

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Education and Children's Services **DATE:** 21 October 2015
Scrutiny Panel

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PART I

FOR INFORMATION & SCRUTINY

CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT UPDATE

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide the Panel with information on the progress made in improving Slough Borough Council's children's social care service since the Ofsted inspection in November 2013.

2 Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action

- 2.1 The Panel is requested to scrutinise the progress made in improving the services provided.

3. The Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA and the Five Year Plan

3a. Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy Priorities

Priorities:

- Health – identifying and prioritising services for vulnerable groups in the Slough population and targeting support to meet the needs of children and young people.
- Economy and Skills – offering support to children, young people and their families, promoting educational achievement for those in care or leaving care increasing their opportunities for success in adult life.
- Safer Communities – offering effective support to ensure children and young people are safe, and feel safe, in their homes and communities; and by carrying out our statutory role as a local authority to provide services for children in need, to safeguard them and look after children whose parents are unable to do so.

3b Five Year Plan Outcomes

Children and young people in Slough will be healthy, resilient and have positive life chances – The improvement programme aims to make Slough children's services one of the best providers of children's social care in the country, providing timely, purposeful support that brings safe, lasting and positive change.

4 Other Implications

a) Financial

The latest forecast for Q1 of the 2015-16 financial year in respect of Children's Social Care was £2.3m and this included a number of proposed actions to mitigate pressures, including increasing the level of recruitment in respect of permanent staff.

As part of the budget discussions for the trust going forward, an eighteen month budget was agreed that totals £36.2m (approximately £24.1m per annum) for the Trust. This compares to the underlying base budget of £21.8m for the service area as a whole. The Trust have presented some initial proposals for reducing costs that include further recruitment of permanent staff, reduced unit costs for placements and the more effective use of framework contracts and improved commissioning, along with investment in ICT to utilise efficiency savings. The Council recognised that the comparative costs with other similar Councils were high; there was significant investment in the service in 2014-15 with an additional on-going growth of £3.3m including in the budget, and £1.5m in the 2013-14 budget. There needs to be a reduced cost profile over the medium term to not only demonstrate better value for money for the taxpayer but to also be part of the Council's overall cost reduction programme to enable the delivery of the Five Year Plan.

b) Risk Management

Risk	Mitigating action	Opportunities
Insufficient improvement being made.	Transition to services into newly established Slough Children's Services Trust.	Slough Children's Services Trust to assess baseline position and establish improvement programme to bring service provision up to 'good' within three years and 'outstanding' within five years.
Transition to new organisation taking focus from improvement programme.	Focus on key issues, and regular progress monitoring by Improvement Steering Group and CYPFB Sub Group, during transition period.	The creation of a new organisation, focused solely on delivering good and effective services to safeguard children will attract effective managers and practitioners, and ensure that all aspects of organisational delivery are focused on good outcomes from children.

c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

Following the November 2013 Ofsted inspection findings, the Secretary of State has exercised her powers under The Education Act 1996 in relation to the Council's children's services functions, giving the Council such directions as she thinks expedient to enable the functions to be performed to an adequate standard.

Through the 1st Direction, the Secretary of State directed that a separate organisation should be set up to carry out, what will be, most of the Council's Children's social care services functions. The 2nd Direction required the Council to enter into a legally binding contract for services with the Slough Children's Services Trust (SCST), for the SCST to deliver children's social care functions on behalf of the Council.

d) Equalities Impact Assessment

And equalities impact assessment is not required in relation to the recommendations in this report.

5 Recruitment and Retention

What did Ofsted say

- 5.1 Following its inspection of Slough Borough Council's children's social care service in November 2013, Ofsted commented on the lack of progress that had been made in recruiting enough qualified and suitably experienced permanent social workers, alongside a concern over the quality of temporary staff that were employed. Ofsted noted the 'excessively high caseloads' of social workers, impacting on their ability to understand the lives of the children they held cases for, leading 'to poor quality assessments, plans and outcomes for children;' this was also seen in the frequent changes of social worker children experienced. Ofsted also raised issues of the physical location and layout of SBC's social work teams, with a requirement that social workers needed to be able to have confidential discussions with their managers and other professionals in order to drive plans for children forward.
- 5.2 Ofsted challenged SBC to put in place immediate mitigations through the development of a comprehensive Workforce Strategy to attract and retain high quality social work staff, protect newly qualified social workers, create the right working environment to support good social work, and improve the capacity of senior management to drive forward the improvement agenda.

