

12 July 2024

Sue Butcher
Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services
Slough Children First and Slough Borough Council
Observatory House
25 Windsor Road
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Dear Ms Butcher

Focused visit to Slough local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Slough children's services on 30 April and 1 May 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rodica Cobarzan and Naintara Khosla.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan. The visit included looking at thresholds, step-up and step-down arrangements between children in need and child protection, children subject to a letter before proceedings and the protection of disabled children.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's records and discussions with social workers about their work with children. Inspectors also reviewed the local authority's quality assurance and performance management information.

Headline findings

Most children in need, including children subject to a child protection plan, receive timely and appropriate services. A reduction in staff turnover and an associated improvement in workforce stability have begun to have a positive impact on the consistency and quality of practice for most children in need and those in need of protection. The senior leadership team has a sound understanding of the further progress that is needed to achieve its vision of a sustainable and resilient service for children, and it has a strong focus on continuous service development. A comprehensive improvement plan is underway.

Children's social care statutory functions have been delegated to Slough Children First (SCF), a company wholly owned by Slough Borough Council (SBC). Since the ILACS inspection in January 2023, relationships between SCF and SBC have been strengthened, leading to a shared understanding, appropriate challenge and agreed priorities for children in Slough.

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

- Case recording, including records of visits and direct work with children.
- The quality and impact of management oversight.
- The effectiveness and progression of child-in-need and child protection plans.

Main findings

Children in need of help or protection are identified appropriately and are provided with the most suitable level of help to meet their needs. When risk levels for children change, information is shared effectively between workers to enable continuity of support.

Children and family assessments are mostly strong. The identification of children and families' needs is informed by a broad range of sources, including children's histories and information from partner agencies. The assessments are culturally sensitive, and families do not need to wait for assessments to be completed before receiving the relevant support.

Children who are young carers are identified during assessments, and effective support is offered to provide social activities away from their caring responsibilities.

When children are at risk of harm, strategy meetings are timely, and they are well attended by partner agencies. In many cases, the information gathered helps professionals to be clear about reducing risk. For a small number of children, including children who are victims of domestic abuse, a lack of analysis has had an impact on safety planning, limiting the effectiveness of support and risk reduction for them.

For most children, their plans are detailed and contain clear actions and timescales. A small number of plans do not progress at pace, and some children experience delays in getting the support that they need. Family network meetings are offered and held in most cases and include effective consideration of safety planning. Children and their carers who are victims of domestic abuse are able to access support from commissioned services, and these services help to make a positive difference to their lives.

Most children's plans are reviewed regularly through child-in-need meetings, core groups and review child protection conferences. However, inconsistent attendance by partner agencies does not always enable social workers to update the plans and identify further actions, risks and support.

Children are seen by their social workers, and in most cases, they build trusting relationships. For some children, changes of social worker and a reduced frequency of visits do not assist with building relationships, limiting the progress of the plans in improving circumstances for children.

While social workers do undertake direct work with children, the quality of this work is variable. In many cases, this work is not consistently evident in the children's records and does not routinely inform planning. Social workers have attributed this to the higher caseloads and the complexity of work with children that they are currently undertaking. In stronger examples, direct work helps older children to understand risks and helps parents to develop parenting strategies; this work is well recorded, supports change and helps family relationships.

Social workers work effectively with the extended family networks and involve family members appropriately in decision-making. This means that children receive support from adults known to them and with whom they already have relationships.

Disabled children benefit from support from social workers who understand their needs well. A variety of services are accessed to support children's needs, such as direct payments, short breaks or activities in the community. However, children's plans are not always reflective of the progress that they make, and this limits the understanding of the impact of support or intervention being provided.

Children in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) benefit from increased management oversight. Thresholds are understood, and there is consistency in decision-making for children entering PLO, stepping down and initiating care proceedings. When risks for children increase, decisions are mostly timely, and appropriate intervention is provided. A small number of children experience delay at the start of the PLO process.

Letters to parents in pre-proceedings include the necessary information and are mostly written in accessible language, providing clarity about the concerns. Letters provide details about support for the child and their family and the assessments to be completed. Engagement of the family network is promoted, which adds to the insight into children's experiences and better supports long-term planning for children.

Social workers are committed to working in Slough; they appreciate the rich population diversity in the borough, which provides opportunities to support families from different ethnicities and religious and cultural backgrounds.

Social workers speak positively about supervision and report that their managers are visible and supportive. Supervision and management oversight are mostly evident on children's electronic records, although the quality is variable, and they do not always evidence reflection and case progression.

Senior leaders are taking appropriate action to secure permanent staff through ongoing recruitment campaigns, and this is enabling greater workforce stability and increased consistency for children. However, increased demand means that some social workers are currently experiencing high caseloads. Senior leaders are continuing to recruit, and newly recruited staff are soon to take up their posts.

A new quality assurance framework is becoming embedded and is starting to make a positive difference to practice with children. The involvement of practitioners in the audits enables them to learn promptly regarding strengths and areas for improvement. Further improvements are planned, such as work around how actions from audits are tracked for completion, moderation and the inclusion of children and families' feedback.

The Improvement Plan is appropriately focused on areas that will make the most difference to children and families. Regular performance meetings and the oversight and challenge provided by the Improvement Board ensure that there is accountability and learning from practice at all levels.

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

Yours sincerely

Rodica Cobarzan
His Majesty's Inspector