

**EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL - 25 MARCH 2014**  
**BRIEFING NOTE FROM COUNCILLOR ANDERSON**

**Services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers in Slough: Inspected by Ofsted in November/December 2013 and judged as 'inadequate'.**

**1. Background and Context to the Ofsted Inspection in 2013.**

Ofsted had previously inspected Slough under a different inspection framework in 2011. The judgements at this time were that safeguarding was inadequate and looked after children adequate. The 2013 inspection was conducted under a new framework with a different scope, grade descriptors and methodology – the 2 inspections were not comparing like with like.

Following the 2011 inspection, an Improvement Board (with DfE representation) was set up and an Improvement Plan put in place. The Board commissioned a number of sector led 'reviews' (on the LSCB; Early Intervention and Prevention; the IRO service and Performance Management). The Board monitored progress through the Improvement Plan and the implementation of the recommendations from the sector led reviews.

Internally within the council, there was a 'drain' of experienced practitioners and managers in 2011/12 and interim managers were put in place at Assistant Director and Head of Service level (just one of 4 posts at that time was filled by a permanent post-holder) and the ratio of agency to permanent staff at practitioner and manager level increased. The Council also undertook a restructuring at senior level and 3 Directorates were created. Children's Services became part of a new Wellbeing Directorate, bringing together Children's Services, Adult Services and Commissioning (and latterly Public Health). 2 key appointments were made at a senior level – A Strategic Director of Wellbeing (who combines the 2 statutory roles of DCS and DASS) and an experienced Assistant Director of Children, Young People and Families who took up post at the end of July 2012.

**The following key actions were initiated by the DCS and the AD.**

- Reviewed work begun by the previous management team in respect of structures within children's social care and implemented a new structure (duty team for contacts and referrals and 8 social work teams each comprising 5 social work posts, a consultant practitioner and a practice manager), 2 Head of Service Posts (an increase of one on previous arrangements) to manage these teams. The teams were designed to be of a size where one manager could comfortably manage the number of practitioners and cases held by the practitioners and be accountable for practice and performance).

The roles within the teams reflected the College of Social Work Professional Capabilities Framework, with the intention that the consultant practitioner would undertake a practice development role. The new structure was implemented in January 2013.

- Secured growth money to establish a new Head of Service post to lead a Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit with enhanced IRO/Conference Chair and business support capacity and new posts of Quality Assurance Manager and LADO/Safeguarding in Education Manager. This reflected and built on the recommendations of the review commissioned by the Improvement Board. A new Quality Assurance Framework was developed, including new arrangements for case audit - 25 independent case audits each month across the 'child's journey' throughout 2013. The audits undertaken mirrored the eventual findings of Ofsted at the end of 2013 – approximately a third of cases good, a third require improvement and a third inadequate.
- Strengthened the management capacity within Children, Young People and Families to oversee children's social care with the establishing of 4 Head of Service Posts (2 covering social work, 1 'Safeguarding and Quality Assurance' and 1 covering placements and resources) and the appointment of a temporary additional Head of Service post to lead on Practice Improvement.
- Hosted a Peer Review of Safeguarding in November 2012 – key recommendations related to the Early Help Pathway, strengthen role of Children's Partnership, focus on social work practice and reduce dependency on agency staff.
- Commissioned (with the agreement of the Children and Young People's Partnership Board) a major strategic piece of work to make proposals for the re-shaping of the approach to 'Early Help' and the local offer in Slough. This piece of work began in January 2013 and concluded in June. The proposals were accepted by the CYPPB and implementation of the proposals is now underway under the governance of an Early Help Board (established in November 2013).
- Reviewed the threshold into children's social care – in December 2012, statistical neighbour rate for referrals per 10,000 children was nearly 600 whereas in Slough it was only 435.6. The establishing of a robust 'duty' arrangement for children's social care (later to include early help) with strong management oversight to ensure consistency of decision making has been key to establishing more appropriate thresholds and was a key piece of work led by the Head of Service (Practice Improvement).
- In the summer of 2013, additional work was done in respect of thresholds through a project to review over 400 child in need cases – which identified that many cases identified as child in need should be progressed into the child protection or looked after systems. This work, alongside the development of a new single 'Slough Child and Family Assessment', replacing initial and core assessments and preparation for the Family Justice reforms led to new arrangements within the children's social work teams in respect of workflow: assessment and child in need work to be managed within dedicated teams; children subject of child protection plans, subject to care proceedings and plans for permanence outside of the looked after system

managed by other dedicated teams and a single Looked After and Care Leavers Team for children with plans to remain looked after through to independence (to provide continuity). These arrangements were implemented in mid-October 2013, just 4 weeks before the inspection.

