

## Slough Borough Council

<b>Report To:</b>	Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee
<b>Date:</b>	4 January 2024
<b>Subject:</b>	Update on task and finish report – Review of Workforce Strategy Business Case for Slough Children First (SCF)
<b>Chief Officer:</b>	Stephen Brown – Chief Executive
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Sarah Wilson – Assistant Director – Legal and Governance
<b>Ward(s):</b>	All
<b>Exempt:</b>	NO
<b>Appendices:</b>	None

### 1. Summary and Recommendations

1.1 This report provides an update on progress against recommendations made by the previous People Scrutiny Panel in relation to SCF's workforce strategy. The previous report was presented to a meeting of the Panel on 31 January 2023 and was put before Cabinet at its meeting on 23 February 2023, which can be found at the following link - [Review of workforce strategy business case for Slough Children First](#)

1.2 Recommendations:

Committee is recommended to:

- (a) Comment and note the progress update.
- (b) Consider whether it wishes to incorporate any of the recommendations into the work programme.

#### **Reason:**

The new scrutiny arrangements are expected to focus on improvement work. Children's social care is under the statutory intervention of the Department for Education. The previous task and finish group report was commended by the DLUHC commissioners for setting a good standard to be followed in the future. They also commented that they looked forward to reviewing the responses and implementation plans that follow the recommendation. This update provides an opportunity for committee members to consider whether adequate progress has been made.

#### **Commissioner Review**

Noted - no other comment from commissioners.

## 2. Report

### Introductory paragraph

2.1 The Council's Corporate Plan 2023-2027 sets out a purpose to close the healthy life expectancy gap by focusing on children. This overarching purpose will be delivered by being resident focused, providing financial sustainability, enabling communities, strengthening partnerships and building trust. The task and finish group report made recommendations to SCF, the Council and the wider partnership. Whilst it was focused on reviewing the workforce strategy, by doing this it identified a number of wider priorities.

### Options considered

**Option 1 – do not report back to scrutiny** - There is no legal requirement to formally report back on recommendations. These were presented to Cabinet and accepted. However, the previous People Scrutiny Panel accepted a recommendation to receive an update report in the next municipal year. **This is not recommended.**

**Option 2 – report back on a regular basis.** The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Good Scrutiny Guide refers to the monitoring of recommendations easily becoming an industry and that after six months or a year, oversight should revert to a standard "watching brief" which scrutiny should hold over all services. Recommendations should not normally need to be reported to committee, however where recommendations have not been implemented, scrutiny may wish to hold the relevant lead member to account in a public forum to understand why progress has not been made. **This is not recommended.**

**Option 3 – receive one update report and use this to determine whether to amend the current work programme.** These recommendations were made prior to the change in political control. There has been significant change in leadership both at a political, strategic and operational level within the Council and SCF. Therefore, it is deemed appropriate to bring a single update report back for the current committee to consider whether it is satisfied with progress or whether it wishes the update to provide a focus for its future work programme. **This is recommended.**

### Background

2.2 The information below sets out progress made against each recommendation. These are split into recommendations for the wider partnership, for the Council and for SCF.

### Partnership recommendations

**Recommendation 1 - Recognise the importance and value of the wider "children's workforce" and develop a shared language across the partnership to empower children and families and to be aspirational and express a shared ambition. All agencies to develop performance metrics to measure these outcomes.**

2.3 In July 2023, Cabinet approved a Slough Early Help Partnership Strategy 2023-2025. This was a multi-agency strategy agreed between SCF, the Council, Thames Valley Police and Health. It set out a vision:

**'Children and young people feel happy, safe and loved within their families and wider community, where they are helped to thrive, not just survive'**

2.4 The strategy included a common language for early help and emphasised that delivery of the offer involved Council services, health, police, community and voluntary sector organisations and faith groups working alongside children, young people and families. A two year delivery plan and governance arrangements for monitoring progress is set out in the strategy.

**Recommendation 1 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 2 - Explore opportunities to extend the education and employment support to children in need and under child protection plans, including having a multi-agency structured apprenticeship programme focused on the value of public service.**

2.5 The Council has made progress with embedding its corporate parenting duties, which include considering the impact of Council decisions on children in care and those who have experienced care. These include a focus on education, employment and training. The Council has approved a Children and Young People’s Participation Strategy and SCF has commissioned Participation People to work on this, funded by grant from the Department for Education.

