

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 4th February, 2021.

Present:- Councillors Kelly (Vice-Chair, in the chair), A Cheema, Ajaib, Begum and A Sandhu

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillor Dhaliwal.

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Basra, Qaseem and Sarfraz

PART 1

30. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Kelly declared that he worked for the Slough and East Berkshire CofE Multi Academy Trust (SEBMAT). Councillor Kelly remained and participated in the meeting.

31. Minutes of the Meeting held on held on 3 December 2020

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 3rd December 2020 be approved as a correct record.

32. Member Questions

None received.

33. Briefing on the scope - Elective Home Education

The Associate Director, Children and Families, provided the Panel with an overview of the Elective Home Education (EHE) provision in the context of the current national trends during the pandemic.

The Panel noted that parents had a choice to educate their children at home or by other means under the 1996 Education Act. The legal and operational background to EHE was explained and was set out in the report. Since March 2020, Covid-19 had had a significant impact on the numbers of children that were being home educated. It was noted that children were often referred to as “Hidden Children” as parents were not required by law to report they were home educating and therefore the number of children currently being home educated was expected be higher. Local Authorities had a duty to establish whether a suitable education was being provided but did not have a role in the assurance of such provision.

In the period, October 2019 to October 2020 EHE cases had risen nationally by 38% and 25% in the South East. Referring specifically to Slough, it was reported that there had been an increase of 59% in cases of EHE and there were currently 289 number of pupils being home educated. This was a significant increase from 138 in 2017/18. Members were informed that this

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presented a number of challenges relating to safeguarding as this could not be monitored in the way it would be in a school setting, and also the wider health and welfare of children.

The Council's Attendance Service was responsible for supporting schools and parents if parents choose to Electively Home Educate. Home Education Teachers commissioned by the Local Authority assessed the suitability of education in place by conducting home visits; door steps and alternative public places such as libraries and since the pandemic have provided virtual visits. The Attendance Service monitored, tracked and recorded each EHE case and worked with other agencies, such as Slough Children's Services Trust, to assess the needs of families and signpost them to appropriate support.

Members discussed some of the challenges such as the lack of a strong legal framework at a national level; capacity issues caused by the rapid increase in EHE; the fact there was no teacher assessment; the impact on outcomes for children being educated at home in terms of the qualifications; the difficulties for children reintegrating into school if they returned following a period of home education; and the safeguarding concerns referred to earlier in the discussion. It was stated that whilst curriculum support may be provided by the school it was the responsibility of the parent to provide the education. The authority had very limited powers to intervene on aspects relating to the provision of education although it could make a referral if there was a safeguarding concern.

The Panel was particularly concerned about the quality of education that was being provided at home and Members commented that whilst in some cases it may be good there were clearly risks that many children were not being educated to the adequate standard. There was an significant outcome gap for home educated pupils with some doing well and sitting exams whilst some others did not. There was also a discussion about whether numbers of children being home educated may increase following the full reopening of schools on 8th March 2021 as some parents were still likely to have concerns about Covid-19. Members highlighted the importance of robust measures and clear communication with parents around the safety of schools to provide maximum reassurance.

Speaking under Rule 30, Councillor Dhaliwal commented on a number of issues included enforcement measures regarding attendance at school and the management of school rolls for pupils being home educated. He also highlighted that whilst the issues raised were of concern the number of children home schooled in this way remained a small proportion of school aged children in Slough. Members asked for a breakdown of children being home education and the Associate Director confirmed he would circulate further information to the Panel.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report was noted.

Resolved – That details of the report be noted.

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34. Slough Children's Services Trust's Performance

The Panel considered details of the current performance and operational challenges for Slough Children's Services Trust (SCST) as at December 2020. The Assistant Director of Frontline Practice and Improvement at SCST informed Members that although there were areas of improvement required, performance had improved against a backdrop of significant pressures brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, resource constraints, and workforce difficulties.

