).

13. However, although these specific services and initiatives can be identified as supporting young carers, the Council encourages all service areas to pay attention to the needs of vulnerable groups.

14. Carers Bucks is commissioned by the County Council to support young carers. This is achieved by providing the young carers with
• a social life with peers in similar situations,
• adults they can trust and talk to outside the family and can act in ‘locus parentis’,
• arrangement of carers’ assessments,
• targeted support for specific needs
• and signposting to other agencies as appropriate.

Health professionals have a crucial role in identifying young carers and Members learned that the main referrers of young carers to Carers Bucks are Health and Social Services.

Impact of caring on the lives of young people

15. The caring responsibilities of these young people vary enormously and can include help with dressing, preparation of meals, involvement in exercises and therapy, administration of medication, gardening, shopping, language translation and giving emotional support.

16. Some of the barriers to successful outcomes include
• the emotional impact of caring not always being understood in Education,
• a lack of parental support, e.g. for homework; and possibly pressure to keep them at home to help around the house
• suspicion of authority,
• little practical support given to families, e.g. help with gardening and household chores, often due to the high threshold to be reached in order that care can be provided by Social Services,
• a lack of opportunities due to few qualifications,
• and a poor social life.

17. Members were told that young carers will have needs at different points along a continuum. Some may need a high level of support and intervention whereas others will be coping with their caring role and need only minimum contact. It is important therefore that a range of services are in place to meet the needs of this group.

18. To gather evidence directly from young carers, Members spoke to a small focus group of young carers, meeting them at one of the regular Young Carers’ Forum meetings. The young people had varied family circumstances, including disabled or sick parents, parents needing more emotional than physical support, and a disabled sibling.

19. The young people spoke openly and articulately about their role as carers and the impact it has on their lives. The varied nature of their circumstances and complex histories brought home to Members the importance of service flexibility to ensure that needs can be met.

20. The impact on the young carers’ emotional health can include low self-esteem because someone else’s needs come first, false maturity because of the responsibilities they take on at an early age, uneven maturation, isolation from their peer group as they may be intolerant of their peers’ behaviour and find it difficult to relate to their peers, and anxiety because of illness of a person they love.

21. However, Members learned that young carers do not view their role in solely negative terms and are often proud of the responsibilities they hold. One young carer considered his early maturity as a positive outcome.

Identification of young carers

22. Although the identification and assessment of young carers is seen to be a multi-agency responsibility, schools are well placed to identify young carers. Members therefore decided to concentrate on best practice in schools and how the school environment can make a difference to the lives of young carers.

23. It is widely acknowledged that outcomes for young carers are improved if early identification can take place. However, Members learned that, for a number of reasons, young carers may not want to be singled out and treated differently and therefore may resist identification. In fact, research estimates that up to 75% of young carers may not be known to their school.5

24. One school informed the committee that it is difficult to detect young carers at school unless there are specific concerns, such as poor progress, attendance and punctuality, or lack of parental contact with the school.

5 The Princess Royal Trust for Carers 2006.
25. Carers Bucks have commented that, in its experience, a school’s responsiveness to young carers often depends on one or two interested individuals who ‘keep the subject alive’. Where some schools are ‘switched on’ to the needs of young carers, others appear to be less proactive. The online questionnaire sent to all schools via the School Bulletin resulted in only 15 responses and 8 of the 15 schools had no identified young carers in their schools.

26. The Committee asked young carers whether their schools were aware of their home situation. One young carer said that she had been very open at school about her caring role. However, she was now at college and she felt she had no one to talk to about home concerns.

27. Another young carer, also now at college, had not informed his school of his responsibilities at home looking after his disabled mother. His reluctance was for several reasons. Apart from not knowing who to go to in his school, and being reluctant to share his personal information with school staff, he wanted to ‘protect’ his younger brothers from being singled out. However, his personal tutor at college is aware of his role and allows extra time for homework.

Supportive Environment

28. Desktop research found that Hampshire County Council is currently participating in the Children’s Society Young Carers Project, to promote the emotional and physical wellbeing of young carers. A model for supporting young carers in schools has been developed and includes a range of free, downloadable learning resources for school staff about young carers, awareness-raising sessions in school, Carers’ Notice boards, giving details of support and community facilities for young carers in the local area, and a Young Carers’ Website.

29. Members consider it important that all primary and secondary schools develop a proactive and anticipatory approach to supporting young carers by providing an environment which supports those who are identified and encourages others to disclose. In addition, it is important that schools provide opportunities for young carers to express their needs and have their views taken into account.

Recommendation 1
That schools are encouraged to improve the identification of young carers by providing an environment which supports young carers and encourages disclosure of their caring role by a range of means, including, for example, by

- displaying a Young Carers notice board,
- designating a member of staff to act as co-ordinator for all young carer activities and support, and first point of contact for young carers and support agencies,
- raising awareness sensitively in schools through assemblies, PSHE and SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning).
Minimising Anxiety

30. Poor attendance at school can be a strong indicator that a young person has caring responsibilities in the home. Pupils may not attend school if they are unwilling to leave their parent alone or the daytime carer is late or has not arrived. They may perhaps need to attend a medical appointment with their parent. Research has shown that having access to a telephone during the day may help young carers to feel less anxious about leaving the person they care for.

