

People Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 11th November, 2021.

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

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

Apologies for Absence:- None.

PART 1

10. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Basra declared that she worked with a number of organisations in the education sector.

Councillor Brooker declared that he was a Governor at Ryvers Primary School.

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

Councillor Mohammad declared that she was a Practice Manager at a GP Surgery in Slough.

They all remained and participated in the meeting.

11. Minutes of the Meeting held on 13th September 2021

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 13th September 2021 be approved as a correct record.

12. Member Questions

Councillor Brooker had submitted a member question requesting details relating to the planned admission number and actual admission number for each school in Slough for September 2021. The Panel noted details of the reply which had been published in the supplementary agenda.

Resolved – That details of the Member question and reply be noted.

13. Draft Budget Proposals 2022/23 - People Directorates and Slough Children First

The Panel received detailed presentations on the draft budget proposals 2022/23 in relation to the People Directorate (Children and Adults) and Slough Children First. Members also had the opportunity to review the detailed business cases and equality impact assessments for each of the proposed budget proposals and a number of Members had taken the opportunity to review the information provided.

Prior to receiving the presentations, Councillor Hulme, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Lifelong Learning and Skills, provided a brief overview of

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the context within which savings for the 2022/23 financial year were being sought. The S114 Notice, impact of Covid and an increase in demands on services had resulted in a need to make services more efficient.

The Interim Director Children's Services reminded the Panel of the current arrangements for the service, noting that the social care aspect of the service was placed in a Trust in 2015 but earlier this year was established as Slough Children First (SCF); a company which was now wholly owned by the Council. Although SCF continued to receive funds from the central government it was noted that nationally, there was an over spend in 96% of Children's departments. Recruitment and retention of staff continued to be a major pressure and this was attributed partly to legacy issues and the reputation of the service. Work continued to take place regarding the public perception of the service and the Panel were reminded that Fostering Services had recently been rated as good.

The financial situation was extremely challenging with some services being delivered at the minimum statutory provision. Areas that had been identified to deliver savings included Home to School Transport and Children's Centres.

Children's Services

The Assistant Director, Education and Inclusion outlined the 21/22 budgetary position by service area, noting that there was a £190k adverse position to budget, which was mainly due to £123k business rates savings target and £67k salary inflation pressure. A savings target of £1.044m for 21/22 was proposed and service areas that had been identified to achieve this were highlighted, including £125k Home to School Transport savings and £344k Early Years Education reduction in staffing (vacancies)

The Panel were informed of the key issues for 21/22 which included the recent SEND inspection. It was anticipated that the findings – due to be published imminently – would highlight major systemic and sustained weaknesses across the system since 2014. The service was impacted significantly from the downgrading of SEND case officers (resulting in 75% turnover) leaving a significant backlog of overdue statutory ECHP applications.

Referring to Children's Centres (CC'S), three options were being proposed with a view to re-purpose the centres. Any reduction in the number of CC's was likely to have a detrimental effect on the levels of need across communities and lead to additional, more costly pressure on the "Front Door" – which was already exceeding capacity with the potential of placing children at risk.

The savings proposals for 2022/23 and departmental emerging pressures likely to be faced were highlighted.

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Slough Children First

The Director of Finance for Slough Children First (SCF) reported on the 21/22 budget progress. SCF was reporting a £532k adverse position to budget and work continued to identify further opportunities in year and for future years to bridge the gaps in budget. Additional savings would be delivered through service reductions (£266k), service efficiencies (£399k), income generation (£322k) and staffing savings (£116k)

The interim Director of Operations provided detailed context relating to the key issues and pressures. There had been an increase of 277 more children in need in 21/22 driven by Covid and legacy issues; together with more children presenting with complex needs; which if not managed at the right time would impact on the number requiring statutory intervention. Recruitment challenges had resulted in a high reliance on agency staff which in turn created an instability of workforce impacting on children and their families.

For the financial year 2022/23 savings targets of £3.420m, which included £746k of growth, were required. Savings of £2.832k had been identified, leaving a shortfall of £588k against target. Members were informed of the measures to achieve the savings which included a new model of in house fostering recruitment which was expected to result in a net increase of 8 new carers in year.

Likely departmental emerging pressures for 2022/23 were brought to Members attention. Staffing pressures were impacting on the improvement journey to offer consistently good services to promote the welfare and safeguard children. A reduction in business support would have a direct impact on front line staff resulting in less time spent with children and families.

People (Adults)

The Executive Director of People (Adults) provided a summary on the delivery of savings for 2021/22. Savings were split into two areas - Adult Social Care Transformation Programme Savings - £2.088m of which £1.058m had been delivered and Adult Social Care savings - £1.749m of which £1.607m had been delivered. The remainder of the savings were on target to be delivered by the end of the financial year. The ongoing impact of the pandemic and demand for social care above the planned levels, especially over the winter period, were noted as key issues for the current financial year.

A savings target of £7.721m was expected during the 2022/23 financial year and a breakdown of the savings proposals was explained together with an overview of the emerging pressures for this service area.

