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26 November 2007

Mrs Sue Imbriano  
Director of Children's Services  
Buckinghamshire County Council  
County Hall  
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Buckinghamshire  
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Dear Mrs Imbriano

## **2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP), your action plan arising from the joint area review (JAR) and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. The letter comments on progress since the recent JAR. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this process and for the time given by you and your colleagues during the assessment.

### **Overall effectiveness of children's services**

**Grade 3**

The services for children and young people delivered by Buckinghamshire County Council are consistently good and improving. Although the pace of change has been slow in the past, the impact of the appointment of new senior staff and the development of the Children and Young People's Plan and the Joint Commissioning Strategy have improved outcomes for children and young people over the last year. Leadership is strong and the management team is enthusiastic and energetic in its commitment to improving services. The council responded positively to the JAR in 2006 and focused quickly on priorities for improvement, but progress has been faster in some areas than others. The contribution the council makes towards improving outcomes for being healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic well-being is good. Although there have been some improvements since the JAR, the effectiveness of children's services in ensuring children and young people stay safe remains adequate.

## Being healthy

Grade 3

### Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. No recommendations emerged from the JAR for the council but there were two recommendations for health services.

### For action in the next six months

- The health services should ensure that there is a sufficient number of children's nurses to staff paediatric accident and emergency (A&E) services.
- The health services should ensure speedier access to assessment and treatment within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

Since the JAR, good progress has been made. A robust three year action plan is established and a sound workforce strategy is being implemented to meet the recommendation in the JAR about staffing paediatric A&E services.

The JAR team judged the work of the CAMHS overall as good. Those service areas which were good have remained so and continue to improve. Through implementing an agreed multi-agency plan, appropriate attention is now given to ensuring speedier access to assessment and treatment. Structural, policy and procedural changes have already been put in place; including appointing two psychologists and introducing the care plan approach within tier 3 CAMHS. It is too early to see overall improvements in outcomes but recent data show some decreasing waiting times, for example from 48 to 27 weeks for tier 2 psychology services.

Multi-agency strategic planning is well established and based on sound analysis of needs. The council and its partners actively promote healthy lifestyles and ably support parents and carers in keeping their children healthy. Outcomes from these activities are good. For example, a peer support initiative has helped to improve the rates of mothers initiating breast feeding. Partnership work, focusing on vulnerable families using local provision such as Sure Start and children's centres, is leading to reduced rates of smoking during pregnancy, a reduction in the percentage of babies born with low birth weights, as well as good and improving immunisation rates.

According to the Tellus2 survey, fewer children and young people in Buckinghamshire (7%) than the national average (9%) consider that they are not healthy. The Healthy Schools initiative has been the stimulus for the substantial increase in time for sport and in the range of activities offered, through classroom-based work and clubs. However, the number of schools in Buckinghamshire participating in this initiative is low compared to the national average. Lack of capacity is a potential barrier to increasing the number, but an additional 112 schools are already engaged in the programme and Buckinghamshire is on course to meet its target in the CYPP. The council, with the primary care trusts, is focusing on raising

the profile of the Healthy Schools Programme with its other partners during 2007–08.

Access to sexual health services is good across the county. Community nurses, general practitioners and trained youth workers work effectively together to make good provision in a range of youth clubs, community centres and schools. Nevertheless, the impact on reducing teenage conceptions has not been as effective as the council had hoped. Compared to national figures, teenage conception rates are very low but they are declining more slowly than they are nationally, and meeting the national target for 2010 is a significant challenge for the area. The council and key partners recognise this and are reviewing their strategies through joint commissioning.

The health provision for looked after children is good and it is getting better through initiatives such as improved access to CAMHS. In spite of this, the number of looked after children who have an annual health assessment has decreased slightly in 2006–07 and is below the national average. The council and its partners are aware that this needs to improve. A multi-agency strategic partnership was launched in May 2007 to oversee and improve health services for looked after children.

The JAR team found that children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities benefited from excellent multi-agency team support. Provision has been further improved, for example through the use of lottery funds to develop outdoor activities and facilities with a particular emphasis on providing for young people with disabilities.

