

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 29th January, 2015.

Present:- Councillors Bal (Chair), Abe (Vice-Chair), Brooker, Chahal, Davis, M Holledge, Malik, Matloob and Sohal (in attendance until 7.15pm)

Education Voting Co-opted Members

James Welsh – Catholic Diocese of Northampton

Education Non-Voting Co-opted Members

Apologies for Absence:- None

PART 1

28. Declaration of Interest

Cllr Bal declared his daughter's employment at Slough Borough Council (SBC).

29. Minutes of the Meeting held on 4th December 2014

The minutes of the meeting held on 4th December 2014 were approved as a correct record.

30. Member Questions

The answers to written questions submitted by members prior to the meeting were circulated.

In addition, the following supplementary questions were asked and answered as follows:

- Given the additional funding pledged to East Berkshire College, what courses would they be providing?
The College provided a mixture of courses at Higher Education, Further Education and compulsory education levels. The funding would be used to expand all of these, as well as its existing IT specialist capacity.
- Out of the 181 local pupils who entered grammar schools, how many applications were made?
There were 181 local pupils who applied and then met the requirements of the entrance examinations. However, the exact processes used by grammar schools in deciding the pass mark required could vary; Langley was looking to develop policies which would assist local candidates in accessing their school.

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- The £70 million spending was currently placed into broad categories; members requested a more detailed breakdown of these statistics.

31. Improvement Plan: progress report

SBC had commissioned an external review of children's services after Ofsted's findings in 2013. The objective had been to create a new baseline for the service after the Ofsted inspection, with the Local Government Association (LGA) selected to complete a safeguarding practice diagnostic. This had been led by an experienced practitioner and reported back to SBC in November 2014.

The findings had largely been in line with internal observations made by SBC, with the following matters identified as positive developments:

- Social workers had manageable caseloads;
- SBC was recruiting high quality staff;
- Case work was conducted in a more purposeful and effective manner;
- Team working had improved; and
- Arrangements for the stepping down of cases to other agencies had improved.

Meanwhile, other areas required further attention:

- There was still an overreliance on agency staff;
- The improvements in stepping down cases did not translate into reduced work for social care services;
- Too many cases were subject to Child Protection Orders;
- Partnership working (e.g. Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)) needed development; and
- Quality assurance required more rigour.

This feedback would be incorporated in the new improvement plan which would be developed.

In terms of staffing, 51% were now permanent with 10 of the 14 management positions now taken by permanent SBC employees. The Slough MASH was due to start on 1st April 2015 and would develop robust information sharing arrangements and triage for casework. It was also intended to maintain the upward trend in early help assessments, which had risen from 7 in April 2014 to 57 in November 2014. The Families First programme had improved care pathways, whilst the stability of placements for local children had also increased.

The future priorities for improvement would be partnership working and performance management / quality assurance. In addition, looked after children (who had not been included in the LGA's first safeguarding practice diagnostic) would be the subject of a second piece of LGA research.

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(At this point, Cllr Sohal left the meeting).

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- SBC had moved towards greater use of Section 17 and less of Section 47, with the latter being a more involved intervention. The use of Section 47 powers had been the result of a risk averse approach to care, and also had stemmed from a view amongst some practitioners that not using a child protection plan meant a 'lesser service' was being provided by social workers (which was not the view of SBC).
- SBC were working to ensure that processes for children in need mirrored child protection plans. It was also critical to ensure that the quality of information received was as good as possible, otherwise agencies would naturally err on the side of caution and invoke the most intensive options available.
- The rate for looked after children being allocated permanent homes was good. However, the precise figures would need to be circulated to members.
- The premium paid for agency staff, as well as the issues of a lack of permanence associated with such arrangements, were recognised by SBC. However, the improvement from a base of 39% permanent staff to the current figure of 51% had been the result of efforts to boost direct employment.
- One of the efforts to increase permanent staff at SBC had been the acquisition of newly qualified social workers. Recent graduates had been of a higher calibre than previously, and were also supported in their first years by a dedicated training programme. These efforts would continue, although it was also recognised that experienced staff would be required to support their efforts.
- SBC's retention policy stressed the importance of learning and development and using the first year of a staff placement to motivate new entrants. A retention bonus was also paid to permanent staff after 18 months, and a market supplement helped Slough compete with West London in terms of pay. Manageable case loads and accessible management would also serve as incentives for staff to remain with SBC.
- The possibility of offering bursaries to social workers entering for qualifications was being assessed by SBC. In addition, SBC had a policy on repayment for staff who left for other authorities after obtaining specialist training paid for by the council.
- Some academies and their head teachers were closely involved with SBC, and most schools were committed to supporting the child outside of a narrow academic focus. However, for some academies this was very much an internal process and SBC was committed to building collaborative working processes.
- The MASH had hoped to be established earlier; however, the original police plan had been for one MASH to cover all of Berkshire, whilst the new proposals (1 based in Slough and 1 based in Reading) were in line with SBC's wishes. This had caused a slight delay, and the exact

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structure of the MASH (as well as any dedicated resources) still needed minor attention.