The report updated the Panel on the national perspective; the Trust's revised Improvement Plan; current operational pressures; and caseloads. The following points were noted:

- There was a national increase in the number of children and young people presenting with more complex needs. The upward trend had been increasing for more than two years but had become even more acute due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The revised Improvement Plan for SCST had been circulated to the Panel and it included listening to the voice of the child and their family to drive plans and intervention; ensuring stability in the workforce through recruitment and retention; improving supervision and management oversight; and embedding quality assurance, continuous learning and improvement as part of the journey to a 'Good' Ofsted rating.
- There had been an overall improvement in progressing actions in the Improvement Plan over the past month with 11 additional 'green' rated actions and 5 additional 'reds'.
- The Trust continued to manage the operational pressures which included the lack of quality social workers available for recruitment, a recent organisation wide IT outage between 5-9 November and the lack of placements available for children and young people.
- There had been a spike in caseloads in October 2020 although it had reduced to a more manageable level since then. Another increase was expected following the return of all children to school on 8th March 2021.
- The specific performance issues were noted in Referral and Assessment (Front Door), Safeguarding and Family Support; Care Leavers and Children Looked After and Support Services. The number of children in care was 215, up from 210 the previous month, and there was an increase in the number of large and complex sibling groups coming into care.
- There were a total of 11 vacancies in the Trust at the end of December which was a reduction of 3 on the previous month. Nine of these vacancies were for social workers.

The Panel asked a number of questions about the report including the impacts of Covid-19 on children's mental health and wellbeing. The Officer recognised this was a significant challenge and explained the support in place

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including clinicians working for the Trust who could help children access the pathways to most appropriate services. There was a partnership approach to support children during 'lockdown' and it was highlighted that vulnerable children were still able to attend school which was positive. The Officer highlighted it was likely there were 'hidden harm' to children who could not be monitored or supported in the usual ways during 'lockdown' and it was likely to take many years to assess the full impacts. The Panel agreed that it would welcome a report on mental health pathways for children and this could be considered for the work programme in future. Member also discussed the performance relating to support for autistic children and the pathways for care leavers. It was recognised that apprenticeship opportunities for care leavers was underdeveloped in Slough and work was just started to address the issue.

The ongoing workforce challenges were discussed and the Panel asked whether anything more could be done to recruit and retain social workers in Slough given the market conditions and strong competition from authorities in London. Members were informed that the financial packages were now broadly on par with London and the most important factors were good management and caseloads both of which were key areas of the Improvement Plan. The Trust continued to work hard on implementing its workforce strategy despite the challenges.

Speaking under Rule 30, Councillor Dhaliwal asked about the issue of unaccompanied asylum seeker children; foster care; and several workforce issues. The Officer responded to the questions and in relation to foster care it was noted that there had been an increase in the number of placements and the service was performing well.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report was noted and it was agreed to receive an update in six months.

Resolved – That details of the report be noted and for the Panel to receive a further update in six months.

35. The Draft Threshold Document

The Safeguarding Partnership Manager introduced the report which outlined what a Safeguarding Children Threshold Document (SGTD) was, why it was necessary and how it was used in practice.

The SGTD was a technical tool used by practitioners to assist them in making professional judgements about whether to make a safeguarding referral or if there were other options available. The document was particularly useful when a child's situation did not clearly indicate that there may be a child protection issue.

It was noted that the document was currently being developed by Slough Safeguarding Partnership in consultation with managers and practitioners from a range of agencies and schools. The Panel was informed that it was

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anticipated the document would be finalised in March with a view to it being used from April 2021. The last review had been carried out two years and was followed by training and seminars. A similar approach would be taken following the current review.

The Panel noted the report.

Resolved – That details of the report be noted.

36. Forward Work Programme

The Policy Insight Analyst presented the Forward Work Programme for the Panel for the remainder of the municipal year.

The items for the next meeting on 16th March were reviewed and agreed to include NEETs; youth offending; parenting in Slough; Early Years provision; and the terms of reference for the proposed task & finish Group on employment and skills. The Trust report referred to in the current work programme had been brought forward and discussed earlier in the meeting.

Resolved – That details of the Work Programme be noted.

37. Attendance Record

Resolved – That details of the Members' Attendance Record 2020/21 be noted.

38. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 16th March 2021.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.26 pm)