### **Areas for development**

- Ensure that health outcomes, including reducing the rate of teenage conception are integral to the delivery of joint commissioning strategy.
- Increase the number of children who are looked after who receive an annual health assessment and dental check.

## **Staying safe**

**Grade 2**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is adequate. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

## For immediate action

- The council and its partners should review and agree thresholds for referral to social care including children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- The council and its partners should ensure all looked after children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have good quality and up to date care plans (including personal educational plans) or transition plans, which are implemented within timescales.

The multi-agency action plan covering these issues is thorough with clear, measurable milestones and tight timescales. All looked after children now have care plans with personal educational plans and all children with disabilities over 14 years old, known to social care services, have a transition plan. Robust auditing systems ensure this good practice continues. New thresholds for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have been introduced and an audit system set up. Work undertaken to review and agree thresholds for referral to social care, undertaken by consultants jointly commissioned with Buckinghamshire's Safeguarding Children Board monitoring and evaluation sub-committee, was completed in July 2007. The consultants found that thresholds were at the correct level but that the criteria were not consistently applied and were not effective in assisting decision-making. Action plans that include auditing are now in place to tackle these issues.

According to the Tellus2 survey, most children and young people in Buckinghamshire feel safe; this is in line with the national average. A range of safeguarding information, support and provision is readily available to the majority of children and their carers, including the most vulnerable. Inspections of provision such as nurseries, schools and foster care show that high levels of care and attention are given to safety issues. Well targeted multi-agency initiatives, for example the Drive and Stay Alive scheme, have helped Buckinghamshire to exceed the national target for reducing the numbers of children killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents.

The JAR reported that, although there was a range of family support services, it was insufficient to meet need. The council and its partners have been working to increase provision and ensure that it is targeted effectively. For instance, the family group conferencing service, which was very effective in 2006–07 in averting care proceedings and child protection conferences, will double in size during this financial year.

Appropriate action is taken to protect children who are most at risk of abuse. All children on the child protection register are allocated to a social worker and all child protection reviews are held on time. However, there has been a decrease in the percentage of s47 enquiries which led to initial child protection conferences held within 15 working days. Performance is below the national average. Other child

protection outcomes, such as the levels of re-registration and the time which children remain on the child protection register, are at a good or better level.

Buckinghamshire has a low number of social care referrals but an appropriately high percentage result in an initial assessment. Progress is being made in completing these within the required timescales but the percentage remains lower than nationally. This means that some families wait too long. However, while the number of core assessments of children in need is lower than the average for England, a high percentage (86%) are completed within the required timescales, which is higher than the national figure (78%).

The majority (97%) of children who are looked after are allocated a suitably qualified worker, who actively coordinates a care plan. The percentage of reviews held on time has improved (from 72% in 2005–06 to 85% in 2006–07) and is now in line with the average for England. Adoption plans are put in place speedily and the stability of placements for children who are looked after is very good. The good progress made in increasing the number of these children being adopted needs to be sustained. Achieving a sufficient number of foster carers, so that there is a choice of placement and a decrease in the number of children placed outside the county and/or in residential placements, is a challenge for Buckinghamshire. The council recognises this and initiatives exist to try to attain this.

Multi-agency policies and procedures are in place to safeguard children. The Local Safeguarding Children Board is well supported and funded by partners, and provides an effective lead. It is a forum where partners engage in robust discussions and set up sound actions to take forward relevant issues such as private fostering arrangements. Good training in child protection is provided to those working with children.

### **Areas for development**

- Improve timeliness of initial assessments.
- Improve the timeliness of initial child protection conferences.
- Embed into practice the work already undertaken on thresholds and consistency and regularly audit this work.
- Act to improve notification rates and comply with legislation for private fostering.

## **Enjoying and achieving**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

### **For action in the next six months**

- The council should ensure children and young people excluded from school receive full time alternative provision.

### **For action in the longer term**

- The council and its partners should ensure a sustained improvement in outcomes in education, training and employment for young people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and for other vulnerable groups, including care leavers.

