

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: People Scrutiny Panel
DATE: 31 January 2023
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WARD(S): All

PART I

FOR DECISION

TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT – REVIEW OF WORKFORCE STRATEGY BUSINESS CASE FOR SLOUGH CHILDREN FIRST

1. Purpose of Report

As part of improving the Council's company governance, the Panel decided to set up a task and finish group to review Slough Children's First (SCF) draft business plan. Approval of the business plan is a reserved matter and will be approved by Cabinet alongside approval of the contract sum for 2023/24. The work of the task and finish group was intended to allow informed recommendations to be made to Cabinet on the business plan. To ensure a sufficiently in-depth piece of work, the Group focused on reviewing the workforce strategy business case as opposed to seeking to review the whole business plan.

The report seeks approval of the report attached at Appendix 1, including the recommendations, which have been split up into recommendations for the Council, for SCF and for the wider partnership of agencies who support children's safeguarding and wellbeing activities.

2. Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action

The Panel is recommended to:

1. Review and comment on the report attached at Appendix 1.
2. Recommend to Cabinet:
 - (a) That the Task and Finish Group Report is considered and the recommendations for the Council are accepted and acted upon;
 - (b) That Cabinet or the Cabinet Committee receives updates on progress against the recommendations as part of updates on SCF governance.
3. Request that the Chief Executive submits the Task and Finish Group Report to the SCF Board of Directors for consideration and acceptance of the recommendations.
4. Request that the Chief Executive submit relevant recommendations to the relevant partnership forums with a view to lead agencies being identified for each recommendation.
5. Note that a report will be brought back to Scrutiny in the next municipal year providing an update on progress against the recommendations.

Comments of Commissioners

“Commissioners would like to commend the task and finish group for the work they put in and the scope of their coverage. The approach they have followed and the learning they have obtained should flow through into future work and members should be thanked for setting such a good standard. DLUHC Commissioners look forward to reviewing the responses and implementation plans that follow the recommendations.”

3. Slough Corporate Plan

- A borough for children and young people to thrive

The Council’s corporate plan emphasises the need for children and young people to be able to access services that keep them safe and secure. This includes a focus on delivering preventative help to children and families. It also includes a focus on raising aspirations and delivering opportunities for young people to prosper. Support for children and young people should be seen as a whole Council and wider partnership responsibility. Whilst SCF have a key responsibility to deliver statutory services to safeguard children and young people, many of the recommendations in the report relate to recommendations for the wider partnership.

- A council that lives within our means, balances the budget and delivers best value for taxpayers and service users

In their report to DLUHC published 28th July 2022, Slough Borough Council Best Value Commissioners expressed uncertainty regarding the deliverability of the Council’s current savings plan. It was also flagged that the financial pressures arising from the current model of delivery of SCF are not possible to contain without an impact on service delivery. The Council will need to ensure it sets a fair baseline budget for SCF to allow it to deliver on its responsibilities. The Council also needs to ensure that SCF is utilising its funding in a way that is supporting good outcomes for children in a cost-effective manner. It is clear from the report that many of the strategies and approaches adopted by SCF are delivering high quality services and leading to improvements in recruitment and retention of staff. However, the national and local pressures mean that a different approach may be needed to support children and families in the future.

4. Other Implications

(a) Financial

The recommendations are seeking to ensure that the Council’s limited resources are used to best effect. This includes ensuring that strategies are targeted at increasing recruitment of permanent staff and retaining and developing a high performing workforce. This will allow for continuity of case worker for children and families. In addition, the recommendations for the Council relate to appropriately commissioning and designing services so they support children and families via services targeted at mental health, domestic abuse, substance misuse and early years. Finally, there are key recommendations aimed at the wider partnership of agencies that support children and families to ensure that the limited amount of public funding within the Borough of Slough is appropriately targeted at those most in need.

(b) Risk Management

The Council's highest corporate risk relates to a failure to appropriately safeguard children and support families to ensure that children are kept safe and well. This report and its recommendations are key to inform Council decision-making across a wide range of services, which will demonstrate that the Council is taking a whole system approach to its responsibilities to children and young people.

(c) Legal Implications

The Secretary of State for Education has powers to issue a direction in relation to specified social services functions relating to children under s.497A of the Education Act 1996. Various directions have been issued in relation to statutory functions in Slough since 2014. The sixth statutory direction was issued in April 2021. This requires that the Council secures that prescribed children's services functions are performed by SCF and the Council jointly and other prescribed children's services functions are performed by SCF on behalf of the Council. The Council was also directed to enter into a new service agreement to implement the discharge of these functions and continue to comply with any instructions of the Secretary of State, his representatives and the Children's Services Commissioner in relation to

- i. ensuring that the Council's children's social care functions are performed to the required standard;
- ii. the terms of the Service Agreement that require the Secretary of State's consent or approval;
- iii. the operation of the Direction.