Following the conclusion of the presentations, Panel Members asked a number of questions which included:

- Adult Social Care - What progress was being made on implementing the provider services review and were the projected savings of

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£300,000 this year and £854,000 next year achievable. The Executive Director of People (Adults) stated that it was expected the savings would be made. Current users of day centres had been allocated a social worker and given the option of an alternative provider. The consultation was due to close by the end of December 2021.

- A Member referred to comments made during the presentation regarding the increased risk of not meeting the statutory duties of the Care Act and asked how this risk would be assessed and managed. It was explained that the Council had a statutory duty to assess individuals and meet care needs identified, and whilst these would be met, the risk was one of remained that assessments potentially not being made in a timely manner and therefore the needs of individuals not being met.
- In reference to whether there would be any additional funding coming to Slough to support services in the next two years, it was noted that although additional funds had been identified the amount and criteria for use of funds was not known at this stage.
- A Member asked what measures were in place to ensure families were able to look after adults via the Accelerated Shared Lives Scheme and was informed that a thorough vetting process took place and support provided as necessary.
- It was projected that client income/contributions were to increase from £300k in the current financial year to over £1m in 2022/23 and a Member asked for details for the increase and whether this was achievable. The Executive Director of People (Adults) stated that following a detailed analysis it had been identified that a number of people receiving services had not been financially assessed and that officers were confident in delivering this savings target.
- Concern was expressed that 'diverting demand at the front door' would result in service user needs not being properly met. The Associate Director, Adult Social Care Operations explained that rather than immediate referrals being made to social workers/services; a more focused approach would be adopted with individuals directed to specific support services.

The Cabinet Member for Social Care and Public Health addressed the Panel, stating that the budgetary position was being robustly monitored and that approval had recently been given to recruit to vacant posts to ensure the delivery of the transformation programme savings.

- A Member asked for details relating to the £120k savings projected for Home to School Transport (HTST) in 2021/22, given that there had been an overspend of circa £1m during 2019/20. The Associate Director, Education and Inclusion informed Members that consultants had been engaged to carry out a procurement process looking at delivery of the service and it was anticipated the savings would be met. Details of the cost of appointment of the consultants would be circulated to the Panel following the meeting.
- Clarification was sought as to whether the HTST proposed savings of £77k in 2022/23 were an efficiency saving by reducing transport costs

or a service reduction by tightening the policy, resulting in fewer children being eligible for assistance. It was noted that children eligible for HTST would continue to receive the service and savings would be delivered by improvements being made to delivery of the service i.e identifying alternative routes.

- Members asked for details of the recent Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) local area inspection. It was noted that the report had highlighted major systemic and sustained weaknesses across the system since 2014. The service was impacted significantly from the turnover in SEND case officers leaving a backlog of overdue statutory Education and Health Care Plan applications. It was brought to Members attention that it was critical that additional resources were identified to address issues raised. It was agreed that a copy of the report would be sent to the Panel once available.
- Concern was expressed that any reductions in Children's Centres (CC's) would have a detrimental effect on the levels of need across communities resulting in more pressure on the 'Front Door.' Councillor Hulme reminded the Panel of the consultation on CC's that would determine how they operated and emphasised that there were no plans to currently close any CC's and that the use of the centres would be repurposed. A Member asked for clarification whether the 30 hours free provision for 2 year olds would continue given the current consultation on use of CC's. The Associate Director, Education and Inclusion stated that details would be confirmed to the Panel following the meeting.
- A Member referred to the recent establishment of Slough Children First (SCF) and asked how confident officers were in controlling expenditure whilst also delivering improved services for the children in the Borough. The interim Director Children's Services stated that SCF faced significant challenges, including that two thirds of social workers were agency works. This had been an ongoing issue for several years and a challenging and complex issue to resolve. Although a recent recruitment campaign had resulted in a number of social workers it was recognised that a more permanent and stable staffing structure was paramount in delivering a good service.
- Referring to 2022/23 proposed savings, the biggest saving proposed was £1.4m through commissioning alternative provision for exploited teenagers. A Member expressed concern that reductions were being proposed in the youth offending team at a time when there was an increase in gang related activity and county lines. The Associate Director, Improvement and Front Line Practice explained that SCF had an Exploitation and Youth Justice Team and Department for Education funding had meant that work continued to be carried out with children at risk or exploitation.
- Further details were requested relating to 2022/23 service efficiencies savings, specifically including alternate provision for exploited teenagers. It was explained that a pilot scheme was already underway with a local provider, which had moved three teenagers placed in residential settings outside of the borough, back into wrap around care in the town. A local market was being developed to reduce the need to place young people out of the borough.

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The Chair thanked officers and members for a thorough preliminary discussion on the budget proposals and noted that further detailed proposals would be considered at the January meeting.

Resolved – That details of the draft budget proposals 2022/23, People Directorates and Slough Children First be noted.

14. Forward Work Programme

The Panel discussed details of the work programme and agreed that the following items be considered at the 2nd December Panel meeting -

- Safeguarding Annual Report
- Slough Children First Progress Report

Resolved – That details of the work programme, as amended, be agreed.

15. Members' Attendance Record

Resolved – That details of the Members Attendance Record be noted.

16. Date of Next Meeting - 2nd December 2021

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 2nd December 2021.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.49 pm)