

Joint Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 26th October, 2016.

Present:- Councillors Anderson, Bedi, Brooker, Chahal, Chohan, N Holledge, Nazir, Pantelic, Parmar (from 6.42pm), Qaseem, Sadiq, A Sandhu, R Sandhu and Usmani

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Mann, Morris and Strutton

PART 1

11. Election of Chair for the Joint Meeting

It was proposed by Councillor Nazir and seconded by Councillor Pantelic that Cllr Brooker be appointed Chair for the meeting. This was carried unanimously.

Resolved – That Councillor Brooker be appointed as Chair for the Joint meeting.

12. Declaration of Interest

Cllr Sadiq declared her employment at Eden Girls' School. Cllr Chahal declared his position as the Chair of Governors at a local school. Cllr Brooker declared his daughter's attendance at Burnham Park Academy and his position as Governor at Churchmead School.

13. Member Questions

The response to the member's question raised prior to the meeting was circulated to members. The following point was raised in subsequent discussions:

- No direct external complaints had been received. However, quality would continue to be monitored to ensure that issues were identified before escalating.

14. Update from Slough Children's Services Trust

Slough Children's Services Trust (SCST) had identified the need to change the environment for children and staff to improve outcomes. The four key areas for improvement would be quality, learning, the workforce and information and should start to address the concerns raised by Ofsted in previous inspections. In the first year of SCST's operation, this had taken the form of placing children at the centre of decision making, creating an

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environment which encouraged staff to innovate and implementing a new model of social work.

To underpin these efforts, a new management team had been appointed. The majority of these appointments were permanent, with some temporary roles ending in March 2017 as short term funding from the Department for Education (DfE) finished. An Ofsted monitoring visit would take place in November 2016, which would give a clear indication as to the level of improvement which has taken place in SCST's first year of operation. However, improved collaboration and partnership working had increased the level of information open to staff; Councillors' views were sought as part of this process.

(At this point in the meeting, Cllr Parmar entered).

As well as senior management, permanent appointments had been made amongst middle managers. 5 Group Managers had been appointed, with two joining later this month, and assisting with the creation of a clear model for social work at SCST. Clear governance arrangements were also now in place, with a Joint Improvement Board seeing co-operation between SCST and the Council (SBC). The establishment of the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub also supported SCST's aims. The relationship between SBC and SCST had improved, with the Interim Chief Executive, Interim Director of Children's Services and political leadership featuring in this process. Whilst the level of complaints received by SCST had risen, this was welcomed and reflected the willingness of Looked After Children (LACs) to voice their experiences.

The new model of social work focused on ending the focus on process and emphasising the importance of relationships. SCST was focused on building the strength of families and keeping them together where it is safe to do so. Children's experiences of social work would also be improved through the creation of small, agile hubs of multi-skilled professionals. These were intended to increase the effectiveness of situations where a child's carer had to change, and also minimise the frequency of this being required. The DfE would also be using SCST as one of three areas to pilot a Centre for Social Work Practice, which would provide staff with a year's training. The Trust had been successful in getting through the first round of a grant application process for £1.8 million central government Innovation Grant, with a final bid to be submitted in November 2016. The outcome should be known by Christmas 2016.

Hub meetings with a wide range of partners and agencies were being held weekly, with the express aim of managing risk within the community. A new Child Protection Conference Framework had also been established and mirrored the areas of concern identified by Ofsted. With a fully permanent team, it had reviewed complaints procedures (which had been found not to meet legislative requirements). Performance and management information was also being reviewed and a better shared understanding of quality assurance being spread across the service.

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The Virtual School had improved compliance in Personal Education Plans (PEPs) for LACs. All staff were now trained in Electronic Personal Education Plans (ePEPs). An interactive weekly register, daily phone calls to check attendance and a restructure of Virtual School had bolstered these efforts. In addition, the Pupil Premium Plus was being used appropriately and a firm focus on raising children's aspiration to succeed was maintained.

