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Mr John Macilwraith

Corporate Director for Children's Services
Buckinghamshire Council

Sent by email to: john.macilwraith@buckinghamshire.gov.uk

Dear John

Annual engagement meeting about social care and education, 30 June 2023.

Thank you for meeting with Tom Anthony, Sue Cox and myself to discuss education and social care in Buckinghamshire.

Education

We discussed the decline in the number of early years settings in Buckinghamshire which mirrors the national picture; however, this has not affected the overall sufficiency of early years places across the county. You also ensure that parents are made aware of alternative early years settings, should their local provider be closing. You talked about the work of your early years team to strengthen the take up of early education places, particularly those eligible two year olds through improved partnerships, including with health services. The role of the local authority linked officer for every early years setting continues to provide you with oversight of provision both from a quality and sustainability perspective.

There continue to be some staffing challenges in early years settings, particularly around the recruitment and retention of qualified managers. You are continuing to strengthen training for early years practitioners and are working in partnership with a local college to deliver the early years SENDCO award. Additionally, you are taking steps to ensure that students and apprentices on placement have quality learning experiences as well as offering bursaries to those who are both looking to join or progress within the early years' workforce.

You shared the headline data for schools. Overall outcomes for each key stage remain strong. However, you recognise that the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils in Buckinghamshire and their peers nationally has grown in the early years and the primary

phase. You talked about the challenges associated with pockets of deprivation within areas of relative affluence. Your data analysis shows that outcomes for disadvantaged pupils vary considerably between schools. Typically, you have found that where leadership is strong and there is a culture of inclusion reflected in high-quality provision, pupils do well. You explained some of the challenges faced by rural schools where numbers of disadvantaged pupils are typically low. You are encouraging schools to work together, including through formal federations to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.

Through the council's programme, 'Opportunity Bucks' you have identified ten wards where you will be focusing your resources to improve life chances and outcomes for pupils. You are also continuing to draw on expertise and research findings from the Education Endowment Fund. This work has culminated in a tool kit for all schools to support leaders in narrowing the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils. Additionally, you are focusing on support for literacy, language acquisition, phonics and learning behaviours through the Buckinghamshire Challenge plan.

We were pleased to hear of your work to quality assure registered alternative provision. You also shared with us your support and guidance to help leaders understand and fulfil their responsibilities when commissioning alternative provision. We discussed the information that Ofsted is gathering about alternative provision during inspections. You are continuing to work with schools to improve attendance and are planning to increase the capacity of the local authority's attendance team whilst recognizing the fact that this is a new unfunded burden on the Local Authority. You explained the work you are doing with leaders to help reduce the number of children being electively home educated and to get children back into school as quickly as possible.

You have continued to expand the school improvement team and now have five school improvement partners. Through your 'side by side' model you have been able to strengthen your support for schools, seeing some rise out of categories of concern and others maintain 'good'. You are now completing a termly risk assessment for schools to determine the level of support and intervention you need to provide. We were pleased to hear how you are strengthening this work through the involvement of other teams. The percentage of schools judged to be good or better has dipped slightly during this school year although the percentage of children being educated in good or better schools remains above the national average. You believe that some smaller schools have found the current framework and structure of inspections through deep dives to be challenging. You would welcome further discussion about this.

Post-16 A level performance continues to be very strong, with the bulk of sixth-form provision in grammar schools. The percentage of students taking non-academic qualifications remains relatively low. You talked about the work of the virtual school in working with schools to improve outcomes for children and young people in care. You shared with us the positive work the virtual school staff are doing to ensure that pupils get the examination qualifications they need. We were pleased to hear that 42 care leavers have an offer to start at university this September.

You informed us of Buckinghamshire Business First's proposals to develop short flexible courses in construction and health and social care through the DfE's 'skills bootcamps' programme. You are clear about the need to ensure that these programmes deliver the

intended outcomes. We also briefly discussed internships and you told us about the support in two special schools for internships at DeVere and the NHS. You are seeking to increase capacity at Furze Down School in Winslow, to develop post-16 provision.

We discussed the progress the local authority has made in relation to the written statement of action following the area SEND inspection in March 2022. Although progress is being made, you would like this to be accelerated. You are pleased with the work to strengthen co- production and the involvement of the parent forum and other partners. You now hold bi- monthly meetings with these partners. You explained your work to strengthen early intervention to improve outcomes for young children who have emerging needs. Buckinghamshire, like some other local authorities, is working in a challenging financial context.

You shared with us your concern about the rise in the number of complaints about schools made to Ofsted, this currently stands at 79 this calendar year to June compared to 64 in the whole of the last year. You feel that some complaints are generic and that these should be directed to individual schools' complaints processes. We discussed the ways that complaints are categorised and that not all complaints result in an 11A. We agreed that it would be helpful for Ofsted to provide further clarification of the complaints process and how complaints are sifted alongside the expectation of response to a complaint required by Ofsted. We are happy to set up a future meeting with Jo Hutton from our complaints about schools team to explain more about how Ofsted deals with complaints and our legal responsibilities.