- Identified that too many agency social workers were of a poor quality; took action with support from HR and procurement to negotiate with the Council's interim staff 'provider'; worked directly with agencies supplying good quality staff; raised the bar in terms of the recruitment processes for agency staff and recruited better quality staff to replace poor quality staff – an incremental process that has taken many months because good quality social workers are in short supply.
- Having reviewed thresholds into children's social care and within the children's social care system, the Assistant Director working with colleagues in performance and finance undertook a major review of staffing levels within the social work teams based on comparisons with statistical neighbours and population growth estimates. This work was completed in early November 2013 and formed the basis for a growth bid (agreed in January 2014 by Cabinet) which gives additional money (£1.4m over 2 years) to increase social worker, manager and business support capacity) by up to 4 additional teams and further additional money to fund the difference between the cost of agency staff and permanent staff for a period to 2016 when the objective is to reduce the ratio to 80:20 (currently in the region of 40:60). The proposals agreed by the Council include resources for recruitment incentives and for a Practice Manager post to support newly qualified social workers and develop relationships with social work training providers etc.
- Secured additional in-year growth (from October 2013) to recruit to 2 additional teams of social workers to deal with the increased workloads occurring in the system caused by the threshold work described above. Recruitment of interims to these teams began in late October 2013, running alongside the replacement of poor quality agency workers.
- Planned and began to implement a new structure for Fostering and Adoption to support the continued successful work to provide permanent families for looked after children and to enhance the capacity to recruit foster carers and adopters for hard to place children.
- Undertook a number of recruitment initiatives for permanent staff, over the course of 2013, unfortunately with limited success in so far as adding to our numbers of experienced social workers, consultant practitioners and first line managers. However, we have been successful in recruiting 4 very promising newly qualified social workers who are undertaking their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). In addition, for the first time, Slough is participating in the Step up to Social Work Programme and is host to 2 students. An important appointment was also made to an IRO Manager post.
- Developed a comprehensive 'Learning and Development Framework' through work led by the Head of Service (Practice Improvement) which included the commissioning of external mandatory training for social workers and Practice Managers.

- Worked with colleagues in Assets to ensure that a major refurbishment of the building (due to start later in 2014) will deliver a 'social work friendly' working environment, including office design that gives each social worker a desk, allows teams to sit together, provides confidential space for supervision and sufficient meeting rooms.

At the same time, the Slough LSCB took action to implement the recommendations of the sector led Review and made significant progress. The governance of the Slough Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership was also strengthened and key joint work commissioned on engagement and participation, commissioning and workforce development. Work with Thames Valley Police also led to 2 additional 'risk assessor' posts, funded by TVP but dedicated to Slough to improve the quality of police referrals on domestic abuse. Work has also taken place to develop a co-ordinated approach to child sexual exploitation

**The actions detailed above had all been undertaken prior to the inspection in November/December 2013.**

These actions were necessary to lay the foundations for improvement going forward and at the time of the inspection it is true to say that much of this work had not yet shown an impact. The Council would agree with the overall judgement of inadequate although it is of the view that the report, in its content, does not adequately reflect the position of services for looked after children and adoption. In verbal feedback the inspectors suggested that the looked after judgement was on the cusp of 'requires improvement' (but the narrative would not give this impression) and the adoption judgement on the cusp of 'good' which is better reflected in the narrative.