SCF is a wholly owned company and therefore the Council as its sole owner makes decisions on reserved matters as set out in its Articles of Association. These include approval of an annual business plan covering a three-year period. SCF is required to submit a draft business plan by 30 September in the previous financial year. SCF submitted a high level 7-year plan containing invest to save business cases in the summer of 2022. However, due to the significant level of investment being requested, the DfE agreed to commission a review which was undertaken by Mutual Ventures. This review is appended at Appendix 2 and makes a series of findings and recommendations, including concern about some of the assumptions being applied and alternative areas of focus.

(d) Equalities Implications

The Council and SCF are obligated to comply with duties under the Equality Act 2010. The services are generally intended to support children and young people and their wider families. Certain communities will be disproportionately represented within the cohort of children and families being supported. Some recommendations are particularly focused on specific protected groups, including early years support, youth services and families experienced poor mental health. There is also a recommendation about utilising the diverse population as a positive as many of the existing staff really enjoy the difference they can make within the town.

5. Supporting Information

Appendix 1 is a report of the Task and Finish Group set up to review the SCF draft business plan. The Group agreed to focus on workforce strategy and interviewed a number of individuals and groups of SCF staff to inform its report. It also reviewed national publications and data provided by SCF.

The Group would like to place on record its thanks to staff within SCF and the DfE Commissioner. The morale and passion that staff showed to their work was positive to see and the Group identified many areas of good practice, including good links with the local university, embedded strategies to support staff to progress their careers within SCF and excellent leadership and management support to allow staff to feel safe and supported. It was noticeable that the things that often made the most difference were not those that cost a lot of money, but demonstrated the care and commitment of the workforce.

The report highlights the national context and pressures around children's social care and the move to strength based or restorative based approaches to allow children to stay with their family network where targeted support allows this. The Group also noted the importance of the wider children's workforce and the need to focus on and develop this wider workforce to meet needs at an earlier stage. Schools clearly play a significant role in the safeguarding and wellbeing of children and the Council's education service must ensure that these key partners work together and support children at risk of missing education and being out of school. The report highlights the improvements that have been made in Sunderland City Council, particularly in relation to ensuring the participation of children and young people in training and that they are at the heart of decision-making across a range of Council services.

The report highlights the need for effective partnership working at a strategic and operational level and opportunities for agencies to join up on recruitment and apprenticeship opportunities. The report also highlights the risks for SCF if other parts of the Council are not operating at the right level, therefore the Council needs to carefully consider the impact of its savings plans on those services that provide early help and support services that impact on children and families. These include early years, education, community safety, youth and housing services.

It was noticeable that the current strategies of recruiting and developing newly qualified and overseas qualified staff was starting to work in terms of reducing the turnover and bringing down caseloads. Managers shared positive experiences of supportive leaders and managers that compared favourably with other places they had worked. It was recognised that strong leaders are key to a motivated workforce and the Panel was pleased to note that there were interviews for a new Executive Director / Chief Executive of SCF prior to Christmas and an appointment has been made, as the turnover of senior leaders in the past has been very damaging to the workforce.

In terms of investment, the report flags that many staff want to see opportunities for progression and investment in learning and development. This was more important than retention bonuses, which can be seen as divisive and unfairly applied. This is on the basis the SCF is paying salaries that are broadly comparable to its immediate neighbours and that it is seen as an employer who will support and develop its staff.

The work of the transformation team was particularly recognised and as this is funded by a DfE grant which is ending next year, this would be an area that should be prioritised for investment.

Finally, the report highlights the need to focus on outcomes for children and understanding the impact of decisions on children, young people and families. The lack of stability in the workforce is highly damaging to children and can lead to them having to tell their story to multiple people. On the positive, there is an opportunity to put children and young people at the heart of decision-making by involving them in workforce planning, being visible at senior levels in the organisation and to lead and participate in training. It was clear to the Group that an edge of care team would make a real difference to older children at risk of criminal exploitation, family breakdown and domestic abuse.

6. **Comments of Other Committees**

Cabinet will be asked to consider the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group when making decisions on a variety of matters, including approval of the SCF business plan.

The People Scrutiny Panel may wish to consider whether it wants to add a topic to its work programme on multi-agency working to protect and support children and young people.

7. **Conclusion**

The Task and Finish Group welcome feedback on its report and hope that the themes and recommendations will be taken into account by the Council, SCF and wider partnership.

8. **Appendices Attached**

Appendix 1 – Review of workforce strategy business case for SCF – Report by the People Scrutiny Panel Task and Finish Group

Appendix 2 – Mutual Ventures review of SCF draft business plan

9. **Background Papers**

None

The draft business plan and business cases that are referred to will be appended to the Cabinet paper, but until that point, they remain confidential. The list of documents available to the Panel are either published documents or are exempt documents at this time.