The authority has improved its provision for children and young people who have been permanently excluded from school. All primary-aged pupils now receive adequate alternative tuition. Provision for secondary-aged pupils has also increased and the council is on track to meet its challenging targets in this area this year. The council is encouraging schools to liaise early with pupil referral units who can provide support for children and young people before they are excluded. This active approach, the more successful reintegration of excluded children and young people into mainstream schools, and plans to provide more appropriate alternative provision for the most vulnerable (particularly those with statements of special educational need) all ensure that pupil referral units are working effectively. The authority's recent initiative to encourage the involvement and collaboration of headteachers has led to consistent management of fixed term and permanent exclusions.

The achievement of those of Pakistani heritage is rising and, in more socially deprived areas, they now outperform White British young people of similar backgrounds at GCSE level. The achievement of Black Caribbean and mixed White British/Black Caribbean children and young people is more variable but, overall, it has improved. An extensive new strategy for supporting the achievement of these children and young people has been implemented, such as mentoring schemes for Black and minority ethnic boys in a number of schools, which also involve their parents. In addition to a number of initiatives for older pupils, long-term work to pre-empt the disaffection of Black and minority ethnic children and young people now takes place much earlier. The council is making positive efforts to employ more Black and minority ethnic staff to strengthen the effectiveness of this work.

Attainment in the county's schools is improving steadily and is well above the national average from early years through to 19. Value added data show that, between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, children and young people make more progress than those nationally. Between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4, although the majority of children and young people make good progress, and many make outstanding progress, achievement is unsatisfactory in a few schools. Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve well, particularly in secondary schools and the achievement of looked after children is above the national average. Planning for appropriate language teaching for children and young people from Eastern Europe with English as an additional language is at an early stage.

The council knows its schools well and is aware of wide variability in performance. The school improvement service is strong and well led. It uses good practice, local

partnerships of schools and subject consultants creatively to support the few schools in one of Ofsted's categories of concern and other schools that are underachieving, so that improvement can be sustained. Where the provision has been inspected by Ofsted, a higher proportion of schools than nationally have outstanding judgements. Ofsted's inspection evidence and the Tellus survey indicate that children and young people enjoy being at school. This is reflected in high attendance rates and low rates of exclusion. However, in 2006/07, the proportion of children and young people with statements of special educational need who were permanently excluded was high. Some progress has already been made to reduce this figure through appropriate alternative provision.

Too often, the time taken for the authority to complete the process of statementing is longer than 18 weeks although the most recent unvalidated data identifies improvement.

### **Areas for development**

- Continue work to sustain improvement in educational outcomes for Black Caribbean and mixed White British and Black Caribbean children and young people.
- Maintain the improvement in the time taken to process all statements of special educational needs to less than 18 weeks.
- Continue to implement plans to extend provision for the increasing number of children and young people with English as an additional language.

## **Making a positive contribution**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

#### **For action in the next six months**

- The council should implement plans for the young people's participation network.
- The council and its partners should increase the impact of consultation with children and young people on the design and shape of services for them.

The JAR team recognised that, whilst opportunities for young people to share their views were widespread, the overall strategy for participation was at an early stage and links between local and county-wide representational bodies were not developed. Since then, the council has made considerable progress on both these

issues by engaging partners more actively and building on Buckinghamshire's established good practice. Membership of the participation network has increased by just over 50% in the last year. Results from the Tellus2 survey showed that a smaller percentage (55%) of Buckinghamshire's children and young people than the national average (60%) consider that their views are not really listened to in their local area. A number of creative projects, aiming to increase the impact of consultation with children and young people on the design and shape of services, have been introduced with positive results. For instance, young people in the Merryfields and Walton Grove respite units for children with disabilities were consulted about the re-provisioning of the buildings and contributed to the layout and decoration of living areas. In addition, Hear by Right standards are being adopted to monitor children's and young people's participation. The multi-agency participation plan is funded through the Children and Young People's Trust and a robust action plan is in place to take forward this work. An important element of this is to focus on groups such as Black and minority ethnic young people who have not been well represented previously to ensure that their views are embedded in planning services.