## **2. The Inspection in November/December 2013**

Ofsted arrived in Slough at a point where we were in the progress of putting in place the arrangements arising from the work set out above. Some work was further advanced such as the work to put in place effective duty arrangements and re-balance the threshold into children's social care, some work was less advanced such as the process to secure staff for 2 additional teams so that workloads would be reduced and some work was underway but not complete (such as the process of replacing poor quality agency social workers and the changes in work flow arrangements)

**The inspection report made some acknowledgement that the actions set out above in section 1 of this report were supporting or would in the future support the required improvement. The following statements are taken from the report**

*'There is evidence of some recent improvement, for example in the appointment by police to a new post, co-located with children's social care, to improve risk assessments in domestic abuse cases'*

*'The Council's own audit activity recently recognised these problems (children having too many changes of social worker) and has introduced a new pathway to provide more effective integration of child in need and child protection provision'.*

*'The number of looked after children in Slough has been consistently lower than in similar local authorities. This is due to a legacy of poor social work assessments and an overly high threshold for access to services. Although the number of looked after children is beginning to rise.....'*

*'Slough has effectively prioritised placing children for adoption.....the time between obtaining a placement order and deciding on a match with an adoptive family is better than the England average'.*

*'Historically the threshold for access to children's social care was too high. It was modified in April 2013 and as a result is now operating at an acceptable level'.*

*'Once child protection concerns are identified, decisions are made in a timely manner and case records are accompanied by a clear rationale and initial action plan'.*

*'The new threshold document and re-design of children's social care contact arrangements have already had an impact, ensuring that children who need protection are identified correctly. This process has resulted in a high and increasing rate of referrals of children who go on to receive an assessment'.*

*'Slough has made progress in developing a coordinated, multi-agency approach to identify and protect young people at risk of sexual exploitation. However, although partner agencies are beginning to work together, this work is not yet embedded and it is too early to measure the impact on young people'.*

*'However, more recently, decisions to look after children are timely and appropriate with no children becoming looked after unnecessarily'.*

*'Good use is made of the Public Law outline.....'*

*'A number of successful measures are in place to help looked after children to return to live in their own extended families'.*

*'Although additional measures have been taken recently to improve services for looked after children, it is too early to assess their impact'.*

*'Newly qualified social workers do not always have a protected caseload or receive the support they need in a timely way. Whilst the Council has recognised this and begun to take action to increase capacity, the impact of this is not yet evident'.*

*'Although there is a well-developed strategy for the delivery of Early Help it has yet to be implemented'.*

*'The Council has recognised this (poor accommodation) and developed plans to improve the situation but as yet, these are not realised'.*

*'Important senior appointments have been made to key roles, including the Strategic Director, Wellbeing, Assistant Director and the LSCB chair. Their efforts are beginning to make some improvements in managing a legacy of poor work'.*

**The Council would, however, contend that the report does not fully report or acknowledge the fact that a significant amount of work had been undertaken since the autumn of 2012 (set out above) and prior to the inspection that has laid the foundations for improvement. It would agree that the impact was not yet evident at the point of the inspection.**

The Council has to acknowledge that there was some lost opportunity in 2011 and much of 2012 and because of this Slough is not as far ahead with securing improvement as would have been expected.

Since the inspection, the Council has continued to drive forward the implementation of the work undertaken in 2013 and is making progress. Many of the actions that Ofsted said were necessary to secure improvements were already work in progress. Where they were not, the Council is putting them in place.

A new Improvement Plan under the following key themes is being developed:

**Theme 1: Early Help**

**Theme 2: Recruiting a skilled and stable workforce (including senior manager capacity)**

**Theme 3: Effective Social Work Practice**

## **Theme 4: Looked After Children and Care Leavers**

All of the areas for immediate and priority action or for improvement will be picked up under one of the 4 themes with milestones and targets so that progress can be monitored.

### **3. Progress since December 2013.**

#### **Some 'Headlines'**

- In January 2014 the Council agreed significant investment (£1.4m over 2 years) in Children's Social Care for additional social work posts (up to an additional 36 posts to include business support and first line managers and recruitment incentives) to be recruited over a 2 year period; one-off money to fund the difference in cost of agency workers to permanent whilst we make progress in appointing permanent staff; £72k for 'future proofing' – a post to focus on supporting and developing newly qualified social workers. The Council also agreed significant growth to cover the rising cost of placements (rising numbers of children) for looked after children (£3m over 2 years)
- 2 additional teams of social workers have been established since the inspection
- Average caseloads of children for social workers are down from 27 at the time of the inspection to 21.5. In the teams holding cases of children subject to child protection plans and care proceedings they are now 17 (just 1 away from our target of 16); in the looked after and care leavers team caseloads are 19. This reduction in average caseloads will allow social workers to spend more time with children.
- A comprehensive development programme for newly qualified social workers is in place and all newly qualified social workers have protected caseloads allowing them to spend 10% of their time on professional development
- The number of overdue assessments of children in need has reduced from 223 at the end of January to 39
- 93% of children subject to a child protection plan have had a visit from a social worker in the last 2 weeks.(compared with 66% in February 2013)

