

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 9th March, 2011.

Present:- Councillors O'Connor (Chair), Abe (Vice-Chair), Bains, Davis, Maclsaac and P K Mann

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Dale-Gough and Shine

PART 1

50. Declaration of Interest

None were received.

51. Minutes of the Meeting held on 25th January 2011

The minutes of the meeting held on 25th January were approved as a correct record.

The Chair sought clarification on the last bullet point of minute 44 - Secondary Schools in Slough and GCSEs, which referred to comparisons with other Berkshire authorities that this would only be in exceptional circumstance. Officers confirmed that this would only be used occasionally where it was appropriate.

52. Education and Children's Services Performance Report

The Panel considered a report which provided an update on performance relating to the work within the Education and Children's Services department for the year to 31st January 2011. The Director of Education and Children's Services advised that parts of the performance data would come to the Panel throughout the year. It was noted that a number of indicators were based on LAA targets which no longer existed. It was noted that some of the targets would be maintained for the refreshed Children and Young People Plan. The Chair suggested that it would be useful to have input into the plan from Councillors as they had good links to the community. It was noted that once a draft of the CYPP was ready it would be shared with Members to gain any feedback that Councillors had on the priorities within their communities. It was noted that it needed to be considered whether some of the targets flagged as red were really a cause for concern or whether the target was inappropriate.

The Assistant Director, Inclusion advised that a number of indicators were based on information gained through the Tellus survey which had now ceased. The emotional health of children which was flagged as red was evaluated through the survey. Despite the survey ceasing, emotional health remained a high priority for the Local Children's Partnership Board. It was reported that the Hub arrangements for the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service which had previously been considered by the Panel were working well.

Three national indicators relating to primary education were flagged as red. It was noted that there were continuing challenges in this sector and these could

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be seen in relation to the number of schools in categories and progress at KS2. There was a significant increase in KS2 results last year but there was still much progress to be made. The Chair suggested that the work done to improve KS2 results did seem at last to be having an impact. Officers confirmed that a number of schools were really focussing on drilling down into the results data which helped to focus actions. It was further noted that two of the most successful primary schools in Slough boycotted the SATS last year. Schools were working hard to address attendance at primary schools but turbulence still remained a contributing factor to results. Members raised a number of queries regarding the performance of primary schools and it was agreed that a report on the schools in special measures including the role of the local authority and governors would be brought to the next meeting.

The Assistant Director, Children and Families advised that the indicator for Young people's participation in positive activities was flagged as red but Slough was ranked 7th nationally and 1st of the statistical neighbours group. However the very high self-imposed target was missed by 1%. It was noted that some targets needed to be reviewed especially as this was evaluated by a Tellus survey which would no longer take place. It was noted that the current budget cuts may affect this indicator. It was noted that a review of the Youth Service following changes which were due to be agreed at the next Cabinet meeting would be scheduled on the Forward work programme for September.

It was noted that a number of mitigating actions had been established to improve the indicator for initial assessments carried out within 7 working days of referral. However this met all statutory targets and was above the latest England and statistical neighbour comparators but fell slightly below Slough's target. It was noted that the target would be amended and with the ongoing work it was hoped to achieve this over the next year.

Resolved:- That the content of the report be noted and the forward work programme be updated to include a report on the youth service.

53. Impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2010 on Services for Children, Young People and Families in Slough

The Panel considered a report which detailed the outcomes of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) announced in December 2010 and the impact on children, young people and their families. The Council budget was agreed on 21st February which included reductions in support services in order to allow the continuation of frontline services. However in addition to the cuts in the CSR the Education and Children's Services directorate also experienced reductions in grant allocations. A list of grants and whether they would be continuing, amalgamated or ceased was considered by the Panel. Several areas of funding under the previous government were heavily dependent upon grants and this placed a number of services under pressure. In the subsequent discussion Members raised a number of queries:-

- In relation to the detail provided on the dedicated schools grant a Member suggested that it would be useful to get some further information on the pupil premium in future.

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- A Member asked if the Council was in a position to know what services may not continue in future in relation to child protection and social care. It was noted that at present the authority only provided statutory services but it would need to be considered how these continued to be provided. Children's Social Care was not affected but the cuts at present but it was confirmed that from 2012/13 onwards there was no way that cuts could be made without affecting front line services. These issues would be considered by scrutiny in future.
- A Member advised that at the last Overview and Scrutiny Panel the Chief Constable advised that one of the biggest challenges was preventing violent extremism and the member expressed their disappointment that this grant had been removed. The Director advised that youth support services was under review at present but there was not enough funding to compensate for this. In addition schools used funding to contribute more generally to community cohesion work.

Resolved:- That the impact of the reductions in funding on current and future service delivery, the relevant performance targets and measure being taken to mitigate risk be noted.

54. Foster Carers Report

The Panel considered a report which provided an overview and update of the Council's current position with regards to fostering. The report included the numbers of approved carers and those under assessment, the impact of the reduction in fees, the staffing position and the current and future recruitment strategies. The reduction in the foster carers' fees was previously discussed at the Scrutiny Panel in September 2010. The Panel considered the future plans for the fostering service which included the establishment of a Slough Foster Carers' Network and the possibility of specialist carers. Members were encouraged to help with the promotion of foster carers' recruitment. It was noted that there was greater emphasis on placing children with in-house carers. In the ensuing discussion Members asked a number of questions, including:-

- In response to a question regarding the changes to the foster carers' scheme it was reported that the initial response was quite favourable and carers appreciated the reasons for a number of changes and felt that overall issues raised had been accommodated.
- A Member noted the importance of focusing on targeted recruitment for long-term foster carers and asked about the strategies for recruitment and retention. A number of long-term placements were with independent fostering agencies but Slough had some long-term carers who had continued to care for short-term placements. In terms of recruitment the same officer would follow-up an initial phone call with an in-depth visit to ensure continuity and once foster carers were approved it was important for them to receive high-quality, targeted support.
- A Member asked if there were enough experienced carers to manage those children with very challenging behaviour. The Fostering Team Assistant

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Manager advised that some newly qualified foster carers could be just as good as experienced carers. However it was noted that it was disappointing to lose some experienced carers but it was hoped that some carers may return to Slough and would be welcomed back if they wanted to continue.

- A Member asked how long it took from the initial enquiry to approving a foster carer. The whole process could take up to a year. It was noted that if the process was rushed families could feel under pressure and it was highly important to attend the preparation group before beginning assessments.
- In relation to the establishment of a preferred provider for placements it was noted that a scheme had been established whereby the Council's payment reduced when a certain number were placed with the agency and the Council had nearly reached this point.

Members requested that a report on the Specialist Carers Scheme be brought back to a future meeting of the Panel.

Resolved:- That the report and the actions being carried out in relation to supporting and recruiting foster carers in Slough and the impact this has on Council resources be noted. In particular the Panel noted and endorsed the following areas:

- (a) The impact of reduction in fostering payments on the service.
- (b) The need to recruit new foster carers and develop specialist schemes in order to reduce the high costs of placing children in external Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's) and residential placements.
- (c) The work being undertaken in relation to establishing a Foster Carer Association to support existing and new carers.
- (d) The implications on service delivery of staff vacancies and the need to recruit to vacant posts.

55. Forward Work Programme

Resolved – That the forward work programme be updated as agreed above.

56. Members' Attendance Record

Resolved - That the Members' attendance record be noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.30 pm)