Recommendation 2
That schools are encouraged to consider ways to minimise the anxiety of young carers during the school day, for example, by making arrangements to permit them telephone access during school hours in order to maintain contact with sick parents.

31. Where parents are disabled, good practice would be to ensure there are flexible and alternative arrangements, for example, the provision of disabled parking facilities in schools and the opportunity for telephone meetings to discuss their child's progress.

Awareness raising

32. Members were impressed and moved by a powerful DVD, produced by Carers Bucks, featuring young carers and their roles and responsibilities. As a result, some Members of the Committee have shown the DVD at meetings of their school governors, in order to raise awareness.

Recommendation 3
That schools are advised to set up training and awareness-raising of school staff and governors, to encourage
- early identification of young carers
- awareness of the needs of young carers
- confirmation of staff roles and responsibilities
- access to services available to support young carers

Consultation

33. As discussed earlier, there are significant emotional demands on young carers and decisions are often taken out of their hands. Communication with young people is vital and there needs to be the right balance for young people to have a say and be consulted with. Kent County Council has identified the importance of involving young carers in its
Youth Parliament and also of involving young carers in decision making and assessment of the cared-for person.

**Recommendation 4**

*That local authority services consider ways to ensure that young carers are involved in any decision-making that may impact on their wellbeing and support.*

**A multi-agency approach**

34. Members learned that when services are being considered for an adult, account has to be taken of the impact of the provision of a particular service on young carers’ caring responsibilities. It is vital that all relevant services work closely with each other to ensure that support for the whole family is in place. Carers Bucks pointed out that account should be taken of the impact on the young carer if the parent feels unable to engage with the service offered, as the situation might deteriorate. Members recognise that it is vital that any professional offering a service to an adult, with dependent children over five, should be encouraged to think of Young Carers and refer the child if appropriate.

35. The Committee learned of the importance of schools working closely with external agencies to ensure high quality intervention is in place to support vulnerable young people. Examples of good practice in Buckinghamshire schools to encourage this include developing a virtual environment where young people are able to engage with professionals and/or experienced adults and be signposted to relevant organisations, and the setting up of regular multi-agency meetings to provide a forum for agencies to meet and discuss individuals’ needs in the round.

**Transition support**

36. Transferring from one educational establishment to another is seen to be a time of potentially increased emotional stress to all children and particularly those in vulnerable groups, including young carers. Members learned about two excellent support initiatives in place in Buckinghamshire to support transition between primary and secondary school. The Buckinghamshire Pyramid Programme team aims to help vulnerable children of primary school age to fulfil their potential in school and in life by building their self-esteem and resilience, and the Transfer Support Team aims to target vulnerable Year 6 pupils and give them extra support during the transition from primary to secondary school. It is up to schools to invite this team to work with their pupils. Members were told there is no specific monitoring of the number of young carers accessing the service.

37. Members were pleased to hear that 220 children, from 60 schools, were currently benefiting from support from the Transfer Support Team. Profiles of each student, along with suggested strategies, are passed on to the secondary school at transfer. The team has worked hard over the past four years to ensure that secondary schools embrace the service which they ‘inherit’ when primary school children transfer to their schools. They also work hard to improve their links with parents, by supporting those they work with and
also to reach those they do not. In addition, along with the Youth Service and Extended Schools service, they are exploring ways to extend the work through the summer holiday.

38. The team spoke to Members of their concerns for their service, including the sustainability of the project, access to all of the network groups within the local authority, and suggest that this initiative could benefit all children in Buckinghamshire, not just those schools choosing to engage in the programme.

County-wide Champion

39. Within the Commissioning and Business Improvement Division there is a lead officer responsible for commissioning support for young carers. However, Members found it difficult to identify an officer within Achievement and Learning who has overall responsibility for young carers and it is considered that it would be advantageous to have an identified lead professional in this Division as well, to ensure that recommendations regarding the support of young carers in schools are carried forward.

Recommendation 5
That consideration is given to the designation of a named officer within Achievement and Learning to act as a county-wide young carers’ champion within schools

Part Two - Emotional Well-being in the Pre-school Years

40. According to research, quality early learning experiences with teacher input improves outcomes for children. Children in the bottom 20% include those living in deprived areas, those for whom English is not the first language, boys, and those born in August. In Buckinghamshire,

- 60.1% are boys
- 20.6% have Special Educational Needs
- 25.7% have English as an Additional Language
- 51.0% are summer born.

41. Two key drivers impacting on the emotional health and wellbeing of pre-school children are:

- The Childcare Act 2006, which places a duty on local authorities to ensure a sufficiency of childcare places, particularly for working parents, those in training and those with disabled children.
- Children’s Centres, of which there will eventually be 35 in Bucks.

