

Slough Borough Council

Inspection of local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 21 January 2019 to 1 February 2019

**Lead inspector: Donna Marriott
Her Majesty's Inspector**

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Significant progress has been made by the council and Slough Children's Services Trust in tackling the deep-rooted problems which led to the service being judged inadequate in 2011, 2013 and 2015. After a faltering start, senior leaders from the council and the trust now work closely together to deliver improved services for children. They have a clear and realistic understanding of the quality of frontline practice, including the areas for further development. An increasingly strong culture of challenge, support and learning is helping to improve practice.

When children need help, care and protection, they receive much better support than they did at the time of the last inspection. The recently introduced single integrated 'front door' for accessing early help and statutory social work services is now ensuring that children's needs are identified and responded to proactively. Social workers ensure that most children receive a timely and proportionate response to their needs. For some children, particularly for adolescents at risk of exploitation, children in private fostering arrangements and 16- and 17-year-olds at risk of becoming homeless, planning is not good enough.

Senior leaders in the trust have acted to strengthen management oversight and accountability over the last six to nine months. This is delivering improved results, with most managers now ensuring better oversight of children's plans. Nevertheless, it is not yet translating into consistently good services or social work practice for all children. Managers are not yet effective in ensuring that all children's plans progress at the pace needed, particularly where neglect is a feature in children's lives, and this results in some avoidable delay for a small but significant number of children.

Senior and political leaders in the council now take their corporate parenting responsibilities seriously. They have provided investment and now demonstrate a commitment to supporting the trust to deliver its vision to ensure that children living in Slough are safe, secure and successful.

Increased stability and development of the workforce have been key elements supporting practice improvement. Caseloads for a small minority of social workers in the assessment hubs are too high. Continuing turnover in frontline posts means that too many children continue to experience changes in social workers, which can prevent them from building meaningful relationships.

What needs to improve

- The quality of children's plans, so that they include clear measurable actions, with timescales for delivery and clarity about what will happen if concerns do not reduce.
- The way strategy discussions are convened, so that processes are clear and relevant agencies participate in initial decision-making.
- The quality of assessment, planning and service provision for privately fostered children and homeless 16- and 17-year-olds.
- The timeliness of initial health assessments when children come into care.
- The rigour of planning and coordination for children at risk of exploitation.
- Sufficiency of local placements to meet the needs of older children and for care leavers.
- The stability of the workforce so that children consistently benefit from the opportunity to build positive relationships with their social workers.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Children in need of help and protection receive a much better service than they did at the time of the last inspection. Although there have been real improvements, some children do not receive the right support at the right time. This is particularly evident for adolescents at risk of exploitation, children in private fostering arrangements and 16- and 17-year-olds at risk of becoming homeless.
2. Although slow to establish, leaders in the council and the trust have now introduced a revised framework and strategy for early help. Managers ensure the effective coordination of services through the recently implemented early help hub. A weekly multi-agency early help panel provides an effective platform to consider how best to support individual children, as well as overseeing service development. The revised threshold guidance, combined with well-attended threshold seminars, has increased partners' understanding of the thresholds of need. The quality and timeliness of early help assessments are improving.
3. When safeguarding and child protection issues are identified, social workers respond in a timely manner, including when concerns arise out of hours. Workers in the integrated front door launched in December 2018 respond effectively to all new enquiries. The co-location of police and health services provides a greater opportunity for joint working and information-sharing. Good partnership working is evident. Contacts and referrals are well managed, and thresholds for intervention are applied consistently. Multi-agency information-sharing is effective, and history is carefully considered and reviewed to inform decision-making. Consent is routinely sought or dispensed with appropriately. Managers efficiently oversee all referrals and decision-making.
4. Domestic abuse notifications received from the police form the largest number of contacts. A daily multi-agency domestic abuse triage meeting effectively shares information and ensures that children living with domestic abuse receive a prompt and appropriate response to their needs. As part of a national initiative, schools are informed of children who have witnessed domestic abuse incidents so that they are able to offer children support.
5. The quality of assessments has improved. Most include sound analysis, appropriately balancing children's needs, family strengths and potential risks. Children are regularly seen and seen alone by their social workers. Social work visits include direct work with children. Social workers work hard to establish positive relationships, and the wishes and feelings of many children influence their own assessments and plans.

