

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 16th July, 2020.

Present:- Councillors Basra (Chair), A Cheema, Ajaib, Begum, N Holledge and Qaseem

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor A Sandhu and Paul Kassapian

PART 1

1. Appointment of Chair 2020/21

Resolved - That Councillor Basra's appointment as Chair of the Panel for the municipal year 2020/21 be endorsed.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair 2020/21

Resolved - That Councillor Kelly's appointment as Vice-Chair of the Panel for the municipal year 2020/21 be endorsed.

3. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Basra declared that she was a Director of First Impressions Consultants Ltd, which involved working with a number of organisations in the education sector. There were no conflicts with any matters on the agenda and she therefore stayed and participated in the meeting.

4. Minutes of the Meeting held on 11th March 2020

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 11th March 2020 be approved as a correct record.

5. Member Questions

None had been received.

6. School Standards Report

The Service Lead, Schools introduced a report which provided an overview of education outcomes in the Local Authority (LA) and an analysis of trends of achievement for schools and groups of pupils in order to better inform strategic planning.

Members were reminded that the Slough School Effectiveness Strategy, updated in 2018/19 and refreshed in September 2019, set out the Council's approach to school improvement and effectiveness. The emphasis had been on schools identifying their own strengths and areas for development in order to contribute to the school system.

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A summary of the education outcomes in Slough 2018/19 were outlined, specifically:

- The proportion of good and outstanding schools in Slough was 92%, which was above the national average of 86%.
- Standards in key measures were above national average in EYFSP, Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4.
- Standards at Key Stage 5 were below the national average at post-16 for A-Level and for pupils attaining AAB in facilitating subjects.
- In the Early Years Foundation Stage the LA ranked 33 against all other LAs for pupils achieving a good level of development which was an increase of 7 places from 40th in 2018.
- KS2 the LA was ranked 30th against all other local authorities for pupils achieving the expected standards in reading, writing and maths combined which had increased 2 places from 32nd in 2018.
- At KS5 the LA was ranked 110th out of 152 LA's for average point score entry per A-Level - a decline of 34 places from 76th in 2018.

Outcomes in the LA continued to improve against national averages and the gap between most groups was generally smaller within Slough than compared against the national averages.

Referring specifically to the gap between high achievers at GCSE level and lower than expected A-Level results, Members were informed that a Working Group involving Secondary Headteachers and an Independent Consultant had been established to identify the causes of the downward trend.

A Member asked what impact the closure of schools had had on disadvantaged pupils and measures the LA had implemented to minimise these. It was noted that schools continued to support those pupils with Education and Health Care Plans and that they had remained open during the lockdown period to receive children of key workers. Concern was expressed regarding the increase in the percentage of pupils qualifying for free school meals. It was explained that due to COVID and its wider impacts an increase in individuals in receipt of benefits was not unusual and that the issue would be kept under review by the LA.

Members raised a number of questions about issues arising from COVID including the impact on the admissions arrangements and queries relating to individual schools. Panel members asked for information regarding what measures were being taken by schools to prepare for the return of pupils in September. It was suggested that Members visit a number of schools after their return to gain a more direct understanding of the issues they faced in response to the pandemic and the variety of measures undertaken to allow the safe return of pupils.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Panel recognised the crucial role that schools had played in recently months in support children and the families of key workers in particular. The report was noted and it was agreed that the Panel consider visits to schools in the Autumn term.

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Resolved –

- a) That details of the report be report be noted.
- b) That the Panel place on record its recognition and appreciation to schools in their role in supporting the NHS during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- c) That officers explore the possibility of Panel members visiting schools in the future to discuss the impact of COVID-19 and the recovery process.

7. COVID-19 Impact on Early Years Service

The Panel considered a report that updated on the effects of COVID-19 on the early years sector across Slough.

A detailed presentation was given that explained the statutory position of the provision of early years services; the operational position in the early weeks of 'lockdown' in March; and the progress made increasing provision since then in a COVID safe way. The Department of Education had instructed all early years settings to close in March, with the exception of provision for children of key workers and vulnerable children. The number of providers, such as childminders and children's centres, operating in the early weeks of 'lockdown' was 16%. One of the ten children's centres in Slough was kept open as the hub to support all eligible children at that stage. The authority worked collaboratively with the sector to reopen provision with COVID-19 measures in place following permission to reopen from 29th May, and by the end of June 46% of providers were operating, including 8 of the 10 children's centres. In early April, less than 100 children were attending early years provision given that it was restricted to children of key works and vulnerable children. Since reopening the numbers had steadily climbed and by the end of June 600 children were attending.

The Early Years Service had produced regular newsletters and communications during this period to keep providers up to date with local and national changes to legislation and guidance. The Panel welcomed the proactive work that had been undertaken to support quality home learning during the 'lockdown' period and a transition document and tool kit had been produced for early years providers to support the planned for children's transition to primary schools. Members discussed a range of issues including the impact on the assessments of younger children and access to equipment at home.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report was noted and the Panel commended the team for their work to respond to significant challenges arising from COVID-19.

Resolved – That the update on the impact of COVID-19 on the early years sector in Slough be noted.

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8. COVID-19 Impact on Slough Children's Services Trust

The Chief Executive of Slough Children's Services Trust introduced a report that summarised the impact of COVID-19 on their services to children and families in Slough.

The statutory responsibilities on children's social care still applied during COVID-19 restrictions and the Trust had had to make significant adaptations to way it delivered services. It had continued to operate a business as usual service and had not closed down any parts of its service. Face to face visits had continued where possible, with garden or 'virtual visits' used where a child or family member had symptoms or was shielding. However, whilst the Trust considered that the application of the new working arrangements had worked in terms of maintaining services, they had created additional work and pressures leading to capacity being stretched. It was noted that there were changes to the type of contacts and referrals with domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health referrals up significantly on the same period last year.

There had been a short term reduction in the number of contacts to the Trust at the start of 'lockdown'. It was recognised that the medium and long term impacts were not yet fully clear, especially as the pandemic was ongoing, but it was anticipated that demand for services would rise significantly in the coming months post-lockdown. Higher levels of unemployment and poverty were expected over time to further increase the demand for services. There was considerable uncertainty about the future financial impacts but an analysis had been conducted which projected an increase in assessments and caseloads through the autumn with a potential £1.2m financial pressure.

The Government had made some additional funding available and the Council confirmed that it had earmarked some of the COVID grant to the Trust to support its services during this challenging period. The Panel recognised that current and future financial pressures on the Trust would have an impact on the Council's budget. The Trust had been effected by staff shielding and self-isolating and 157 working days had been lost. A Members asked about the financial impact of this and whether it had created a backlog of work. It was responded that it had been a significant challenge with more work and less staff. Members discussed a range of other issues including the impacts on SEN services and children's mental health provision.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Panel acknowledged the work of the Trust and Council in seeking to continue to support vulnerable children during a very challenging period and agreed that the future service and financial impacts would need to carefully monitored.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

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9. Forward Work Programme 2020/21

Resolved – That the Scrutiny Officer arrange a workshop for the Committee, prior to the next scheduled meeting in October 2020, to discuss in detail the Panel's Work Programme 2020/21.

10. Date of Next Meeting - 21st October 2020

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 21st October 2020.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.47 pm)