

Cabinet – Meeting held on Monday, 21st February, 2022.

Present:- Councillors Swindlehurst (Chair), Mann (Vice-Chair), Akram, Anderson, Bains, Carter, Hulme and Pantelic

Also present:- Councillor Gahir

Apologies for Absence:- None

PART 1

70. Declarations of Interest

Item 3 – Slough Children First Annual Business Plan: Councillor Hulme declared a pecuniary interest in that she was a member of the Slough Children First (SCF) Board. Councillor Hulme stayed in the meeting and participated on the basis she had been appointed to SCF as the Council's representative on it as an outside body as per the provision (g) of the general dispensations section of the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

Item 4 – SEND Written Statement of Action: Councillor Pantelic declared that she was a practicing primary school teacher, not in a school in Slough. She stayed in the meeting and participated in the discussion.

71. Minutes of the Meeting held on 17th January 2022

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 17th January 2022 be approved as a correct record.

72. Annual business plan for Slough Children First Limited (SCF)

The Executive Director of People (Children) / Chief Executive of Slough Children First (SCF) gave a presentation and summarised a report that sought approval for SCFs annual business plan.

It was noted that SCF was a company wholly owned by the Council and approval of the annual plan was a reserved matter under SCFs Articles of Association. This was an interim business plan that sought to set out SCF's priorities and budgetary requirements, together with the assumptions underlying its financial strategy. It was noted that the business plan should have been presented to Council in September 2021. This was therefore an interim plan for 2022 to 2025. The new plan for 2023-26 would be presented by September 2022, with reports to People Scrutiny Panel and Cabinet in quarters 1 and 2 of the 2022/23 financial year respectively.

The key elements of the business plan were summarised including the vision and values, practice model, workforce issues and key strategic aims. The aims included quality improvements throughout a children's journey with a target of 70% of casefiles being good within 18 months and stability in the

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workforce with less than 20% agency workforce. The plan included the aim to work within budgets through addressing demands, for example through a continuum of Early Help; reduced reliance on agency and innovative spend; income maximisation by working with partners; and back office efficiencies.

Lead Members asked a number of questions and raised several points during the course of the discussion which are summarised as follows:

- The Cabinet recognised the improvements that had been made since the establishment of SCF both in terms of the stronger working relationship with the Council and, crucially, the improvement of services. Lead Members welcomed the fact that no service in SCF was rated as 'inadequate' for the first time in a decade and whilst it was recognised much more progress needed to be made this was a significant milestone.
- The financial position of the company was discussed, particularly the importance of SCF operating within its financial envelope and delivering its savings plans. The concerns raised by the Commissioners on this issue were noted and the Cabinet agreed the increased reporting as set out in the report ensure progress could be monitored.
- Lead Members agreed that hearing the 'voice of the child' in the plans and strategic documents was crucial but did not come through strongly in the business plan and they would like to see more examples and evidence of this in future versions.
- A Lead Member queried the fact that the equality impact assessment did not identify any impacts on people with any protected characteristics. The Cabinet requested that the next version of plan include evidence and figures to demonstrate that the plan would not have a greater impact on certain groups than others.
- The workforce challenges were recognised particularly the ongoing issue of permanent recruitment of social workers. Concern was expressed about the potential over-reliance on Innovate teams. The Director explained the work being undertaken on recruitment and retention, including the training and development opportunities for newly qualified social workers.
- The company's business plan and improvement plan were clearly linked and a Lead Member highlighted that some of timescales in the improvement plan had already slipped, for example priority 3 on participation and engagement. Assurance was provided that whilst the plans were rightly ambitious, actions and targets would be realistic and this would be reflected in future versions of the plan.
- A question was asked about the reasons for the high provision made for legal costs of £2.1m. The Director responded that increased

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complexity of cases and delays in the courts systems were contributory factors. The Cabinet asked how confident the proposed £0.6m reduction could be achieved and it was noted that work would need to take place 'upstream' to hit this target.

- A Lead Members asked whether the key target of 70% of all children's files being good or above within 18 months was achievable given the baseline of 24% at September 2021. The Director stated that the company had included targets that it would be able to deliver.

The Lead Commissioner addressed the Cabinet and commented that signs of performance improvement were welcomed but further progress was needed. He commented on the important role that scrutiny should play in reviewing the business plan in detail in the summer and making recommendations to Cabinet.