**Recommendation 2 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 3 - Embed a multi-agency partnership approach to supporting families impacted by the cost of living pressures, including ensuring all partners recognise the impact on children living in poverty.**

2.6 The societal factors, including the increased number of families experiencing food, fuel and hygiene poverty, as well as housing issues, due to the impact of the cost of living crisis, was highlighted as part of the national and local context for the Early Help Partnership Strategy. Evidence was presented in the Strategy that 40% of children lived in low income households in 2020/21. Under the priority of “Supporting our children to thrive”, one of the measures is for the family to feel able to manage their finances and/or debt is being managed or has been resolved. The delivery plan overview included raising awareness of early help and prevention services and increasing access to universal provision for children, young people and families.

2.7 The Slough safeguarding partnership has made direct links with the poverty forum as a result of learning from reviews. There are links to support for families around the cost of living crisis on the Slough Safeguarding Partnership website. This includes links to voluntary and community organisations such as The Baby Bank, London and Slough Run, The Cowshed as well as a training course for professionals and frontline workers.

**Recommendation 3 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 4 - The safeguarding partnership to review its arrangements for youth services.**

2.8 A new Multi-Agency Child Exploitation group has been created, chaired by the Director of Operations in Slough Children First and providing strategic leadership and oversight of partnership arrangements to safeguarding children and young adults at risk of or experiencing all forms of exploitation. This group brings together the various partnerships with responsibilities and regulatory duties towards these young people and their families. It principally involves leads for youth justice, community safety and safeguarding partnerships working together with partners from health and schools and the

voluntary sector to ensure all strategies and plans in relation to these young people are harmonised, parents are supported, empowered and involved and that children are protected from harm. A new comprehensive strategy is currently being devised by this group and an action plan and performance framework to monitor its effectiveness will also be created to ensure the strategy is effective. The group reports to the safeguarding partnership and all the work is directly overseen by the Safe in Slough Executive group.

**Recommendation 4 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 5 - Multi-agency partnership focus on early help and prevention.**

2.9 As stated above, the Council and its partners approved an Early Help Partnership Strategy in July 2023. This sets out a collective vision to share knowledge and resources to support to support children, young people and families who need help as soon as they need it, to prevent problems escalating.

2.10 In addition in November 2023, the Council approved a family hub model. A family hub model requires a focus on systems-wide models of providing high-quality, whole-family, joined up family support services. Each family hub will be bespoke to its local community and will provide services and support on a multi-disciplinary and multi-agency basis for families with children up to 19 years old (25 years for those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)).

**Recommendation 5 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**SBC Recommendations**

**Recommendation 6 - Ensure that SBC is appropriately considering the risks to children and families when commissioning and designing services to target mental health, domestic abuse and substance misuse.**

2.11 The Council's new Corporate Plan places children and young people at the heart of service delivery. This includes a strategic priority to be a borough for children and young people to thrive, a town where residents can live healthier, safer and more independent lives and a cleaner, healthier and more prosperous Slough.

2.12 The Council has reviewed its commissioning arrangements for services supporting residents experiencing issues with substance misuse and mental health.

2.13 On domestic abuse support services, the Council is in the process of reviewing its services, including how it meets its statutory safe accommodation duties. Further work is required in this area to demonstrate that the needs and risks of children are fully considered when commissioning services.

**Recommendation 6 – further work to do on ensuring commissioning strategies are appropriately focused on risks to children.**

**Recommendation 7 - Ensure SBC's education service is appropriately supporting the private, voluntary and independent early years workforce to develop their skills in supporting vulnerable children and families.**

2.14 In May 2023 the Council made a decision to remodel its children's centre services to reduce the number of physical buildings and retain two children's centre buildings for specialist childcare focused on children with SEND. The decision was made following a

sufficiency assessment of childcare provision which identified that there were opportunities for the voluntary and independent early years providers to meet need in certain parts of the Borough.

2.15 Early years providers are expected to support children with SEND and other specialist needs. The Council has designated early years officers who support the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector to develop their workforce. This includes advice on training and continuing professional development portfolio that captures local and national opportunities that PVIs can access. Training includes supporting vulnerable children. The Council has recently set up a working group looking at initiatives for partnership working to support the sector with recruitment and retention programmes and is in the process of refreshing the Early Years Workforce Development Strategy.

**Recommendation 7 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 8 - SBC education services to work with schools to reduce prevalence of children missing education, inappropriate home schooling and exclusions and off-rolling.**

2.16 The Council's Children Missing Education team focuses on pupils missing education either due to not having a school place or due to poor attendance. The team supports schools and families to ensure pupils return to school through attendance intervention and if this does not work will use legal enforcement. Data is available to Council officers providing live pupil attendance information and the team produce termly attendance reports for each school and hold termly review meetings.