What have we done

- 5.3 Having recognised the over reliance of the services on agency staff, the quality of those agency staff, the 'short supply' of experienced permanent social workers and the rising caseloads had applied to the Council for additional resources (agreed in January 2014) to increase the establishment within the social work teams (social workers, managers and business support staff) and offer revised recruitment and retention incentives.
- 5.4 Alongside the work to improve the level of recruitment of permanent social workers, the council reviewed its arrangements with its framework provider for agency social workers to improve the quality of temporary staff employed in the service. A comprehensive Learning and Development Programme was also rolled out and arrangements were agreed for a robust programme of support for newly qualified social workers which included a dedicated manager.
- 5.5 This work was consolidated into the Children's Social Care Workforce Strategy 2014-2017 in September 2014, focusing on the commitment to recruit and retain suitably qualified and experienced staff, ensuring that staff had the support, information and skills they needed.

- 5.6 With the new Workforce Strategy in place, there was a need to drive its delivery and the service struggled to give adequate focus to this. Therefore, additional dedicated capacity was brought in to drive forward this key aspect of improvement at a greater pace; a Children's Workforce Lead was appointed in May 2015.
- 5.7 Since the appointment of a Children's Workforce Lead, the pace of recruitment has improved. In April 2015 children's social care included 40% permanent frontline social workers, this rose to 46% in August 2015, with future activity (including those staff appointed but not yet in post, and those who have resigned but not yet left) indicating 68% in November 2015. The target would be to reach at least 75% permanent social workers by December 2015.
- 5.8 Accommodation works took place to provide a suitable space within the ground floor east of St Martin's Place. This ensured a suitable environment for confidential discussions between managers, staff and clients. In addition this meant adequate space was available for teams to be sited together.

Impact of activity

- 5.9 In order to 'baseline' improvements being made, the service commissioned the Local Government Association to undertake two practice diagnostics in November 2014 and March 2015. In terms of recruitment and retention, these diagnostics recognised the investment that had been made to increase the capacity of the service through permanent recruitment, to have manageable caseloads, improved working arrangements that had been put in place to provide social workers with designated team spaces alongside their managers to enable greater oversight, and stronger training, development and support. However, the diagnostics also noted the continued reliance on agency staff, with a lack of pace in the plans to reduce this.
- 5.10 Whilst the direction of travel for recruitment is now looking positive, the pace at which this key element of the improvement programme moved has impacted on other areas of improvement. It should also be noted that a focus on recruitment must sit alongside a robust approach to retention, with the requirement for a thorough and consistent induction process along with ongoing professional development opportunities for all staff.
- 5.11 Average social worker caseloads have reduced and now range from 14 children in the Looked After Children and Care Leavers Teams to 21 children in the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities Team and Assessment and Child in Need Teams. In particular, there has been a significant reduction for the Assessment and Child in Need Teams, who had average caseloads of 36 children at the time of the 2013 inspection. The calculations of these caseloads have also taken account of Consultant Practitioners who hold reduced (50%) caseloads, allowing them to take on more complex cases, but also to provide support to less experienced colleagues.

6 QUALITY OF PRACTICE

What did Ofsted say

- 6.1 Ofsted found that too many children and families were receiving a poor quality of service. In particular, they highlighted: insufficient priority being given to child in need cases, with families not receiving the services they required, and that this then allowed them to escalate into the child protection system; a legacy of poor

assessments and high thresholds were meant that some children were entering the children protection and looked after children system belatedly; and a lack of social worker stability making it difficult for children and young people to develop meaningful relationships with social workers, impacting on the social workers ability to understand their needs and use this knowledge to develop plans for their future.

- 6.2 Ofsted also highlighted that whilst nearly all placements were rated 'good' or better, and a high proportion of looked after children were placed with foster carers, over a quarter of these were more than 20 miles from their home communities making it difficult for them to maintain regular contact with their families and friends, due to issues with foster carer recruitment. Being placed away from their home communities also impacted on looked after children's ability to access the services they might need, and resulted in too many children experiencing problems with their placement, causing the placements to breakdown. Ofsted did note that the arrangements in place to deal with children who went missing from their home or care placement were well-coordinated.
- 6.3 It was recognised that there had been some success in placing children for adoption and that they were well supported throughout the process and post-adoption; however, many children with placement orders were still waiting to be matched with a family, due to a lack of effective recruitment of foster carers.
- 6.4 The quality of pathway planning for those preparing to leave care was poor, with many care leavers not engaging in employment, education or training; and this sat alongside care leavers anxiety from not having a clear understanding of their rights and entitlements, or plans for their future.
- 6.5 Ofsted challenged SBC to put in place immediate mitigations through: improving early help, child in need and child protection assessments, ensuring they are comprehensive and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely); ensuring that social workers were spending sufficient time with children and young people to build and maintain a positive relationship with them, understanding their wishes and feelings to assist in writing assessments and plans to address their needs (specifically through regular visits where the child was seen alone); improving recruitment of foster carers and adopters, and support for foster carers in their role; and improving care leavers preparations for independence.