6. Social workers and managers are rigorous in identifying and responding to child protection concerns. Police and social care staff make decisions about child protection enquiries outside of the formal process of holding a strategy discussion. This practice excludes other agencies from being involved in initial decision-making and could lead to significant information not being readily available to ensure that children are adequately protected.
7. Child protection enquiries are timely and thorough, but a high proportion do not proceed to an initial child protection conference. An audit undertaken by the trust to examine this issue has concluded that thresholds are largely appropriate, but it also indicates that not all social workers are as clear as they need to be about how best to respond to accumulating concerns when children are already subject to social care intervention. This is in line with what inspectors found in individual children's cases sampled.
8. The timeliness of initial child protection conferences is improving. Child protection conferences and core groups are generally well attended, and partner agencies contribute positively. The quality of planning requires strengthening so that plans are child-centred and have realistic, time-bound and measurable outcomes. Contingency plans are not always specific about what needs to happen if a plan is not successful.
9. Significant progress has been made in strengthening work with families under the Public Law Outline (PLO). Letters before proceedings outline concerns and actions required. Some letters are lengthy and professional language is used making them difficult for parents to understand. When children's circumstances do not improve, or risks escalate, legal planning meetings are, for the majority of children, swiftly convened. For a small but important number of children, there are delays in recognising intensifying risk, resulting in emergency action. This is particularly evident for children living in neglectful circumstances.
10. Neglect is a key challenge for the partnership in Slough. The trust is not yet consistently intervening at an early enough stage when children experience neglect. The trust had recognised this prior to the inspection and began training staff in a variety of methods to measure the impact of neglect, but it is too early to demonstrate any impact. The trust and the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) have been slow to take a coordinated approach to tackling neglect, and the draft neglect strategy is yet to be approved.
11. Social workers have a good understanding of the diverse population in Slough and are alert to potential risks such as those related to female genital mutilation and possible radicalisation. Despite extensive work across the partnership to raise awareness, referrals remain low. Services for disabled children are mostly effective. Children receive a swift response to their identified needs.

12. The trust's response to children living in private fostering arrangements is not yet sufficiently robust. Not all children receive the right level of support and the suitability of arrangements are not rigorously assessed. The trust and the LSCB have acted to raise the profile of private fostering, but notifications to the trust remain stubbornly low.
13. The partnership has been effective in developing a response to child exploitation in Slough. The multi-agency arrangements of the sexual exploitation missing risk assessment conference (SEMRAC) share intelligence for child exploitation and missing children, helping to protect them and disrupt perpetrators. Although there has been significant progress in strengthening the response to child exploitation, planning and risk management are not yet consistently robust. The impact of this is that for some children, where there are real concerns regarding criminal or sexual exploitation, planning can be reactive, responding to crisis, rather than proactively coordinated.
14. When children go missing, they do not consistently receive timely return home interviews. Return home interviews are mostly comprehensive, but they do not always sufficiently analyse information to ensure that intelligence is used to support plans to reduce further episodes of going missing.
15. Local authority officers keep a careful check on children who do not attend school full-time. Effective liaison between the trust and the local authority helps ensure that potentially vulnerable pupils are kept safe. Services offer support to children whose families choose to educate them at home, checking that arrangements are appropriate and are signposting adults to useful help.
16. The trust and the council have identified that the response to young people who are homeless requires improvement. A joint action plan has very recently been developed to strengthen the effectiveness of response. Sampling by inspectors identified the need for a more coherent joined-up response when young people are at risk of homelessness, ensuring that joint assessments are timely and that support is well coordinated.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

17. Since the single inspection in 2015, the quality of services for children in care has substantially improved. Although children now receive much better care and support, services still require improvement to be good. Weaknesses in the quality of planning, shortfalls in the availability of accommodation and too many changes of social worker mean that some children are not as well supported as they need to be.

