

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 19th February, 2014.

Present:- Councillors Sohal (Chair), Abe (Vice-Chair), Brooker, Carter, Davis, Malik and Matloob

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors P K Mann, Plimmer, Smith and Strutton

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors O'Connor and Hussain and O'Connor. Lynda Bussley

PART 1

43. Declarations of Interest

None.

44. Ofsted Inspection Findings

The Panel considered the report of Ofsted on its Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, which was carried out from 19th November to 11th December 2013. The overall judgement was inadequate, with the findings for individual services as follows:

Children who need help and protection	Inadequate
Children looked after and achieving permanence	Inadequate
• Adoption performance	Requires improvement
• Experiences and progress of care leavers	Inadequate
Leadership, management and governance	Inadequate

In attendance were Councillor P K Mann, Commissioner for Education and Children, the Chief Executive, the Strategic Director of Wellbeing and the Assistant Director – Children Young People and Families, to answer questions from members. The Chief Executive began by expressing regret that the Council should find itself in this position and disappointment that the report was more harsh in tone than officers had been led to believe from face to face feedback from the Ofsted inspectors, albeit that the overall judgement was not a great surprise. Whilst it was recognised that it remained a big challenge for Slough to achieve services for children and young people that could be judged good, it was disappointing that the report had not taken account of a number of improvements that were in the process of implementation at the time of the inspection, and that the section on adoption and looked after children was not as positive as suggested by the evidence available. All efforts would be made to focus on the priority and immediate action and other areas for improvement as set out in the inspection report.

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Members received answers to questions and clarification of points of detail in the report as follows.

Children who need help and protection

The Council had established good working relationships with its partner agencies, for instance, effective liaison with the Safeguarding Board around early help and protection issues and a very worthwhile collaborative approach between the Council and the Bucks Healthcare Trust. The key findings of the Ofsted report had been shared with partners as it affected them and it was recognised that further work with partners was still required, for example, in relation to referrals from the police involving domestic violence, the quality of information passed on about the type, nature and seriousness of the case could be improved. The Panel noted that the criteria in place during the last inspection were different and more exacting than those applied during the 2011 inspection. As a result of previous work to implement improvements, the number of children assessed as being formally in need of a specialist children's service had increased substantially (to a level more in line with what would be expected in a Borough such as Slough) and the resources required to deal with this had increased.

Looked after children

The Panel noted that the vast majority of looked after children were placed in foster care. Some were in residential children's homes and while others were with parents in their own homes where special regular monitoring arrangements were in place. It was noted that the Council was looking to increase the base of foster parents in Slough and within a radius of 20 miles, but given the small size of Borough it was inevitable that not all children could be placed in the town. Attendance at school by looked after children was generally in line with the national average but it was accepted that this needed to be improved and work with schools about this was ongoing. Discussions were taking place with Cambridge Education about how schools distant from Slough managed the Council's looked after children. The Council had applied an additional £800k to the looked after children budget in the last financial year and additional sums had been applied throughout the current year to ensure all placements were funded. An increased base budget had been approved for 2014/15.

Adoption performance

The report had recognised a number of strengths in the Council's record on adoption. It was noted that of 99 children found permanent homes over the last two years, 54 had been adopted with the remainder placed in long term fostering care. Steps had now been taken to reduce the time lag on the approval process for adoptions.

Care Leavers

It was recognised that more work was needed on the support of care leavers – arrangements were in hand to design a "pledge" to make to care leavers in relation to key issues about their housing, support and education/employment. Along with the other authorities in Berkshire, the Council was a participant in 'city deal', a scheme with Aspire which increased the opportunities for

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assisting vulnerable young people into skills training or work, and there was scope to target better results on this. The Council had been criticised for failure to look at things from the child's perspective and part of the answer to this lay in further development of the Council's corporate parenting role.

Leadership , management and governance

In relation to a workforce strategy, a whole range of improvements had been taking place over the last year which were beginning to show results as the inspection was taking place. A lot of work had been done around increasing the numbers of permanently employed, qualified and experienced social work staff, as well as creating more longer term temps, which had great benefits for continuity of care and support provided. An open (and ongoing) recruitment drive had been mounted against a background of a national shortage of social workers and strong competition from other authorities to attract staff. Recruitment and retention measures had been improved, and a three year development programme for newly qualified social workers had been introduced. Increased funding had enabled a 37% increase in staff numbers, with a protected caseload for newly qualified staff (average now down to 18 cases). It was considered the right management structure was in position to deliver a sustainable improvement in performance. The accommodation works being carried out at St Martin's Place would provide more areas suitable for confidential discussions between managers, staff, clients as well as a new reception area for children and families. However, from the 7th February an immediate improvement had been implemented through grouping social work staff together on one floor (compared to two previously) with adequate space for the increased workforce.

The Panel noted the improvements in hand would assist in addressing many of the issues raised in the Ofsted report, but renewed attention would be given the priority and immediate actions identified. The Chair thanked the officers for attending the meeting and answering questions from the Panel.

Resolved -

- 1) that the report and additional action proposed be noted;
- 2) to receive regular reports of progress, with an updated action plan showing a timeframe for actions to be implemented and outcomes achieved; and
- 3) that a workshop/seminar for the Panel on what 'good' would look like will be held in the new municipal year.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.00 pm)