#### **Early Help:**

- A new permanent Head of Service came into post in February 2014

- Early Help Board established (Governance for Early help); chaired by senior NHS manager; terms of reference, priorities and Project Plan in place; Operational Group to meet in early April – to begin work on ‘Early Help Collective’ approach
- New team ‘Targeted Family Support’ established in Council to work with families just below the Children’s Social Care threshold; team nearly fully staffed with permanent workers; interim experienced social work qualified manager in post; protocols agreed with social care re ‘step down’ cases and joint working;
- Work undertaken to address agency ‘resistance’ to e-CAF (now called Slough Early Help Assessment); multi-agency training to be rolled out in April/May. 2 ‘Early Help Adviser’ posts established to support agencies with Early help assessments – one permanent appointment made.

### **Recruiting a skilled and stable workforce:**

This theme is the ‘mission critical’ activity which will lead to sustainable improvement and lead to a situation where ‘all children and young people in Slough receive good help, care and protection’. It underpins the successful delivery of the other 3 themes, in particular the Effective Social Work Practice theme.

Over the latter part of 2013 and the early part of 2014, the Council made progress in ‘letting go’ agency staff whose practice fell short of standards and replacing them with better quality staff. Additional social workers and managers have been recruited on an agency basis which has led to a reduction in average caseloads. The senior management team in Children’s Services is now composed of permanent post-holders (or on long-term contracts). Comprehensive arrangements have been put in place to support the professional development of promising newly qualified social workers and some key appointments have been made in the Safeguarding and Quality assurance Unit and the Early Help service. However, overall, our ratio of permanent to agency social workers and first line managers has not improved. The need to recruit additional staff quickly (through agencies) has in fact slightly worsened the ratio to just short of 40%.

The following gives some details of actions taken:

- Significant progress in recruiting to Head of Service Posts in Children’s Services. In December 2013, out of 5 posts, only one manager was permanent; the following posts now have permanent appointments: Early Help (in post since February); Protection and Care (long-standing permanent manager); Safeguarding and Quality Assurance (permanent manager to take up post at end of June). We have also made an appointment of an experienced Head of Service on a 20 month contract for



the Head of Service Assessment and Children in Need (a considered decision to seek an experienced interim on a long term contract as this is a key part of the system for improvement work); an internal acting up arrangement to the Head of Service (Placements and Resources)

- The Council has reviewed its senior management capacity in Children's Services and has agreed to appoint 2 additional post holders on fixed term contracts (18 months to 2 years) at Head of Service level. One post holder will lead a major programme to re-design the pathway for looked after children; the other will work to the Assistant Director, undertaking a range of duties to include the co-ordination of internal governance and improvement arrangements.
- The Council is taking part in the Step up to Social Work programme for the first time this year and we have 2 students now in placement in Slough.

A 'Recruitment and Retention' Action Plan is in place; a project group has been identified and a number of key actions have been undertaken (proposals to be finalised by end of March/early April)

- Benchmarking against neighbouring authorities is taking place, looking at pay scales and other incentives
- Proposals for the use of recruitment incentives in Slough are being drawn up
- Work has begun to re-design the Council's website for social work recruitment, including the use of multi-media material
- Exploratory discussions have taken place with 2 external agencies (1 further meeting with a 3<sup>rd</sup> agency is planned) and proposals have been received to work with the Council on social work and social work manager recruitment – a multi-faceted strategy for filling key posts
- Staff identified who want to 'profile Slough' as part of recruitment activity.
- Agency staff interested in permanent appointment targeted
- Slough has now the joined e-DBS scheme (quick turn around for checks) and is in discussion with Avarto in respect of shorter timescales to turn around recruitment

When the above is completed, we will undertake recruitment for key posts.

Retention of staff once recruited is critical; many of the actions identified in the theme below are critical for retention.

