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22 February 2022

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Dear Andrew

Focused visit to Slough Children First

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Slough children's services on 18 January 2022. The inspectors were Amanda Maxwell, Her Majesty's Inspector and Maire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for 'front door' services, including decision-making for contacts and referrals about children, child protection enquiries, decisions to step up or down from early help, and assessments for children in need.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed the arrangements beforehand. Both inspectors were on site. They held face-to-face discussions with local authority staff and used a mixture of face-to-face meetings and virtual technology to hold discussions with partner agencies. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Since Ofsted's last visit in October 2020, there has been significant change and challenge for the local authority. The children's services company, Slough Children First, is now wholly owned by Slough Borough Council and is strategically aligned to the council but operationally independent. One newly appointed joint chief executive and director of children's services leads the service. Relationships between the council and children's services have improved. This has facilitated the integration of services which support children and families. For example, early help and services to support

children who are not in education, employment or training are now overseen by Slough Children First, streamlining services for families. There has been a significant shift in the culture within the organisation and strategic relationships with partner agencies are more positive and productive.

The council issued a section 114 notice in 2021 and as a result, commissioners have been appointed to the council to oversee and scrutinise the use and management of funds. The previous deficits accrued by the former trust have been written off but there continues to be tight scrutiny and regular review of spending to manage the current and projected future overspends.

Senior leaders know their services well and have supported staff to develop and improve their practice. They have successfully navigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They experience significant challenges in the recruitment and retention of skilled staff. This hampers workforce stability, which inevitably affects the quality of practice. Although systems in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are helping to keep children safe, bottlenecks in early help and safeguarding and family support delay the throughput of work. This means that some families wait too long to receive support when their needs are assessed as requiring early help targeted support. Similarly, not all children's plans are progressed quickly enough. Senior leaders have implemented a range of recruitment strategies, including attracting experienced social workers from overseas and using agency social work teams. Despite this, caseloads remain high, and the situation remains fragile.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Management oversight within the assessment teams to ensure that risk to all children is assessed when their circumstances change.
- Capacity in early help and safeguarding and family support to reduce the delay in children receiving help.
- The impact of quality assurance processes to improve social work practice.

Findings

Systems within the MASH are effective at ensuring that concerns about children are progressed effectively, including those received out of hours. Referrals are appropriate and generally the quality of these is suitable to inform next steps. Decisions within the MASH are timely and proportionate and take account of relevant multi-agency information. Suitable parental consent is obtained and overridden where necessary.

Partnerships have been strengthened over the course of the pandemic with the co-location of police and health agencies in the MASH. Partners work well together and strategy discussions in the MASH are mostly well attended. Partners are aware that capacity issues limit their attendance at some multi-agency meetings outside the MASH, which is a missed opportunity to jointly inform decisions for children.

Child protection enquiries commence promptly in response to children's concerns. The quality of these is variable. Inspectors saw comprehensive investigations which fully considered risk to children with clearly articulated safety planning but also some weaker investigations that appeared superficial.

Early help decisions are appropriate and well considered. There is a good understanding of thresholds for this service. Capacity issues have delayed some interventions, starting with children whose needs are assessed as less urgent. Unfortunately, some of these families have then declined the help when offered. Effective systems are used to ensure that children access the appropriate social work support when their needs increase or change is not achieved.

The quality of assessments is improving. They capture children's voices as well as their daily experiences. Most assessments include family history and presenting issues and the analysis supports appropriate decision-making, which clearly identifies what needs to change. There is a strong focus by managers on the impact on children, which starts at the MASH. Workers in the assessment teams are knowledgeable about children and this awareness is gained through their regular visits, strong relationships and some engaging direct work.

Capacity issues in Safeguarding and Family Support (S&FS) prevent some children moving through to the right service. This bottleneck delays the throughput of work from the assessment teams, which inevitably slows down the progression of plans for children. Inspectors saw evidence of changing risks for a small number of children while they wait to transfer to the next team, which should have prompted an update to the assessment. Leaders are aware of these issues within the S&FS and have a clear plan to address them.

Children at risk from domestic abuse are identified and Slough Children First has a range of services, including some developed over the course of the pandemic, which support families affected by domestic abuse effectively.

A specialist team is effective at ensuring that responses to children who are at risk of exploitation are holistic and informed by multi-agency mapping and safety planning. As a result, risks to children are managed well. When children go missing, early screening at the front door appropriately informs decision-making. This helps to protect children.

Strong management oversight in the MASH helps to progress prompt decision-making for children. Workers value the informal responsive case direction, peer support and access to managers. The oversight of children in need practice is not as robust within the assessment teams.

Leaders have a good understanding of their service. Plans are in place to address their areas of weakness. Progress has begun to align services and ensure that there is more coordination between early help and social work support.

Performance management reporting is well established and helps leaders focus on areas that are not performing well. Quality assurance processes are developing, but audits continue to show variability in the quality of social work practice and auditing. Although leaders can identify weaknesses in children's cases, auditors do not consistently identify gaps in practice, and this remains an area for improvement.

Senior leaders have a range of workforce strategies to appoint suitable and skilled staff. Some of their efforts have been fruitful but vacancies remain. The shortfalls in capacity are putting additional demands on staff which are not sustainable and slow the progression of work with children and families. Despite this, staff were positive throughout the visit about working for Slough Children First and demonstrated enthusiasm and commitment to children.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Amanda Maxwell
Her Majesty's Inspector