During 2006–07, a higher percentage of Buckinghamshire's looked after children (66% in 2005–06 to 77% in 2006–07) were involved in making decisions about their own lives by participating in reviews, but this level is still considerably lower than the average for England (87%). A number of initiatives, arising from consultation with young people, such as older ones chairing their own reviews, are now operating. Buckinghamshire's strong longstanding culture of celebrating their children and young people's views and achievements continues through events such as the music festival at Burnham Youth Centre in June 2006.

Children and young people are directed effectively to well focused information, advice, counselling and other services to develop positive attitudes to their lives and learning. For instance, the percentage of young people aged between 13 and 19 years involved in the wide range of youth services increased again this year from 25% to 30% which is higher than nationally. Services are used effectively by children and their families, including those needing support at challenging times. Peer mentoring, buddying and befriending schemes are playing a positive role in improving the lives of young people, such as those organised by Buckinghamshire's young carers. In the last year, schools have acted more constructively to reduce bullying and racism, with some positive outcomes.

Compared to national figures, there is little youth crime in Buckinghamshire, and effective and timely work is done to further reduce anti-social behaviour and offending. This year, the Youth Offending Service has introduced an approach which focuses on those young people most at risk of offending. This has had positive results. The rate of re-offending and the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system have reduced to lower than those nationally. However, the percentage of looked after children who were given a final warning, reprimand or conviction during this year has remained static and is above the national average.

The Children and Young People's Trust is now funding a participation network across all agencies to allow young people to make their views known. The Youth Parliament works alongside the council's cabinet. In response to its views, a subsidised travel scheme for young people was introduced as a pilot this May in order to allow better access to leisure facilities.

### **Areas for development**

- Increase the number of looked after children expressing views in reviews.
- Decrease the number of looked after children given a final warning/reprimand or conviction.
- Continue to increase and embed into practice children and young people, participation in decision-making, especially those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

## **Achieving economic well-being**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The contribution of the council's services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. One recommendation emerged from the JAR.

### **For action in the longer term**

- The council and its partners should reduce the length of stay for families with children in temporary accommodation, and ensure an adequate supply of semi-independent and supported accommodation for care leavers.

The number of care leavers in suitable accommodation is now 90%. The number in bed and breakfast accommodation has decreased by two thirds since the JAR and an action plan or exit strategy is in place to move on all those remaining. No current figures are available for the length of stay of families in bed and breakfast accommodation, but the JAR action plan includes robust strategies to meet challenging targets.

A refreshed 14 to 19 strategy for education and training sets out plans from 2007 to 2013. This is managed by a new strategy group, made up of a wide range of providers, including Connexions and the Learning and Skills Council. Provision for students aged from 14 to 19 is organised successfully through two consortia. A comprehensive on-line prospectus covering all available 14 to 19 provision, including a wide range of vocational options, gives easily accessible information to ensure a good match between courses and children and young people's aspirations, abilities and locations. Difficulties with access for some young people in rural areas have been eased further through good cross-boundary collaboration with Milton Keynes in the north and Slough in the south. Five new specialist diplomas have been accepted across the county: two for September 2008 and three more for 2009. Partnerships

within the two consortia give creative flexibility to funding and the range of provision. For example, the council retains funding for 14+ and partnerships make bids for specific projects to the Schools Forum.

Overall achievement in the county for students aged 14 to 19 is good and above the national average on all indicators. Standards are high in school sixth forms, particularly at Level 3, and satisfactory in colleges of further education. Point scores at A and AS level and the proportion of young people who go on to higher education are above national averages and rising. Recent inspections of the two further education colleges show an improvement: one is now good and the other is satisfactory. Appropriate subject-focused support is in place. Recent success rates for work-based learning are at or approaching national averages, although the increase in the completion rate for apprenticeships has slowed. The council currently has insufficient knowledge of the local employment needs of small- and medium-sized businesses in the county to enable it and its partners to increase the relevance of training.

