

People Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 2nd December, 2021.

Present:- Councillors Qaseem (Chair), Kelly (Vice-Chair), Basra, Begum, Matloob, Mohammad and Sandhu

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Gahir, Hulme and Strutton

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Ajaib and Brooker

PART 1

17. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Basra declared that she carried out work for a number of organisations in the education sector.

Councillor Mohammad declared that she was a practice manager at GP surgery in Slough.

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

Councillor Hulme, attending under Rule 30, declared that she was the Council's nominated representative on the Board of Slough Children First.

All councillors remained in the Chamber throughout and participated in the meeting.

18. Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 November 2021

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 11th November 2022 be approved as a correct record, subject to noting the comments of a Panel member that in relation to the SEND Inspection (Minute 13, page 2) and Home to School Transport (Minute 13, page 4), further information had been promised to Members which had not be circulated in a timely manner.

19. Member Questions

No Member Questions had been submitted.

20. Slough Children First Progress Report

The Panel received a comprehensive presentation from Carol Douch, the Director of Operations at Slough Children First (SCF), on the progress of the company since its establishment as a local authority company in April 2021, in a new model that replaced Slough Children's Trust.

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Members noted the revised governance model; appointment of a new independent chair and non-executive directors; the performance management arrangements; and the scope of services delivered by the company, which were principally all tier 3 and 4 children's social care services. The company faced a number of operational challenges including workforce pressures due to competitive market for social workers and recruitment and retention difficulties; IT issues; and a high number of referrals and caseloads. There had been a significant increase in demand in recent months, including 'front door' contacts received up 31% between August and September; contacts from key agencies such as schools and health services; and an increase in referrals. Covid-19 had had a number of impacts both operationally and in terms of the patterns of service demand. The Panel noted performance information on the 'front door', safeguarding and family support, Children Looked After and care leavers.

The Panel discussed the improvement journey for children's services under the Department for Education Direction and Ms Douch highlighted that no SCF service was now rated 'inadequate'. It was the first time this had been the position for several years, although it was recognised that significantly more progress was required. In relation to recent inspections, Members noted that Breakaway had recently been classified as good for all areas and outstanding for leadership and management. The SEND inspection had identified a number of significant weaknesses and a Joint Written Statement of Action between the Council and Clinical Commissioning Group would be required to be submitted in February 2022.

Members thanked Ms Douch for the presentation. In future Members requested that the slides be circulated in advance to allow time to consider the information provided. It was agreed that the slides would be circulated and published.

A wide ranging discussion followed which is summarised as follows:

- Workforce – the Panel recognised that recruitment of retention of permanent social workers and other professionals was a long-standing challenge and asked what more could be done. Ms Douch set out the measures taken, including overseas recruitment, and noted that workforce challenges were a national as well as a local issue. The Panel was informed that SCF had recently met the Department for Education to review the position and no further actions were identified over and above what the company was doing. It was noted that 50% of the frontline staff were permanent. Members asked about the processes in place for overseas recruitment to ensure social workers were suitably qualified and trained to perform effectively. In response it was noted all of those recruited were qualified and a support programme was in place. It was also recognised that the financial position of the Council was a factor for some workers considering coming to work in Slough.

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- IT problems – Members asked questions about the IT problems referred to and it was confirmed they related to Observatory House. Contact between children and services often took place via phone and video calls which required good and reliable connections. The reception issues in Observatory House had been recognised and escalated. Some improvements had been made but further work would be needed to address all the issues.
- Care Leavers – a question was asked about the support given to care leavers to access employment and training. It was noted that 30 out of 79 young people were not in employment, education or training. Ms Douch highlighted the excellent work of the Virtual School and the NEET team which had transferred from the Council. The corporate parenting panel received data in relation to care leavers and regularly monitored performance indicators.

