

2 February 2018

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Dear Nicola and Cate

### **Monitoring visit of Slough children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Slough children's services on 10 and 11 January 2018. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2016. The inspectors were Linda Steele and Donna Marriott, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Based on the evidence gathered during this visit, the council and trust are continuing to make progress in some areas to improve services for children. Social work practice is improving. Assessments, plans and reviews are evident in the vast majority of children's cases. Nevertheless, like previous monitoring visits, inspectors identified weaknesses in the effectiveness of management oversight. This continues to be an area of practice that requires attention. This has hampered progress in some areas and consequently, the pace of improvement has been slow. Leaders have recently taken action to re-focus the trust's improvement plan, with increased emphasis on strengthening management oversight and accountability. The priorities set are appropriate, but it is too early to demonstrate impact.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of help and protection, with a focus on three themes:

- the quality of plans, planning and social work intervention with children in need and their families
- the effectiveness of management oversight and decision-making, and how well children in need plans are overseen and progressed by managers
- the quality of 'edge of care work' for children in need, along with decisions and plans to look after these children.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision notes, and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff including managers, social workers and other staff.

## **Overview**

The council and the trust show commitment to improve services for children, and have put in place some of the foundations necessary to deliver effective services for children in need. Based on the evidence gathered during this visit, social work practice is improving. In most cases seen by inspectors, children receive effective intervention from skilled workers. Variabilities in practice are still evident. Children benefit from a range of support, but do not yet experience a consistently robust service in response to their needs. Management oversight is not always focusing on the progression of children's plans. For a small minority of children, the quality of practice still falls below the standards the trust would expect. This means that senior leaders cannot be confident that all children receive the support they need.

The trust has been successful in recruiting permanent social work staff, as well as retaining a number of experienced agency staff. Staff have access to a variety of appropriate training and are supported to attend. These training opportunities are further strengthening social work practice. Staff spoken to by inspectors were positive about working for Slough. Senior leaders in the council and trust know they need to increase the pace of improvement and have recently implemented a revised plan to help them achieve this.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Based on the evidence gathered during this visit, social work practice is improving, leading to better outcomes for some children. Social workers visit children regularly, and see children on their own. Social workers make stringent efforts to build trusting relationships with children and work with them to understand their experiences. Despite some turnover of staff, social workers know the children they work with well and provide them with good support.

The quality of assessments has improved but timeliness remains a challenge, with 57% (year to date) being completed within timescales. Although some assessments take too long to complete, inspectors saw some examples of children receiving services in the intervening period, ensuring that their needs are responded to. Once completed, most assessments are comprehensive, explore risk and protective factors effectively and are informed by history, including information held by partner agencies.

Partner agencies regularly attend meetings, contribute to children's plans, and undertake tasks to improve circumstances for children and their families. However, children in need meetings are not always held quickly enough to ensure that families and professionals are clear about the actions that are needed from the outset of the

work. Consequently, there is a lack of clarity during this critical time about what needs to be done to improve children's circumstances. Inspectors saw some good-quality plans, but not all are focused on children's outcomes or include measurable objectives. Most do not include contingency plans, making it difficult to hold families and agencies to account. Weaknesses in planning such as these mean that plans are not always progressed effectively with the pace needed.

Skilled workers in the multidisciplinary innovation hub deliver intensive intervention, including support outside of office hours. This helps children to remain in the care of their families when appropriate. Social workers and family support workers talk positively about the benefit of co-working to support children and their families with a broad range of needs, including those associated with domestic abuse, behavioural issues and parental substance misuse. This has improved levels of engagement with some families and improved outcomes for some children.

Social workers are positive about weekly hub supervision, finding this approach helpful in enabling them to reflect about the issues affecting families' lives. However, supervision, challenge and management oversight continue to be areas for development as practice is not yet consistently good. Inspectors saw some considerable gaps in supervision taking place. Management oversight lacks rigour and managers are not stringent enough in making sure that children's plans are progressed. As a result, there is sometimes drift and delay in taking action when risks to children increase, or progress is limited or not sustained. The trust recognises this and has recently taken action to ensure a greater focus on management oversight and supervision compliance through the introduction of refreshed supervision standards and performance monitoring. However, it is too early to measure the impact of this.

Workforce stability is improving and this is starting to have a positive impact. The trust has had some success in recruiting social workers, with 81% now permanent members of staff, compared with 72% in January 2017, reducing reliance on agency staff. Caseloads have reduced overall and most social workers have manageable caseloads. However, there are some disparities, with a very small minority of social workers holding caseloads in excess of 30 children.

There is a developing performance management culture within the service. Performance information is in place and used by managers. Recently introduced performance surgeries ensure that frontline managers are held to account for their hub's performance.

The audits completed for the purpose of this visit contained relevant findings and, in most cases, correctly identified weaknesses and strengths. However, inspectors found some practice issues, which had not been scrutinised effectively and not all audits are sufficiently self-critical. In response to these shortfalls, the trust has introduced a new auditing tool, to seek staff views on the findings of audits and improve learning, but it is too early to demonstrate the impact of this.

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified areas of strength, areas where improvement is occurring, and some areas where we considered the progress has not been swift enough.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Linda Steele

**Her Majesty's Inspector**