Resolved:

- 1) That members receive precise figures on the percentage of looked after children who were placed in permanent homes.
- 2) That the report be noted.

32. Children's Services - update

SBC was undertaking practical work with the Department for Education (DfE) on the externalisation of children's services. SBC and DfE had formed a steering group which would oversee high level issues concerning the transfer of services and improvements, focusing on the scope of services to be included in the organisation, the governance model it would adopt and the timetable for transition. In addition, a project team had been established by SBC to look after the more detailed issues supporting this.

DfE had appointed a commissioner to oversee the transfer, with a secondary responsibility of theirs being the oversight of improvement. In addition, SBC had also arranged temporary coverage for the Director of Wellbeing during her absence, with Dr Krutika Pau appointed as the interim Director of Children's Services. Other responsibilities held by the Director of Wellbeing had been distributed amongst SBC staff.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The final decision on the governance model would rest with DfE. However, SBC's input was sought in negotiations on the matter, with the Cabinet to take a final decision on the model to be advocated by the Council.
- Whichever model was chosen, services would have to be separate from SBC's operations. As a result, in a charitable trust there would have to be under 20% SBC representation on the board. The arrangements would also have financial consequences such as liability for VAT, although DfE was committed in principle to funding any difference in cost between existing arrangements and their eventual replacement.
- SBC would be contracting to the new organisation once it was established. It would be possible to scrutinise and challenge any decisions, but SBC's direct impact would be limited. However, SBC's statutory accountability would remain.
- Dr Krutika Pau had an interim contract with an initial period of three months, for an average of three days per week. Members could be provided with an organogram outlining the new arrangements. Duplication of responsibilities had also been avoided under the interim arrangements.
- The DfE commissioner for children's services worked with SBC for one day per week and reported to DfE, avoiding any duplication of responsibilities in this regard as well.

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- Reorganisation of the service at the top level had now been concluded. However, the need for cost reductions under future budgets meant that other reorganisation efforts amongst SBC staff would need to continue. At present, staff morale had not been affected as far as could be ascertained through turnover and recruitment statistics.
- The process of externalisation would be likely to take at least nine months to conclude; it was unlikely that the transfer of services would be halted in this time. In addition, the permanence of the arrangement may depend on future government policy regarding externalisation of services in authorities across England.
- The previous authority to have externalised children's services had used the model of a company limited by guarantee. However, the differences in the circumstances did not indicate that this outcome was favoured in SBC's case.

Resolved:

- 1) That members be provided with an organogram outlining the interim arrangements for children's services.
- 2) That the report be noted.

33. Children and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) - to follow

This item would now be referred to the meeting on 15th April 2015.

34. Team Around You

This initiative built on the recent improvement efforts at SBC and the recommendations made by Ofsted in 2013. Overall, its focus was placing the child at the centre of care, with a series of specific outcomes and measures of success to be used to evaluate success.

The approach had been constructed in conjunction with children, education / care professionals and the police amongst other agencies, with the voice of the child to be explicit in all parts of care design. It was also intended to accelerate the pace of care, with frontline staff to be engaged at all times. This would create an involved and holistic approach to care provision. The key issues would be as follows:

- Commissioning of services;
- Gathering knowledge about the child involved; and
- The construction of appropriate outcomes for each case.

As well as working with children to build the project, housing would also be involved to ensure that transition from care was part of the process.

In terms of fostering and adoption, efforts would be made to recruit suitable carers (e.g. local businesses would receive information on the service to encourage individuals to come forward). Looked after children would also receive mentoring from previous recipients of the service where possible.

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The pilot would start in the spring of 2015, with any lessons to be identified at an early stage. A project board and a stakeholders' group were also in place to oversee all aspects of the programme.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The pilot was due to start in March 2015 and conclude at the end of May. Evaluation would take place the following month.
- Participation sessions had been conducted with their findings used in the construction of the pilot.
- Two potential mentors had been identified for looked after children.

Resolved:

- 1) That the Panel receive a report on the findings of the pilot in July 2015.
- 2) That the report be noted.

35. Forward Work Programme

The Panel made the following amendments to the work programme:

- The Slough Safeguarding Board's annual report will be considered in the autumn of 2015;
- The results of the Team Around You pilot will be considered in July 2015; and
- Headteachers from Churchmead and Burnham schools would be invited to the meeting on 11th March 2015.

36. Attendance Record

The attendance record was noted.

37. Date of Next Meeting - 11th March 2015

Chair

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