For children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), almost 90% of new Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are now being completed within the 20 week deadline. All frontline SEN posts were filled by permanent staff by the end of June 2016; recruitment of permanent staff to management-level posts is now underway. The pledge for LAC had been approved by Council and the Joint Parenting Panel also involved joint work between SBC and SCST. In terms of foster care, a record number of new foster carers were being assessed, whilst SCST was using the 'Mockingbird Family Model' to encourage innovation in recruitment of carers. The Youth Offending Team had also received positive feedback from the Youth Justice Board.

In terms of future priorities, these were identified as implementation of the Ofsted delivery plan jointly with SBC, the launch of the Five Year Strategy and full implementation of the "Safe, Secure and Successful" policy by March 2017. This needed to ensure that SCST achieved an Ofsted grading of "Good" by October 2018 and would involve collaborative work with SBC.

The following points were raised in discussion by members:

- DfE were looking for SCST to maintain an annual staff survey; the first one had indicated that 2/3rds of respondents felt the service had improved (although the response rate had been around 50%). SCST would also continue to pursue other methods of evaluating staff responses to their efforts, as well as gathering information from outside SCST on their views. Part of this process would continue to be the monthly 'Trust Talk' session, which was treated as a dialogue between senior management and staff; dissenting voices were welcomed as part of this. Performance management (e.g. absenteeism rates) would also be undertaken and the whistleblowing policy was promoted to staff members.
- Since taking the service from SBC, staff had indicated that management was more supportive. There was also more room for innovation (e.g. the Mockingbird Family model) which had encouraged staff to raise their own ideas. Team working was now closer and responses were quicker; whilst challenges remained, there were more grounds for optimism.
- SCST's service was largely within budget for year 1, with accounts lodged with Companies House. Initial costs for moving on staff had increased expenditure, whilst the costs of agency staff remained high, whilst placement budgets were a challenge and being monitored. Overall all, however, the service was within budget.
- In terms of improving finances, an open evening had seen a number of external applications for posts within the Trust. In addition 6 agency

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staff had applied for permanent positions. Other areas of incentivising applicants to join SCST (e.g. the Centre for Social Work Practice, key worker housing) would also be explored.

- There were a total of 40 foster carers registered with the Trust. To support these, an out of hours line had been established whilst the SBC Nurse supported healthy living. SCST and SBC were working jointly to encourage healthy lifestyles and there was also a foster carers' association which organised events. A drop in centre was available on a monthly basis and programmes on issues such as drugs and weapons awareness were also provided. In addition, a sons' and daughters' support group bolstered these efforts. An annual event was held to celebrate the achievements in this area.
- SCST felt that more foster children were placed outside of Slough than was desirable. Whilst such placements were required on occasions (e.g. unhelpful networks of associates, child sexual exploitation issues) these were rare. The emphasis on local foster parents sought to address this.
- Newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) were looking for roles in Slough, with 119 having applying for the 13 posts advertised. Of these, many had previous experience in Slough. The recent investment in the service had encouraged longevity amongst staff; this new culture was creating a support network amongst social workers. The number of active cases had decreased; this was based on the new working model which emphasised the need for safe levels of casework for hubs to manage. Cases that did not require a social work intervention would be redirected on the basis of joint working with the voluntary sector. It was also the aspiration that as hubs embedded, work levels would remain manageable to ensure quality work. This would be ensured through a decline in re-referrals and related developments based on improved quality of social work.
- Steady progress was being made on recruitment. 11 out of 15 Consultant Social Workers were now in place, whilst the first NQSW cohort was now approaching the end of their first year; these would fill vacancies as they graduated. As each year would see a new cohort recruited, it was intended for the situation to be resolved within 3 years of operation. In addition, suitable agency workers were becoming permanent staff (6 had made this transition) whilst the new system introduced by Government would encourage SCST to reduce the number of agency staff. 85% of staff in the hubs were permanent; this would continue to be monitored and reported to the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel. Members were encouraged to disseminate this progress where possible to help with recruitment.
- A new Complaints Manager post had been filled, with SCST keen to mitigate any complaints in the early stages of the issue and investigate matters fully. SCST's Chief Executive also met with complainants to gather information. Complaints were performance managed (e.g. deadlines on responses, reasons for delays requested when these were not adhered to).
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on all aspects of SCST's work were the subject of a weekly monitoring report. These were then discussed