You explained the current challenges of staff recruitment and retention in schools, including for teaching assistant posts. You shared the work that you are doing to support headteachers including a two-year programme for new headteachers. We shared with you the ongoing work and response following the inspection of Caversham Primary School and the current consultation about our complaints processes. Additionally, you asked us to consider the current arrangements regarding local authority attendance at inspection feedback meetings of academy schools, given your statutory responsibility for safeguarding in all schools.

Social Care

Thank you for sharing your self-evaluation. This provides a helpful overview of your own assessment of the services that you provide. The conversation we had gave us further insights and helped us to understand the progress you have made, as well as the areas that remain challenging. It is encouraging that you now have a permanent senior leadership team in place, including a service director for transformation and improvement. This service director has a lead role in driving greater integration across all services for children and families, including liaison with voluntary, community and faith organisations. You explained your plan to create small locality teams that are closer to the communities, boosting the contribution of partners. This is intended to reduce the amount of 'hand offs' for children, as, in these teams, the same practitioner will undertake assessments as well as provide ongoing child in need or child protection support.

You described the contrasts that exist within the authority area. This encompasses areas of affluence as well as some wards which have significantly higher levels of deprivation. You

explained that 'Opportunity Bucks' is your five-themed approach to levelling up in the 10 most disadvantaged wards. You explained how you have been able to respond to a range of pressures, including a significant increase in contacts. This includes direct requests for early help support and requests for information, as well as a high volume of police contacts. Alongside the increase in contacts, there has been a reduction in referrals that meet the threshold for statutory services. A recent review found that your MASH is working well but there is more work to do, including with partner agencies, to further embed a shared understanding of the thresholds for voluntary as opposed to statutory provision. You are bringing training for school designated safeguarding leads in-house, to provide a better level of training and support. You have, when required, successfully moved staff to respond to pressures, for example when there have been high numbers of section 47 enquiries.

You are confident that your 0-25 exploitation hub provides an effective response to children and young people who go missing or are vulnerable to exploitation. You sometimes have to respond to vulnerable children or serious youth violence as a result of children or families having been moved into the authority area. You have stronger links with community safety officers and maintain a close overview of the most vulnerable children. You work hard to ensure that vulnerable children are in education, recognising this as a significant safeguarding factor.

You believe that the support you provide to children in care and care leavers has continued to improve, helped by the relative stability of the workforce. You face the considerable challenge of securing sufficient local suitable placements for children. You have opened your own parent and baby unit, alongside your three children's homes, and have had exploratory discussions with other local authorities to consider jointly commissioning more residential provision. There has been an improved offer of local housing for care leavers. Thirty-six care leavers have been able to access their own local social housing in the last year. The numbers of care leavers who are not in education, employment or training have reduced, but helping them all into meaningful activity remains a challenge. You said that this sometimes reflects the high levels of mental wellbeing and emotional support that care leavers need but struggle to access, once they become 18.

Staff recruitment remains an ongoing challenge, especially to secure staff to complete assessment, child in need and child protection work. About 27% of your staff are agency appointments, although many have been in post for some time, which provides children with stable and consistent support. You work hard to secure a stable workforce, including aiming to recruit additional cohorts of ASYE applicants this year. You have developed a mental wellbeing programme for practitioners. This is highly valued and is helping you to recruit new staff. Your children in care and care leavers services have greater staff stability, providing children with longer term support and relationships. Across the organisation you believe there is more work to do to ensure that regular and impactful management oversight is driving children's progress. As part of your transformation activity, you are also planning to strengthen supervision arrangements and have a plan to introduce weekly group supervision within the locality based teams.

You are proud of the range of quality assurance arrangements that you now have in place. Audits are increasingly embedded across the organisation, and you plan to routinely include the views of children and families in audit activity. You undertake extensive dip sampling as well as audit activity in other parts of system, including the LADO service, as a way of

maintaining a line of sight to front line practice and supporting continuous improvement. Your 'Journal Club' provides an opportunity for practitioners to explore how research can inform practice. You have strong arrangements with the local children's safeguarding partnership. This has helped secure and cascade learning from audits and case reviews. You are ambitious about establishing a coherent and consistent practice methodology in Buckinghamshire and have concrete training plans to support practitioners to embed the approach.

At present you provide support to 67 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, some way short of your 0.1% target of 128. You have created a dedicated team to provide support to these children. You described the pressure this creates to identify suitable placements.

You currently have 10 children in unregistered children's homes, 9 of whom are subject to deprivation of liberty orders. You maintain tight senior management oversight of these children and undertake extensive daily placement searches to try to move them into suitable appropriate registered provision.

Thank you again for making the time to meet with us.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lee Selby", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Lee Selby

Senior His Majesty's Inspector, South East

Please note: This letter is not published by Ofsted and the comments made have not been evaluated as part of an inspection.