What have we done

- 6.6 The service reviewed the organisational arrangements for the front end of the service and these were strengthened, with cases transferred to the assessment and child in need teams once it became apparent that a section 47 strategy discussion was required, rather than being held with Duty; along with more effective arrangements put in place for cases to be stepped down to early help from referral.
- 6.7 The plans to implement a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) were progressed, in order to strengthen the services ability to immediately link with partners' intelligence in assessing safeguarding issues.
- 6.8 The Practice Standards for Casework were revised and simplified in May 2015 in order to consistently promote good practice within the service. These were rolled out across the service with an expectation that all staff will consistently apply these standards and managers will be supported to challenge poor practice.

- 6.9 There was a focus on strengthening the Consultant Practitioner role, supported by an interim appointment (Practice Improvement Head of Service) to work with Consultant Practitioners to drive forward improvements in practice.
- 6.10 All permanent Practice Managers were required to undertake a comprehensive management development programme to develop their personal and professional effectiveness. The programme was designed to skill frontline managers to support their staff to deliver high quality practice. The 'Building Managers for the Future', programme was launched in April 2015, validated by the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM).
- 6.11 The Team Around You pilot was run to assess the approach as a potential mechanism for improving the ability of the service to move plans forward.

Impact of activity

- 6.12 In terms of quality of practice, the LGA diagnostics identified a number of areas where improvements had been made, whilst recognising that those improvements had been relatively recent.
- 6.13 Progress had been made on compliance and care plans were generally of an adequate standard, however, they were not always consistently outcomes focused or SMART. Since April 2015, the council has commissioned two audit activities in respect of children's services, one of which focused on casework relating to children subject to threshold decision making, and casework relating to children subject to child protection plans found that, whilst the threshold decision making was generally sound, there was a lack of consistency around the application of standards and most plans were still not SMART.
- 6.14 The improved organisational arrangements at the front end of the service were having a positive effect, but there were still a very high volume of Section 47 (child protection) investigations undertaken. However, since the diagnostics, the impact of the new arrangements have begun to show an impact with the rate of Section 47 investigations beginning to drop from a high of 241.3 per 10,000 children in January 2015 to 225.5 per 10,000 in August 2015.
- 6.15 The diagnostics felt that whilst the front end had been strengthened, having an impact on Section 47s, the same focus was still needed in terms of assessment, planning and review of the child in need pathway. In terms of partners, there was much more work needed to ensure that an effective early help arrangement could support reducing the demand for social care services, as there was no evidence that it was currently achieving this.
- 6.16 The November 2014 diagnostic recognised improvements had been made, but stressed that they were at risk of being unsustainable.
- 6.17 The further diagnostic in March 2015 also recognised that improvements were taking place, but that there was more progress needed. In particular, focus was needed around overcoming the legacy of changing social workers, and variable quality of practice and supervision. The development of SMART plans was still an issue (see above).
- 6.18 In terms of performance information:

- Single assessments were introduced nationally at the time of the last Ofsted Inspection, so there is no direction data comparison on performance, however, the number of single assessments completed and authorised within timescales has been consistently above 80% for the past 12 months. This is still an area that can be improved on, particularly in terms of assessments being completed sooner within the expected 45 day timeframe.
- In November 2013 78.9% of children who were subject to child protection plans had been visited in the previous two weeks. For the last 12 months, this figure has been between 90% and 100%. However, reported data has shown a lower performance when considering children seen alone during their child protection visits. The standard in Slough is that all children aged three or above should be seen alone at each visit (which is a higher standard than the Berkshire LSCB procedures which say that a child should be seen alone every third visit). Performance data was showing that in the first quarter 2015/16 only 57.5% of all cases (children aged 0 to 18) were seen alone during this visit. However, the data collection procedures have now been adjusted to accurately reflect the expected standard, and managers have worked with practitioners to improve recording in this area. As a consequence, performance in August 2015 showed that 81.8% of children were seen alone. In addition, changes have been made to the system to make it mandatory for this field to be completed, and this will allow for accurate recording in future and will be an area of performance that the Trust will want to keep under review.
- A key area of performance giving concern in November 2013 was the number of new looked after children who were being placed more than 20 miles from home. In November 2013 this was 24.7% of Slough's looked after children, reducing to 9.3% in August 2015. This has been a challenging area of work due to the size of the borough.
- The number of children in residential care placements has more than halved to 11 in July 2015, down from 23 in November 2013; providing children with more stability within a family (foster) environment as well as having a positive impact on placements budgets within children's social care.
- From May 2015 to July 2015, over 90% of looked after children were receiving six-weekly visits; this figure fell slightly in August to 84.5%. Six weekly visits are not a statutory minimum for all looked after children, with children in stable placements required to be visited every 12 weeks. Slough had set a standard of every six weeks for all looked after children except where this was contrary to the wishes of the young person involved and with agreement from the appropriate Head of Service within Children's Social Care. In November 2013, only 51% of looked after children were seen alone at their statutory visits, this has now risen to 74.3% in August 2015.
- Long term stability of placements was also highlighted as an area requiring improvement, being 53% of looked after children (who were under the age of 16 and in care for at least two and a half years)) in November 2013 to 72.3% in July 2015, remaining around 70% in August 2015.