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at a Monthly Performance Board. These discussions had led to an investigation into a decrease in the number of visits made to children of a protection plan and also highlighted concerns over referrals to SCST which had been assessed but led to no further action. However, it should also be borne in mind that in social work, it was not always possible to state whether an increase or decrease of a specific KPI was 'the desirable direction of travel'.

- As an example of this, under the system prior to SCST's establishment, protection plans had been short lived. SCST wished to change this, which had led to a rise in the number of protection plans in the short term. However, as SCST's approach became established, this was now stabilising and should decrease over time.
- In terms of evaluating whether SCST was on target to achieve its desired 'Good' and 'Outstanding' Ofsted gradings, the November 2016 monitoring visit would be the first litmus test. Ofsted would be talking to staff rather than senior management and using examples of casework to form their findings.
- SCST's internal audit of casework had found a varied level of quality, which led them to anticipate that Ofsted's conclusions would be similar. In terms of wider evaluation, the Trust in operation in Doncaster had organised a peer review via the Local Government Association; this may be an option for SCST to pursue.
- SCST was committed to engaging with care leavers. However, in the short term this was proving difficult given the poor experiences many of them had. SCST was engaging with the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education to obtain the best outcomes and had also established a care leavers' forum but realised that further work was needed in this area. Care ambassadors were being recruited to develop this work.
- The social work model used by SCST was based on the work of Professor Eileen Munro and had also been used by Hackney and Cambridgeshire County Council. The model was available on SCST's website.
- The key differences which were needed to improve the service were openness and transparency, an end to the 'blame game' culture and the 'top-down' style of management. These would create the environment for the central objective; putting the child at the centre of the discussion rather than officers.
- Technology was being used to improve the service in terms of foster care and agile working. Staff time would be used more efficiently by allowing staff to enter information remotely, whilst the recently appointed apprentice would be working with the Communications Team and working on social media strategy. The Slough Local Safeguarding Children's Board was also developing its use of technology.
- Secure email accounts were available for staff and an appointment had been made to a new Information Governance position.
- When Personal Education Plans (PEPs) were formed, there should be a wide range of inputs. These could vary from case to case, but should always involve the child concerned fully and may also draw information

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from the designated teacher, the social worker, the Virtual School, any foster carers involved, any tutors or the SEN Co-Ordinator as appropriate.

- 3 groups had been established for children in care. These held meetings every 4 – 6 weeks and fed their views into the Joint Parenting Panel. However, they were still working on issues of trust with children in care.
- The changes of social worker who managed specific cases remained a key challenge although turnover was reducing. However, this change was slower than desired and was being mitigated by the sharing of information. This would ensure that children and families would not repeatedly have to relay their story to SCST, and the use of hubs was supporting this.
- All members of SCST staff were meeting with the Trust's Chief Executive to discuss their future plans and training needs. These discussions also allowed staff to provide an honest assessment of SCST's position.
- At present potential foster carers/adopters who withdrew from the process were not routinely followed up. However, the new permanent Recruitment Manager could undertake this, and this suggestion would be followed up by the Trust.
- Ofsted would visit SCST on a quarterly basis.
- Due to a change in the Direction from Government, Children's Centres would not be transferred to SCST. Instead, SBC's Education Services team would run them.

Resolved:

1. That SCST's Recruitment Manager revisit the files of potential foster carers which had lapsed to investigate their future recruitment.
2. That the update be noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.37 pm)