### **Effective Social Work Practice**

- 4 newly qualified social workers undertaking a comprehensive development programme; 10% of time dedicated to professional development
- Average social worker caseloads now 21.5 (reduced from 27 at time of inspection). In Care and Protection teams is now 17 (target is 16); in looked after children and care leavers team is 19.
- The social work teams and the early help teams are now located together on one office floor; all social workers have their own desk; teams sit together (practitioners, manager and business support); improved confidentiality; staff positive and morale improving (positive celebration of 'World Social Work Day'. Major refurbishment will start later in year which will increase supply of small rooms for supervision and meeting rooms.
- Additional management capacity in Assessment/CIN teams since January has begun to deliver improvements – reducing numbers of children in the system (through better workflow) – 612 children down from 752 in February; reduction in the number of overdue assessments – 39 (and only 19 in A&CIN), down from 223 at the end of January; average caseloads of children of 25 (down from 35 at the time of the inspection)
- New workflow arrangements (implementation begun just prior to inspection) now fully implemented and 2 additional social work teams established
- Learning and Development Framework finalised and launched in January – a range of mandatory training, continuing professional development activities
- Revised case audit programme – changed to focus on 'practice evaluation', to be led by Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit, begun in March. Based on Ofsted methodology and includes joint auditing of case record with managers and practice observations. Will focus more on voice of the child and reducing risk
- Strengthening Families approach piloted for initial case conferences – positive feedback from staff, service users and partners
- In spite of increasing numbers of children subject to CP plans (253 in February, up from 146 in March 2013) and looked after children (197 at the end of February, up from 185 in March 2013), performance on meeting targets re visits to children is being maintained or improved (93% of children on CP Plans visited in the last 2 weeks – improved from 64% in March 2013 and 90% of looked after children are visited at the required frequency – maintained in high 80% over the year).
- Additional Business Support capacity is now in place – 5 permanent Business Support Managers and at least 1 Business Support Officer for each social work team. A Corporate Working group is meeting (chaired by a Strategic Director) to look at improved systems and support to deliver effective social work.
- Formal dialogue now in place at a Pan-Berkshire level between LAs and TVP – led by Wokingham Chief Executive to agree a model for MASH for Berkshire LAs. A multi-agency meeting has taken place in Slough, facilitated by a consultant who

helped to implement the Devon Mash. Broad agreement to scope a Slough MASH (LA resources already in place). Consultant to be retained by Slough to lead further work.

### **Looked After Children and Care Leavers**

Agreement has been given to recruit a Programme Manager to lead a programme that will improve the experience of looked after children and care leavers throughout the system. In the meantime, significant underpinning activity is taking place:

- A Looked After Children Needs Assessment (2014/16) has been undertaken and a Sufficiency Strategy has been developed, currently in draft. The draft has been endorsed by the Corporate Parenting panel and will be signed off at the next Children's Partnership
- A Corporate Parenting Strategy (2014/16) has been developed, was endorsed by the Corporate Parenting Panel in March and will also go to the next Children's Partnership Board. The Strategy has been presented to the Council's senior leadership team in March
- The 'Pledge' for looked after children has been reviewed by the Children in care Council (and to include care leavers). The pledge has been signed off by the Corporate Parenting Panel and printed. A launch is planned for April

The above 3 documents are for multi-agency sign-up and will drive the Immediate and Priority Action 'Ensure the LA makes the aspirations and attainment of children in care and of care leavers their highest priority. Ensure that this priority is enshrined in all partnership strategies and plans.

- The CYPPB Joint Commissioning Strategy has been amended to include outcomes for looked after children and care leavers and the Engagement and Participation Strategy already included outcomes for looked after children and care leavers.
- Meetings have been held with Cambridge Education and outline proposals discussed for enhanced and robust 'virtual school' arrangements
- The new workflow arrangements in Children's Social Care have brought together under one first line manager social work for looked after child whose plan is to remain looked after and care leavers – this is designed to embed continuity for young people.

- Work is planned for April to work with a group of care leavers to adapt the DfE 'Charter' for care leavers for use in Slough. A group of care leavers have been consulted so that we can produce information in young-person accessible formats setting out rights and entitlements etc
- The Young people's service have agreed to work with care leavers on independence skills and the Slough housing allocations policy now includes care leavers as a priority group (and foster carers).
- Work is taking place (arising from the Sufficiency Strategy) to increase safe and sustainable accommodation options for care leavers

Kitty Ferris (Assistant Director)  
24<sup>th</sup> march 2014.