2.17 Multi-agency forums include CME / Elective Home Education (EHE) Forum and Attendance Network Meetings. Council officers are working towards the development of a persistent absence / school avoidance strategy.

2.18 There is a particular national issue around mental health and Council officers have produced a resource toolkit to reduce emotional school-based avoidance. Officers from the SEND teams are undertaking joint visits with EHE officers for those pupils who are home educated.

2.19 Council officers work closely with local schools to reduce the risk of exclusions and off-rolling. This includes managing the Fair Access Panel to ensure that pupils are allocated a school place following exclusion and providing advice to schools on how to avoid exclusions.

**Recommendation 8 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 9 - SBC to review its capacity and resources for joint commissioning of services with health.**

2.20 Significant progress has been made in relation to putting in place appropriate strategies to inform future commissioning priorities. This has included approval of a placement sufficiency strategy and strategies for Adult Social Care in terms of support for carers, older persons and learning disabilities. With a whole family approach, this enabled support to be provided and commissioned taking account of the multi-generational households living in Slough.

2.21 SCF works closely with the Council, with NHS Frimley ICB and across boundaries to jointly commission complex care packages for children with additional need and integrated therapies.

2.22 There are further opportunities to join up resources for commissioning of services across the wider partnership and particularly with health agencies. The appointment of a stand alone Director of Public Health to support the Health and Wellbeing Board and increasing the remit of this officer to cover a wider range of public protection services provides an opportunity for increased focus on this area.

**Recommendation 9 – further work to do to join up commissioning on a multi-agency basis.**

**Recommendation 10 - All council departments to consider and assess the impact of their work on children and families within Slough.**

2.23 The Council has passed a motion to give additional protection to looked after children and care experienced young people. Member level reports will set out how any proposal meets the Council's corporate parenting duties where appropriate. The Council's Corporate Plan also has a focus on children and families and any proposals will be reviewed against these strategic priorities.

2.24 There has been a review of the Council's corporate parenting panel and health and wellbeing board to ensure each focus on its respective statutory responsibility and meets best practice. In the future it will be important to ensure that these bodies are measured against clearly identifies priorities and outcomes focused.

**Recommendation 10 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 11 - Retention strategics need to focus on non-pay elements. The business case for retention packages is not supported by the evidence presented to the group.**

2.25 The new executive leadership team has made good progress in increasing the ratio of permanent staff without the need for retention packages. This has resulted in the departure of the Innovate managed teams earlier than anticipated and is an important part of building a supportive culture focused on supporting children and families.

**Recommendation 11 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 12 - SCF strategies need to have a greater focus on impact on the child and family and creating stability for children and families. The Edge of Care Team business case should be supported, however the Family Hubs should be considered on a wider multi-agency partnership basis.**

2.26 SCF has introduced an edge of care team to support families at risk of statutory intervention and children in care who are ready to be reunified with their families. This is leading to a reduction in the number of children subject to care proceedings.

2.27 Cabinet approved a new family hub model on a multi-agency partnership basis.

**Recommendation 12 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**2.28 Recommendation 13 - Ensure managers have access to good quality management data that supports them to make decisions on caseloads that take account of the context and skills of the team. This should include those on child protection plan and not just children who are looked after.**

2.29 There have been improvements to the management information being given to senior leaders and frontline managers. The 2024/25 Business and Improvement Plan includes a priority to identify emerging trends and inform strategic planning and transformation work, to develop and implement a revised, robust QA audit programme and to improve the performance framework.

2.30 There is further work to be undertaken on ensuring that data is accessible quickly and at low cost by all those who need to review and analyse this, however the systems are in place for managers to undertake their roles.

**Recommendation 13 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 14 - Utilise Slough's diverse population as a positive and avoid focus on Slough being similar to London boroughs, complexity of casework and negativity of the Ofsted rating. Many social workers see the cohort of children and families as a key opportunity to make a real difference.**

2.31 SCF's workforce is broadly representative of Slough's diverse communities. Work is starting to better engage with communities, including faith communities and there is a positive relationship with Slough's voluntary, community sector.