7 Quality Assurance

What did Ofsted say

- 7.1 Ofsted highlighted the need to improve the performance management and audit programme within children's social care, ensuring the effective evaluation of practice and reduction of risk.
- 7.2 Looking at the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service and child protection chairs, Ofsted stressed the need for more rigorous challenge to drive progress.

What have we done

- 7.3 The service had a Quality Assurance Framework in place, which included a case audit programme, a case supervision programme and a combination of monthly 'high level' performance reporting and a small number of weekly reports at the team and worker level, but this was not consistently applied.
- 7.4 Practice Standards were introduced in May 2015 and extensive promotion of the tools across all practitioners and managers was undertaken. These standards were focused on ensuring that the basics were being done.
- 7.5 Having identified the need to strengthen the IRO service, a new IRO team was put in place to develop the role and impact of the service.

Impact of activity

- 7.6 Both practice diagnostics stated that Slough needed to strengthen its approach to quality assurance and performance management, identifying this as a contributory factor in the inconsistency of practice.
- 7.7 Following the diagnostics and a council-commissioned audit focused on the effectiveness and impact of the council's Quality Assurance Framework for children's social care, the approach to feeding back learning from the case audit programme was strengthened, and a workshop was held for managers, monthly audit moderation and learning meetings were established, alongside the introduction of themed audits. The cohort of auditors was being expanded to include IROs, conference chairs and consultant practitioners.

8 Leadership and Partnership

What did Ofsted say

- 8.1 Ofsted was concerned at the capacity of senior leadership within the council to drive forward improvements in the service, and challenged the council to ensure that the local authority, as corporate parent, gave the highest priority to the needs of children in care and care leavers.
- 8.2 Ofsted also commented on the insufficient progress made in multi-agency working, with referrals not containing appropriate levels in information, and partners not engaging early enough with children and families; this was highlighted by the lack of progress in developing a local multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH).

What have we done

- 8.3 The development of the MASH has been ongoing, with the co-location of the council's First Contact Team and Thames Valley Police at Slough Police Station as a pre-cursor to the full implementation of the Slough MASH; and the Clinical

Commissioning Group have agreed to fund a part-time 'health navigator' post to support the MASH, but this post has not yet been recruited to.

- 8.4 Work has taken place to strengthen the engagement of agencies in formal child protection processes, such as strategy meetings, attendance at conferences and information sharing.
- 8.5 Multi-agency work to develop pathways for Female Genital Mutilation and CSE has taken place although all agencies would acknowledge that much more remains to be done.

Impact of activity

- 8.6 Whilst progress has been made to establish the Slough MASH, this is still to go live.
- 8.7 Progress has been made in further developing an Early Help framework, with the Early Help Sub Group of the Children and Young People's Partnership overseeing developments; early help coordinators are in post, services have identified early help champions, early help assessments are increasing in numbers (now to a level equal to surrounding local authority areas), and there has been good engagement from other services such as the Young People's Services. However, as was highlighted by the LGA diagnostics, there is still no evidence of the impact of early help on reducing the numbers of children coming into children's social care.
- 8.8 Much of the focus of the leadership within the council has been on ensuring a safe transition of children's social care services into the new Slough Children's Services Trust, with Eleanor Brazil (Slough Commissioner for Children's Social Care) commenting on the 'collective commitment and hard work of officers of the Council, the DfE project team, the new recruits to the Trust, lawyers for both the Council and the DfE and the Deloitte's project team'.

9 Next steps

- 9.1 The transfer of children's social care services to the Slough Children's Services Trust took place on the 1 October 2015. A full report on this transfer will be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November.

10 Conclusion

- 10.1 With the transfer of children's social care services from Slough Borough Council to the Slough Children's Services Trust on the 1 October 2015, this report provides a summary of improvements that have been made to date following an inadequate Ofsted rating in November 2013. Whilst recognising there have been areas of improvement, there is still much more to be done as the Trust takes the programme of work forward.

11 Background Papers

- 1 - Children's Services Transition Project Decisions and Update (Cabinet, 13 July 2015)
- 2 - Update on Externalisation of Children's Services (Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 9 July 2015)

- 3 - Slough Borough Council: Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and Care Leavers (Ofsted, 11 February 2014)