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Mr Michael Bracey
Corporate Director – People
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Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, South East

Sent by email to: michael.bracey@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Dear Michael

Annual Conversation - education and social care – 12 March 2018

Thank you for meeting with Janet Fraser, Simon Hughes, Stephen Long and myself to discuss social care and education in Milton Keynes.

You gave a contextual update, noting stability in the council's political complexion. You were pleased to have had the same lead member for two years and a protected budget for children's services in the next financial year. However, you said funding levels will be under pressure in the long term; a concern for you when set against what you feel are higher levels of deprivation than often acknowledged. Among other significant changes, you mentioned rises in the numbers of children living in temporary accommodation, continual growth in the housing sector, and a progressively more ethnically diverse community.

Social care

We were interested to hear that your workforce is stable and your use of agency staff and sickness rates are low. You see this as a key component in developing and improving social work practice in Milton Keynes. You told us that finances are stable, that the local authority has continued to invest in preventative services and that you have made good progress against your post-inspection action plan. Partnerships are strong and the amalgamation of the children's and adult's safeguarding board is helping to refine and refresh the board's work.

The Milton Keynes family support approach is an extensive programme providing a range of interventions and support before the threshold for statutory services is met. This includes the Healthy Relationships programme, which is reaching a significant number of adults and children affected by domestic abuse. You have seen a reduction in the number of children on child protection plans where domestic abuse is a feature, but you cannot be sure at this stage if this is a direct result of the implementation of the Healthy Relationships programme. Operation Encompass is not yet in place in Milton Keynes but you are in discussion with the

police about establishing it. You believe thresholds are correctly applied and children are not on family support plans if they require a Child Protection Plan. You consider that oversight from MASH, at the point of referral and the management of the family support teams by a social worker manager, ensures children's cases are held at the right level in the system.

We discussed some of your performance data. The number of children on a child protection plan has increased but the number of looked after children has decreased. You monitor this information regularly to interrogate underlying themes or trends. At this stage it is not clear if the increase in the number of children on a plan is likely to continue. The reduction in the number of children in care is in part due to the reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers and, you believe, a reduction in the number of older children coming into care.

Since the last inspection you have been focusing on the performance of the corporate parenting teams and there has been some turnover in these teams as a result of this work. You want to improve the confidence and skills of the supervising social workers and improve the arrangements to listen to, and work together with your foster carers. You hope this will help improve placement stability for children and young people. We were interested to hear that you consider your virtual school is a strength, it is ambitious for children and knows individual children well. It is also now working with children on the edge of care where education provision may be an important contribution to preventing a child coming into care.

You told us your focus for the next year is to implement your action plans for the adoption and care leavers service and to introduce a 'Quality First' approach. If you were to receive a focused visit you think it would be helpful for it to consider the MASH or family support and the edge of care.

Education

We reviewed inspection outcomes at different phases. The proportion of good or better schools has risen in recent years and is above the national and regional averages in the primary phase. At secondary level, figures are above national but below the regional picture.

In the early years, improvement over recent years means more children reach a good level of development than seen nationally. Attainment is broadly average by the end of primary school, with progress in key stage 2 slightly ahead of the region in writing and mathematics, but a little behind in reading. At secondary, the quality of schools has improved but your team picked out the below national average progress and attainment figures as a concern. Within that picture, the progress of disadvantaged pupils is the key worry, alongside that of SEND pupils. Your team noted some success in narrowing the disadvantage gap in primary, but that this has yet to extend to older pupils. Attainment at post-16 was covered briefly. It is broadly average but provision is about to see an adjustment, with all A levels being taught in schools, and the college offering only vocational provision.

We spent a significant amount of time talking about the Milton Keynes school improvement strategy. You and your team were pleased with the overall impact of school improvement staff. All schools are graded, based on a range of evidence. They are provided with a core offer, which they can supplement with paid-for services. You noted good engagement with the authority from the mostly maintained primary sector. This includes use of partnership arrangements, alongside academisation, and 'improvement boards' where schools are underperforming. The secondary picture was identified as more mixed by your team. Weak value added figures were attributed to some schools not adapting quickly to new curriculum requirements, some less effective teaching, and momentum lost in key stage 3. Engaging with secondary leaders is proving harder, notably in some academy schools. You are communicating with the RSC where you judge an academy to be underperforming.

You gave us a brief update on bids being made to the Strategic School Improvement Fund, mainly around improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. We covered governor services, where you feel strong support is provided, and governors are challenging schools over the progress of groups such as the disadvantaged. You characterised headteacher recruitment as healthy in primary. In secondary, some challenges were noted in filling roles, including in bringing in new talent from outside.

In an update on SEND provision, you and your team noted EHCP transfers will be completed apart from a small number with specific issues. You picked out high quality special schools as a draw for parents to move into the town, and a positive response from parents to the decision-making process about school places. We talked about the rise in recent years in SEND numbers, particularly in SEMH. Your aspiration to ensure more are 'successful in mainstream provision', in the plan was noted. Headteachers have drawn up their own fair access protocol. In the context of SEND we also looked at home education. Here you have seen numbers rise and have set up a team to look at the issue. You said the authority challenges any inappropriate off-rolling by schools, and that you are keen to see more pupils returning to schools.

One of your colleagues gave an update on the Prevent agenda. Additional funding is being put into the area and you expressed confidence in what is done to safeguard pupils. Regular training for schools and governors, joined-up work with the police, and drive from the council to get this right were singled out in the discussion. Referrals to the Channel process have been few. Right wing extremism is the key issue, in your estimation. We also heard about work to ensure 'supplementary schools' stay on the right side of the law. You have 83 operating in the town, and were satisfied that the right steps were being taken to monitor them.

You confirmed the arrangements for the communication of information linked to complaints about schools to the local authority team.

Thank you once again for meeting with me and I look forward to hearing about further developments in Milton Keynes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read "Chris", is positioned above the printed name.

Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, South East