The Childcare Act 2006

42. The statutory duties imposed by the Childcare Act 2006 will have an impact on the emotional health and wellbeing of children, including early education places. This includes the Authority’s duty to ensure there are sufficient childcare places. Members learned that
supply and demand are being mapped to ensure sufficiency – this totals approximately 464 locations in the County. The current early education entitlement for 3 – 4 year olds is 12 ½ hours per week in 5 x 2 ½ hour sessions. This will be increased to 20 flexible hours by 2015 and includes priority provision for working parents, those in training and those with disabled children. Members were concerned to learn that the mapping exercise has indicated a current under-provision of childcare places for children with disabilities, and are pleased to learn that the Authority continues to place priority on working with external partners to ensure that places are available to meet the demand.

Pre-School Strategies

43. The Committee heard of the work being carried out at a local nursery school to identify vulnerable children and to help build their self-esteem. Work with the whole family is a priority and strategies include an open door policy, Adult Learning courses and Sparks (a scheme with Year One parents teaching them how to manage behaviour and support literacy). In addition, each pupil is allocated a key worker who builds a close relationship with pupil and family and visits the family before the child starts school. Observation of pupils, at home and at school, of their appearance and actions, enables development issues to be identified at an early stage.

44. The school places a great deal of importance on its partnership work with other agencies including social workers, health visitors, educational psychologists and speech and language therapists. Parents as First Teachers (PAFT), which works with parents in the home, has been involved with this school in the past but currently does not due to funding constraints.

Communication

45. One of the main issues with new pupils can be communication difficulties. To overcome this, the school has reduced the number of pupils in the nursery class from 26 to 16 giving a ratio of adults to children of 1:6. Nationally, headteachers report increasing numbers of 4 year olds with social skill difficulties, which may lead to challenging behaviour and an impact on educational attainment.

46. The Committee heard of occasions where children, with English as their first language, are starting nursery school with limited language skills. Teachers told the Committee that they would value specific guidance on how a range of communication issues can be supported within the classroom. In addition, guidelines for parents on the standards and skills expected when children start pre-school would be very useful.

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<td>That guidance on developing a range of communication skills in children is made readily accessible for Early Years professionals and teachers.</td>
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<td>That information, support and advice on developing children’s communication skills at all stages is available to parents.</td>
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**Children’s Centres**

47. Members were informed that Children’s Centres are part of a range of services which help children have the best start in life and to enable them to make a positive contribution to society. The Children’s Centres are being developed to fit local need and act as hubs for children and young people throughout the Local Delivery areas. There will eventually be 35 Centres in a variety of sites in Buckinghamshire.

48. Engagement with ‘seldom heard’ families is currently through links with health visitors and school nurses and will in future be through Family Workers and the Children’s Centres. Members learned that health visitors’ opportunities for informal contact with vulnerable families are decreasing, partly because there are fewer post-natal groups for mothers and babies and also because immunization clinics are now carried out by GPs. Members expressed concern at the decrease in this resource and the impact this could have on young children’s health and well-being.

49. Parents As First Teachers (PAFT) work in partnership with health visitors to provide essential support to parents from pre-natal stage to three years. They spoke to the Committee about how their work fits in well with the work of Children’s Centres, for example in their home visits where they give information to parents ‘on their own terms’ and are able to see children in their home environment. This can lead to early identification of development problems. However, they currently have a considerable waiting list for their service.

50. Most Children’s Centres in Buckinghamshire have not been established long enough to assess whether they are succeeding in reaching ‘seldom heard’ families and whether their locations are accessible. Members learned of the importance of every new parent being informed of services available at their local Children’s Centre. Centres are said to work best when they are used by parents as a gateway to further targeted support.\(^6\) By reaching out to all parents, and not labelling it as provision specifically for the most-deprived communities, it is hoped that Children’s Centres may succeed, in the long run, in attracting those families who need most help and support.

Members recognise the importance of Children Centres and will continue to ensure that they remain a priority on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee’s work programme, particularly in terms of how they are helping to promote emotional well-being in young children.

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Overall Conclusions

51. In conclusion, Buckinghamshire County Council regards emotional health and wellbeing as a priority for children and young people and acknowledges the impact it has on achievement and life chances. Much support is in place for all vulnerable children, including young carers, to better their life chances. The Committee has focused mostly on the impact that schools can make in improving the lives of young carers, although it acknowledges that a number of agencies and services need to work closely together to ensure the right support is in place for the whole family.

52. Members of the Committee were considerably impressed with the young carers they met with, who, rather than being negative, spoke in positive terms of their caring roles and their plans and future aspirations. However, Members learned that this level of focus is an exception rather than the rule, and other young carers can be ‘lost’. The difficulties in identifying young carers can leave them particularly vulnerable. Although valuable support is in place to support young carers, more still can be done and the Committee hopes that its recommendations will go some way towards ensuring that this happens.

53. Children’s Centres will be pivotal in ensuring that families have access to appropriate services and agencies and that children who may need extra support are identified as early as possible.

54. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Children’s Services will continue to keep the development of Children’s Centres as a priority on its work programme with particular regard to:

- the role of Children’s Centres and whether they are fulfilling their purpose,
- services offered by Children’s Centres are taken up by those most in need,
- services being accessible to those in rural areas and/or those without transport.
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