Speaking under Rule 30, Councillor Strutton asked a number of questions including whether the IT issues had impacted on the Virtual School and social work recruitment; and whether SCF now had suitable rooms and facilities at Observatory House for children and families given the previous limited provision at St Martin's Place. Ms Douch responded that the IT issues had not had an impact on the Virtual School provision. It was reported that one member of recently recruited staff attributed the IT problems as the reason for leaving employment with SCF. Ms Douch confirmed that there was now improved and adequate rooms for children and families since the move to Observatory House. Councillor Strutton raised the issue of the SEND inspection, the findings of which had been published since the last meeting of the Panel. SCF did not manage SEND services so scrutiny questions would be best put to the Director of Children's Services. The Lead Member responsible for children's services, Councillor Hulme, was present and summarised the immediate work that would be undertaken to respond to the weaknesses identified in the inspection and to improve services. The Panel agreed to receive a report on the SEND action plan at the meeting in March.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Panel thanked Ms Douch for her presentation which was noted. The company would provide an annual report to scrutiny in the spring of 2022.

Resolved – That the progress update on Slough Children First be noted.

21. Slough Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report 2020-21

The Safeguarding Partnership Manager, Betty Lynch, introduced the Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report 2020/21. The report set out the key achievements and areas for development in relation to the work of the partnership in the past year for both adults and children's safeguarding.

The Annual Report was a statutory requirement and it was presented to scrutiny after it had been approved by the partnership. It had been a challenging year, particularly due to the impacts of Covid 'lockdowns'.

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Partners had worked hard to manage safeguarding risks throughout the period. The Panel noted significant areas of progress during the year including a new threshold document rooted in the UN Convention for the rights of the child; Child Neglect Strategy and practice tools; shift to online multi-agency safeguarding training to ensure professionals could continue to be trained despite Covid restrictions; and an increasing volume of rapid review work in relation to children.

Members discussed various aspects of the report and asked a number of questions to which Ms Lynch responded. It was asked whether the Strategic Leaders Group (SLG) was being properly led despite the fact the Council Chief Executive had not been at work for some time. Members were assured that the SLG was working well and that the Executive Director of People (Adults) had been chairing the group for some time anyway. The Panel asked what the key risks were. It was noted that the partnership had a detailed risk log in place which included workforce recruitment and retention and staff fatigue following the demands and pressures of Covid. Councillors asked if the report covered any risks arising from the issuing of the Section 114 Notice. The Executive Director responded that this report did not include them as the reporting period was to March 2021 and the Section 114 was issued in July 2021. Any financial risks arising from this would therefore be covered in the next annual report and the SLG were mindful of the potential impacts of the Council's financial position on a range of interventions that supported safeguarding.

Members asked about the work partners were doing to safeguard children from exploitation. Ms Lynch responded by summarising the activity being undertaken and commented on the possible impacts of Covid 'lockdowns' with children out of school and concerns about more children being 'unseen' with abuse and exploitation being harder to identify. There was a discussion about work with schools and assurance was provided the system generally worked very well with clear and prescribed processes for partnership working when referrals were made. If Members became aware of instances where the process was not working as expected they should report them through the proper channels so any issues could be addressed. The work done in Slough to tackle the problem of modern slavery was highlighted. The Panel reviewed the adult safeguarding trend data; discussed the work of the violence task force; and links with the community safety partnership.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Panel placed on record its commendation for all partners in working in this important and challenging area to protect vulnerable people in Slough, particularly during the Covid pandemic.

Resolved – That the Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report 2020/21 be noted.

22. Forward Work Programme

The Panel reviewed its work programme for 2021/22. It was noted that the next meeting in January would focus on the revised budget proposals for adults and children's services. This would include an update on the Provider Services Review following the scrutiny of this issue in September.

Members agreed to add a report on the SEND action plan to the plan for March 2022.

Resolved – That the work programme be noted.

23. Members' Attendance Record

Resolved – That the record of Members' attendance for the 2021/22 municipal year be noted.

24. Date of Next Meeting - 31 January 2022

It was confirmed that the next scheduled meeting of the Panel would be held on 31st January 2022.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.32 pm and closed at 8.36 pm)