18. Social workers build meaningful relationships with children in care through regular visiting. Children's assessments are of good quality, with their wishes and feelings carefully considered. The quality of children's plans is more variable, with some lacking clarity about the actions needed and the timescales for delivery. For some children, the turnover in social work positions results in too many changes in social worker, and this hampers relationship building.
19. When children return home, they are well supported. Life-story work helps children to understand their histories, but not all children have benefited from this. Decisions for children to become looked after are now timely and proportionate, though a small number of children come into care in an emergency when an earlier, more planned approach would better meet their needs.
20. The vast majority of children in care in Slough live in safe, secure and stable homes. A high number of children live at a distance from their friends and families (more than 20 miles from home), but this is reducing through concerted effort by the trust to identify placements closer to home. Sufficiency of suitable placements remains a challenge, particularly for adolescents with complex needs. The development of the 'mockingbird project' is helping to support foster carers, enabling children to be cared for by adults they know. Children have good-quality contact with their families, particularly their brothers and sisters, when this is in their best interests.
21. Independent reviewing officers are effective in supporting the progress of children's plans. They oversee children's individual circumstances between reviews and ensure a continued focus on achieving positive outcomes for children. Children's reviews are written to the child, in plain language, and assist the child both now and in the future to understand the reasons why decisions were made about their lives.
22. Since the last inspection, there has been a significant improvement in the number of children accessing health and dental checks and a strong focus on improving children's emotional well-being. Clinicians working in hubs across the service use information from strengths and difficulties questionnaires to ensure that children's emotional well-being needs are met. Most children benefit from comprehensive health assessments and regular dental checks. Despite some progress, too few children benefit from timely health assessments when they first come into care, particularly those children placed at a distance from their families.
23. The Children in Care Council 'Reach Out!' is beginning to influence service development and delivery through engagement, with a number of initiatives across the trust and council. The council and the trust recognise they have more to do to extend children's involvement beyond the representatives of the current Reach Out! group. Young people are actively involved in the

recruitment of key roles in the trust and have produced a number of tools to assist social workers in supporting children when they come into care.

24. The virtual school has been transformed since the last inspection. The virtual school headteacher leads a capable team effectively, with the needs of children at the centre of the team's collective work. Children are known well, and staff have high aspirations for their success in education. The virtual school monitors children's academic progress closely, taking their needs and views into account. Pupils supported by the virtual school, particularly those of primary-school age, typically make good progress, because their education is coordinated so effectively. Provision for post-16 young people is less well established than for younger children.
25. The local judiciary and the Court and Family Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) report improvement in the quality and timeliness of care applications and social work evidence. This has contributed to an improvement in the timescales within which care proceedings are completed and supports children to achieve early permanence.
26. Senior managers in the trust closely monitor children's plans for permanence. Fostering panels are used well to agree long-term placement matches for children. Foster to adopt arrangements enable children to build strong attachments, but social workers and managers do not always consider this early enough for very young children, who might benefit most from this approach. There is a strong focus on securing permanence for all children, whether this is through adoption, family arrangements, or carefully matching children with foster families through long-term fostering.
27. When adoption is the plan for children, they receive an effective and timely service. Children's permanence reports are thorough. Children are well matched, and careful consideration is given to contact arrangements. They move quickly to live with their adoptive families and enjoy stability. Good use is made of the adoption support fund. Good-quality assessments, training and support are available for prospective adopters.
28. Services for care leavers have improved significantly since the last inspection. The local offer to care leavers has been revised and clearly sets out the support on offer. Personal advisers do well at keeping in touch with care leavers and support them to successfully live independent lives, ensuring that they are clear about their rights and entitlements. Care leavers' health needs are well considered. Although they receive information directly from health services regarding their health histories, this information is not maintained by the trust. This means that it is difficult for the trust to be confident that all care leavers have received this important information. The numbers of care leavers who are in education, employment or training has risen from a low base.

