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16 March 2021

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Deborah Glassbrook
Director of Children's Social Care, Education and Early Help Services
Reading Borough Council

Sent by email to: deborah.glassbrook@brighterfuturesforchildren.org

Dear Deborah

Annual Conversation – social care and education – 3 March 2021

Thank you for meeting with Nicola Bennett, Tracey Scott, Hilary Macdonald, Harry Ingham and myself online, to discuss education and children's social care in Reading.

Social Care

You told us how pleased you are that the government direction has been lifted, recognising the significant improvements that have been made in the provision of services and quality of practice. This is an important and significant step in your improvement journey, though you recognise that there is more to do and are ambitious for what you can achieve. There have been some changes to arrangements at a senior leadership level. You are pleased to have appointed Di Smith as the new chair of the board, and to have tightened your governance arrangements.

You have a stable and permanent staff group at senior and middle management levels, which has helped to achieve this. COVID has had an impact on recruiting and retaining staff, particularly the virtual nature of team working. This has also had an impact on turnover of staff, though many of your agency practitioners have been with you for a significant period. Some social workers have caseloads higher than you would like, particularly in the FIT teams, which has had an impact on progressing CIN cases in particular. You continue to weigh cases according to complexity, with monthly reviews by team managers. Therefore, while caseloads have increased, staff are managing, and morale is good. You have increased your social worker posts and are hopeful about the potential impact of current initiatives, such as your apprenticeships and 'step up to social work' programme.

While the pandemic has brought several challenges, for you and many of your staff, it also brought about some opportunities. Strong partnership working has informed risk assessments and helped you to have oversight of children who receive a service. You told us that you have maintained face-to-face visiting throughout the pandemic for the children you were most worried about and increased your level of visiting to younger children.

You have seen an increase in demand for your early help services and an unprecedented number and increase in the complexity of referrals for unborn children, with more coming into care at birth. This has been an area of focus for you, ensuring learning from pre-birth work in early help is migrated into the access and assessment team. You are looking to benefit from the Safer Baby Toolkit work being undertaken in Windsor and Maidenhead to strengthen your approach to this area of practice. Under 5's are a priority group for the next 2 years.

You shared that there has been an increasing prevalence of youth violence, particularly including the use of knives. There have been three recent fatal stabbings in Reading involving teenagers as the alleged perpetrators. There has been a review of these and previous cases involving knife crime, and you are satisfied that they are not gang related. However, the impact of COVID is not clear. You reflected upon the pressures of lockdown and acute stress within families, with families coming to your attention that were not previously known to you and children who have not experienced adverse childhood experiences.

December 2020 saw a spike in the number of children subject to a CP plan, which has reduced recently. You reflected that professionals are feeling anxious and are reassured about the safety of children when they have a CP plan. However, this may mean that some children may be subject to child protection procedures unnecessarily. This is borne out by your own analysis of this increase, which identified a number of children's plans end at first review. This has been a long-standing problem and you surmise is compounded by your inspection history. You are moving social work practice towards a strength-based and trauma-informed approach. You are supporting practitioners via coaching opportunities to have a more authoritative approach.

Your children in care numbers have remained stable but sufficiency remains a concern for you. Achieving local placements and progressing the planned work to bring your children back to Reading is an ongoing area of work in discussion with other local authorities. The timeliness of initial health assessments for children remains a challenge and has been impacted in part by the pandemic and lockdown. You understand the causes and have plans in place to address these issues.

Your pre-proceedings and court work has continued. You haven't seen an increase in pre-proceedings work and the number of children subject to care proceedings has stabilised. You shared that there have been some delays in court work progressing which is impacting upon achieving permanence for some children. You are pleased to have received positive feedback from the lead Judge recently regarding the quality of statements to court.

Children who go missing have not always benefitted from a timely return home interview. Again, you understand the reasons for this and have recently 'brought in-house' this function and are of the view that timeliness will improve as a result.

Internal and external quality assurance work has continued during the pandemic and is helping to inform your practice improvement. You have continued with 'deep dives' themed audits and compliance checklists, and Hampshire will be undertaking a review of your QA processes. You are now more confident in your QA processes and are now moving from compliance activities to looking at the quality of practice.

Education

The local authority's school improvement model has been embedded further this year, despite the challenges of the pandemic. Although there has been significant disruption to education nationally, the director of education has steered a steady course and driven forward the improvement priorities that were established in 2019. School-to-school support networks are an important part of this strategy. These networks allow for sharing of strategies and support across schools. The local authority's recent 'big education conversation' gave school leaders the opportunity to debate school wide issues. You were pleased with leaders' engagement in this initiative.

The disruption to the education sector caused by the pandemic has meant that the local authority does not have the opportunity to perform the usual scrutiny of school performance data. Within this context, however, you are pleased with the increase in attainment at the end of key stage 4. In 2020, the average attainment 8 score for Reading increased by 4% to 54; this is above the national average of 50.

We discussed your continuing high ambitions for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). As part of your SEND strategy, the local authority has created 200 additional places in Reading schools' special units for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder. The director of education expressed the opinion that accountability between the local authority and school-based SEND units has improved due to your recent review of service level agreements.

In our discussion, you and your colleagues explained that you were looking forward to continuing your commitment to co-production and the regular meetings with strategy group members, such as the 'Reading Families Forum'. The local authority remains committed to inclusion. The director of education explained that this commitment and the local authority's 'therapeutic approach' had continued to contribute to a decline in fixed term exclusions. You explained that there had been 3 permanent exclusions in Reading, so far this year, but you are confident that these were necessary and correctly administered. The local authority's education department is currently undertaking a review of alternative provision in Reading. All the pupil referral units in Reading are now academies but you are assured that the local authority will maintain the positive working relationships that are already in place in this sector.

You are, rightly, concerned about the increased number of elective home education (EHE) requests from parents over the past year. However, this increase has recently shown signs of slowing down. Local authority officers have focused on speaking to school leaders about

giving parents accurate information concerning the EHE process. You are hoping to resume face-to-face visits with parents who have chosen EHE, in the near future. Rightly, you ensure that high levels of scrutiny are applied to any EHE requests and particularly for any child who is subject to a child protection plan. When parents change their minds about electing to educate their child at home, you are confident that schools are generally ready to accept pupils back on to their rolls.

In last year's annual conversation, we discussed your strategy of bringing the previously outsourced careers education provision under the control of the local authority. This action followed the issuing of a ministerial letter that raised concerns about the high levels of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). You and your colleagues are pleased with the results of your renewed strategy. It is clear that, in 2020, there was a large increase in the percentage of 16- and 17-year olds who had an offer made to them for September. It is also significant that the number of young people 'known to' the local authority increased by over 1000. Furthermore, the proportions of young people who are NEET decreased substantially in 2020. This was particularly the case for young people with SEND.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read "Chris Russell".

Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, South East