Councillor Gahir was invited to address Cabinet and he commented on the timeline to reduce agency staff and costs of interim staff. The Director responded to the points raised.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Cabinet recognised the progress that had been made and agreed the recommendations as set out in the report for future scrutiny and refinement of the business plan. The Cabinet recognised the significant milestone that no service was rated 'inadequate' and formally recorded their thanks to the staff that had contributed to that achievement.

Resolved –

- (a) That SCF's business plan for 2022 to 2025 be approved on an interim basis.
- (b) That it be agreed that approval was subject to the following:
 - Quarterly monitoring reports being presented by SCF to the Council for formal comment and noting by Cabinet setting out achievements against the business plan;
 - The SCF business plan was to be timetabled for consideration by the People Scrutiny Panel in the first quarter of 2022/23;
 - An updated business plan for 2022 to 2025 was to be presented to the Council in Quarter 2 of 2022/23;
 - SCF was to submit its business plan for 2023 to 2026 by 30 September 2022 in accordance with the requirements set out in the Articles of Association and to allow sufficient time for this to be considered by the People Scrutiny Panel and incorporated in the budget setting process.

- (c) That SCF staff be formally thanked and congratulated on the fact there were no longer any inadequate services within the company and that this was a significant milestone, which reflected that hard work of staff within SCF.

73. SEND Written Statement of Action

The Lead Member for Children's Services, Lifelong Learning & Skills and the Associate Director, Education & Inclusion introduced a report on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Written Statement of Action (WSOA).

The WSOA had been filed with Ofsted and the CQC on 18th February 2022 in response to the SEND local area inspection carried out between 27 September and 1 October 2021. The Cabinet was asked to note the WSOA and approve the next steps which included the preparation of a detailed action plan to be incorporated into the Council's wider Recovery and Improvement Plan.

The Ofsted/CQC report had identified a number of significant weaknesses in the areas practice that the Council and Slough Clinical Commissioning Group, working with other partners, would need to address through a WSOA. The main areas of concern were outlined and they included weak arrangements for ensuring effective joint leadership, the overlooked voice of children and the timeliness with which Education, Health and Care plans were produced. The inspection had also highlighted a number of strengths which were noted. The WSOA had been co-produced with input from the Council, social care, health parents and school partners. There was a clear desire to improve services and a substantial amount of work would be required to deliver the necessary changes.

The Cabinet emphasised the importance of aligning the WSOA with the wider Council Recovery and Improvement Plan and agreed that SEND improvements must not be dealt with in isolation but as part of the broader work with partners to improve children's services. Lead Members highlighted the successful co-production model used in adult social care and requested that that good practice be utilised with a strategy developed with service users, parents and carers at the centre.

Lead Members asked for clarity about one of the weaknesses identified in the inspection that: *"not all schools were welcoming of children and young people with SEND and arrangements for partnership working with schools had been informal and ad hoc"*. It was noted that this observation had most likely arisen from some parent feedback to the inspection. The Cabinet discussed the roles and responsibilities and schools in the improvement process.

A report on the WSOA would be considered by the People Scrutiny Panel on 31st March 2022 and the Cabinet asked that the focus be on looking forward to focus on the improvement journey. The Panel should be encouraged to

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propose recommendations for Cabinet. It was agreed that the Cabinet would receive a progress update on delivery in six months.

At the conclusion of the discussion the recommendations were agreed.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Joint Written Statement of Action attached at Appendix A to the report be noted.
- (b) That the following next steps be approved:
 - That a detailed action plan is prepared and incorporated into the Council's wider Recovery and Improvement Plan.
 - That the SEND action plan be presented to the People Scrutiny Panel in Quarter 1 of 2022/23.
 - That a report be brought back to Cabinet in the next 6 months giving an update on progress against the action plan.

74. Appointment of External Auditors

The Cabinet noted an information report that set out a recommendation from the Audit & Corporate Governance Committee to Council regarding the appointment of external auditors. The Cabinet were supportive of the recommendation to opt in to the sector led appointment process through the Public Sector Audit Appointments.

Resolved – The report was noted, specifically that the Audit & Corporate Governance Committee would be making the following recommendation to Council in March 2022:

“Recommend to Council that the Council accepts the Public Sector Audit Appointments’ (PSAA) invitation to opt into the sector-led option for the appointment of external auditors for the five-year period from 2023/24.”

75. References from Overview & Scrutiny

There were no references from Overview & Scrutiny.

76. Notification of Key Decisions

The Cabinet considered and endorsed the Notification of Key Decisions published on 21st January 2022 which set out the key decisions expected to be taken by Cabinet over the next three months.

Resolved – The published Notification of Decisions was endorsed.

Chair

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