29. Pathway plans ensure that support is in place to prepare young people for independence and to have high aspirations in life. The quality of plans needs to be improved in order to ensure that actions are clear and time bound. The trust has already identified this and has work underway to improve pathway plans.
30. Care leavers are supported to access a range of services to make their transition to independence successful. The trust and the council are working to improve the range of suitable accommodation options available for care leavers. At the time of the inspection, a small number of care leavers aged 18 and over were living in bed and breakfast accommodation. These arrangements are time limited, risk assessed and carefully monitored, but remain unsuitable, and cannot adequately meet these young people's needs.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

31. Senior leaders in the council and the trust have taken determined action to improve the quality of services following the single inspection in 2015 which judged the service as inadequate. At that time, the deep-rooted inadequacies in children's services required whole-system change to bring about the improvements needed. Progress was initially impeded by the considerable difficulties in transferring the delegation of statutory functions to the trust. The pace of improvement has accelerated considerably over the last six to nine months. Leaders have started to improve the quality of social work practice, but there is still too much variability.
32. The partnership between the council and the trust has matured significantly and they now work effectively together. Political leaders now demonstrate a commitment to improving outcomes for vulnerable children, which has translated into the council's five-year plan. They have invested well and are committed to continuing to support the trust in delivering its vision to ensure that children who live in Slough are safe, secure and successful. The trust now needs to deliver on higher standards of practice.
33. Effective governance arrangements ensure clarity regarding accountabilities and support partnership working across the council, the trust and the LSCB. As the partnership has matured, joint arrangements, such as the integrated front door, have been strengthened. Although slow to establish, the council and the trust has now delivered a revised framework and strategy for early help which shows early signs of providing more coherent coordination of early help services. There is more work to do across the partnership to strengthen the response to children living with neglect and those in private fostering arrangements, and to effectively support homeless young people.
34. An increased focus on supervision and compliance with basic practice standards over the last six to nine months is beginning to deliver results.

Supervision and management oversight have been substantially improved. Supervision now takes place regularly and managers oversee children's plans, although with variable impact. Hub supervision creates additional opportunities for social workers to reflect on planning for children, supported by hub clinicians. Managers are not yet consistently effective in ensuring that all children's plans progress at the pace needed. Consequently, for a small minority of children there are avoidable delays in meeting their needs.

35. The director of children's services and the chief executive of the trust work closely together and are highly visible to frontline staff. They have a realistic understanding of the work needed to further strengthen quality and standards. This is well articulated in the joint self-assessment, which provides an accurate evaluation of the strengths and areas for development.
36. Significant financial investment has secured additional social worker and manager capacity in response to increased demand. The trust has invested well in various initiatives, such as step up to social work and the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), in seeking to 'future proof' the workforce. Although this has reduced pressures across the service, caseloads for some workers in the assessment and intervention hubs are too high. Despite extensive work to strengthen staff retention, turnover in operational posts increased during 2018. The instability across frontline positions, combined with a high number of transfer points, means that some children continue to experience too many changes in social worker.
37. Staff morale is good; most staff feel well supported and training opportunities are broad ranging. Staff value the model of relational working and systemic practice which enables them to build meaningful relationships with children and families.
38. Quality assurance and performance management arrangements have been strengthened since the last inspection. Regular performance surgeries provide an understanding of practice and ensure accountability across the service. Performance information is now readily available for managers, including a live reporting tool which is beginning to provide more effective oversight of day-to-day practice.
39. Quality assurance processes continue to embed and develop. A range of quality assurance methods, including audit, diagnostic reviews, performance surgeries and a twice-yearly practice week are beginning to provide a more sophisticated insight into the quality of practice. Audits accurately identify that compliance with standards has improved. Effective quality assurance work has contributed to the reduction in inadequate practice.
40. Senior and political leaders in the council now take their corporate parenting responsibilities seriously. Comprehensive performance data and reports discussed at the joint parenting panel enable scrutiny and challenge. Themed

discussions have a clear focus on the six priorities of the corporate parenting strategy. The use of 'hot topics', which children identify for discussion, ensures that children's voices are heard. The council and the trust recognise they have more to do to strengthen children's participation in the joint parenting panel and to increase the number of children who participate in the Reach Out! group, and there is an action plan in place in response to this.

41. Not all the actions arising from the inspection of the independent fostering agency in June 2018 have been pursued with sufficient pace by the trust. A targeted sufficiency strategy provides a cohesive framework for delivering improvements to the volume of placements for children in Slough. However, sufficiency remains a challenge. There is insufficient provision for the most vulnerable older children, including care leavers and 16- and 17-year-olds at risk of homelessness across the partnership. The independent fostering agency is working to increase the numbers of foster carers to meet local need but has not achieved its targets.



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