**Recommendation 14 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 15 - Focus constrained resources on leadership and management development and career progression opportunities for internal staff, as well as loans and payments to support staff with capital outlay.**

2.32 The 2024/25 Business and Improvement Plan contains an updated action plan against the seven enablers. One of these enablers is engaging and supporting the workforce. This includes supporting staff opportunities for career progression and progressively strengthening the quality of strategic and frontline leadership by means of a leadership development programme for leaders and managers at all levels of the system.

2.33 To support career progression in general, SCF is part of the Frontline programme, there is a planned career progression framework and a skills gap analysis to inform a workforce training programme. The wellbeing offer is also being formalised.

**Recommendation 15 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 16 - Ensure SCF's model of practice is appropriately strength based / restorative in approach.**

2.34 SCF's business and improvement plan for 2023/24 was approved by Cabinet in September 2023. The plan for 2024/25 was approved in December 2023. The plan sets out SCF's ambition for children and young people, including that support and help is provided when needed and in a way which prevents need and risk from escalating, the right support is provided in the right place at the right time, children will be supported to stay with families when it is safe, families will be empowered to make their own decisions

and there will be work with the whole family to enable them to develop the skills and confidence to manage situations at a much earlier stage.

2.35 The new early help model, edge of care team and focus on reunification with families is leading to a reduction in the number of children being subject to care proceedings.

**Recommendation 16 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 17 - Embed hearing the voice of the child into all records and decision-making and monitor this on a qualitative basis.**

2.36 The Council and SCF has agreed a new Children and Young People Participation Strategy focusing on ensuring that children and young people are able to influence decision-making at an operational and strategic level. The Council has amended SCF's contractual performance indicators to include indicators focused on measuring participation. These were approved by Cabinet in December 2023.

2.37 The enhancements around the QA process will ensure that data is captured on the quality of practice, including the extent to which children and young people's voice and influence is seen in decisions impacting them.

**Recommendation 17 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**Recommendation 18 - Explore opportunities for children and families to be part of delivering training and developing and influencing decision-making at a strategic level.**

2.38 The strategy referred to under recommendation 17 covers strategic decision-making and the Council will hold SCF to account via a specific contractual performance indicator focused on participation and influence at a strategic level.

2.39 One of the enablers in the 2024/25 Business and Improvement Plan is around children's voice and influence. Actions planned include providing training to young people to enable them to contribute to high level meetings and recruitment and involving children and young people in redesigning the online recruitment strategy.

**Recommendation 18 – Satisfactory progress made.**

**3. Implications of the Recommendation**

3.1 Financial implications

3.1.1 There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report. The Council funds the majority of the expenditure for SCF via an annual contract sum.

3.2 Legal implications

3.2.1 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 seventh statutory direction was issued in August 2023, alongside a direction in relation to SEND services. The direction 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 has an appointed DfE commissioner to oversee the improvements required for children's social care and SEND services.

3.2.2 SCF is wholly owned by the Council and as such the Council is responsible for making key decisions in relation to it. This includes approval of an annual business plan. Cabinet approved the 2024/25 Business and Improvement Plan in December 2023. Cabinet was also asked to approve updated contractual key performance indicators reflecting the need for partnership and multi-agency working to improve children's services.

### 3.3 Risk management implications

3.3.1 The Council's corporate risk refers to risk of failures to appropriately safeguard children and support families to ensure that children are kept safe and well and to improve services for children and young people with SEND. The recommendations arising from the previous task and finish group report are seen as key to inform 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.

### 3.4 Corporate Parenting implications

3.4.1 Section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 sets out statutory corporate parenting principles which the Council must have regard to when exercising its functions in relation to looked after children and young people. These include acting in their best interests and promoting their physical and mental health and well-being, encouraging the expression of views, wishes and feelings and ensuring these are taken into account, ensuring these children and young people are safe, stable in their home lives, relationships, education and work and preparing them for adulthood and independent living.

3.4.2 The statutory guidance emphasises that these principles must not be seen in a vacuum and should shape the mindset and culture of every part of the local authority and are intended to ensure that councils have high aspirations for children in their care and young people who have experienced being in care.

### 3.5 Equality implications

3.5.1 The Council has a duty contained in section 149 of the Equality Act to have due regard to the need to: a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, and other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act; b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

3.5.2 The broad purpose of this duty is to integrate considerations of equality into day-to-day business and to keep them under review in decision making, the design of policies and the delivery of services.

3.5.3 High quality and cost-effective children's services are critical to supporting both the Council and SCF to meet their equality duties, particularly in relation to advancing equality of opportunity by way of reducing inequalities that exist between certain groups of vulnerable children and their families and the wider population.

**4. Background Papers**

None