In response to concerns raised in the JAR and the high proportion of Pakistani and Black Caribbean young people at risk of not being in education, employment or training (NEET), raising the achievement of this group and that of other vulnerable young people such as young offenders is a priority in the new 14 to 19 plan. Indicators this year show an improvement. For example, care leavers in education, employment and training (EET) rose from 44% in 2006 to 76% in 2007; EET figures for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and for teenage mothers are also high. Black and minority ethnic children and young people form a disproportionate group within the low NEET figure but the number is falling. This year, responsibility for improving the continuity and the quality of service for these young people and for monitoring their progress has passed to the Connexions service.

### **Areas for development**

- Audit local employment needs in order to make sure that training offered to 16–19 year olds is relevant.

## **Capacity to improve, including the management of services for children and young people**

**Grade 3**

### **Summary of strengths and areas for development**

The council's capacity to improve its services for children and young people is good and its management of these services is good. Two recommendations emerged from the JAR.

### For action in the next six months

- The council should further develop its recruitment and retention strategy for social work staff, and, in the interim, review workloads to ensure work is allocated and progressed.
- The council and its partners should ensure that the implementation plans for the *Every child matters* agenda and the joint commissioning strategy identify sufficient resources to allow the delivery of change while maintaining the performance of services.

There has been some progress with recruiting social care staff. Staff turnover is still high and the vacancy rate is down, but both are still above those of statistical neighbours and nationally. A comprehensive recruitment programme in June and September to reduce the use of agency staff by the end of 2007 has been a partial success but, given that this was an area of development in the annual performance assessment 2005 and in the JAR last autumn, progress is too slow.

The Children and Young People's Trust (CYPT) development plan is now in place, with appropriate funding to support it. A creative approach to joint commissioning involves a very wide range of partners and tackles a wide remit. A robust implementation plan has been devised and ten priorities for joint commissioning have been identified within the four major CYPP areas: participation, underachievement, prevention and active lifestyles. Cross-cutting themes ensure a focused and portfolio-led approach to improving quantitative and qualitative outcomes for the most vulnerable groups of children and young people. Some pooling of budgets, training for partners so they have the necessary skills in tendering, and close collaboration between agencies, and a wide range of other partners, make this a cost-efficient system. This is already tackling areas conventionally outside a joint commissioning remit, such as managing surplus school places.

The CYPT has a clear structure and objectives and provides effective leadership. Since the appointment of a number of new senior staff in the last twelve months, the previous slow pace of change has quickened. Their vision is shared by partners and implemented through the Children and Young People's Strategy Board. A clear, comprehensive three-year plan identifies lead responsibilities, resources, milestones and realistically ambitious targets. There is a strong focus on priorities as a result of needs analysis and consultation with partners, including voluntary organisations and the views of young people, their parents and carers. Areas identified for action in the JAR are embedded into the plan, including the need to implement the recommendations of the Equality Impact Assessment and a Prevention Strategy, both of which are in their early stages. To ensure focused provision, a local delivery framework, informed by best practice in other authorities, has been developed in consultation with partner agencies. These arrangements will enable support for children from a range of services to be provided more effectively at a local level.

The CYPP is adjusted annually, taking stakeholders' views into account. A wide range of organisations have approved the CYPP for 2007 and there are strong partnerships

with other stakeholders. The council was working to the draft plan for some time before its final approval and, as a result, it has made progress on many of the indicators and recommendations in the JAR. Good examples are the reduction in the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training and the improved quality of 14 to 19 provision.

The planning incorporates thorough performance management. A new open-access, web-based system to record monitoring is being developed. This builds on sound procedures that have already been established.

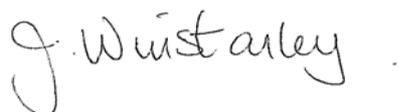
### **Areas for development**

- Improve the pace of recruitment and the retention of social work staff.
- Sustain and build on the new initiatives for effective and efficient joint commissioning.

Overall the council has demonstrated good progress in meeting the JAR recommendations and has shown good capacity to maintain and improve further its services for children and young people.

The children's services grade is the performance rating for the purpose of section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will also provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment to be published by the Audit Commission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley  
Divisional Manager  
Local Services Inspection