

Inspection of Slough local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 23 January to 3 February 2023

Lead inspector: Amanda Maxwell, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Children's social care services in Slough are managed by Slough Children First, a company established in April 2021 and wholly owned by Slough Borough Council. At a strategic level, senior leaders have not collectively ensured that the company is consistently delivering good services for children, young people and their families. The predominant focus on the local authority's significant financial challenges has diverted attention away from the needs of children and their families. At the operational level, senior leaders have not worked together to tackle weaknesses effectively and they have not been sufficiently challenging or effective in prioritising and making the necessary improvements. Attention is now expanding from procedural compliance to include the quality of practice, but improvements are not embedded or consistent.

Local authority children's services were judged requires improvement in 2019 and seven areas for improvement were identified. At that time, services were provided by a predecessor body, Slough Children's Services Trust. Since that time, there has been continuous and significant change, compounded by the pandemic, including a change of ownership, workforce instability, a financial crisis and changes of senior leadership in both Slough Children First and the council. The overall quality of

practice remains unchanged and several of the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection have not been successfully tackled, such as the quality of plans and assessments, planning for children in private fostering arrangements and services for homeless children aged 16 and 17.

What needs to improve?

- The scrutiny by senior leaders of the council and the governance arrangements between these leaders and Slough Children First.
- The impact of leaders and managers, including the corporate parenting board, on driving progress for all children.
- The participation offer and engagement of children and young people in the development and delivery of services.
- The quality of practice and the timeliness for achieving permanence.
- The impact of quality assurance processes to improve social work practice and, in particular, the quality of children's plans.
- The assessment, planning and service provision for children in private fostering arrangements and for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds.
- The timeliness and oversight of placement with parents and connected persons arrangements.

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

1. Children and their families who currently access early help services benefit from effective support and intervention. This makes a significant and positive difference to children's lives. However, the early help offer to families is newly implemented and some families experience delay in accessing services. Managers are taking appropriate steps to strengthen the response. Arrangements for step up and step down are timely and ensure continuity of support for families.
2. The majority of children referred to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) receive a timely and effective response. The quality of referrals from partner agencies is variable, meaning that the MASH team is often required to gather additional information to inform decision-making. Parental consent is appropriately understood and applied. Management oversight is embedded, and managers provide a clear rationale and identify next steps for social workers.
3. Responses to children's urgent needs and maintaining safety for children out of hours are timely and appropriate.
4. The responses to referrals of significant concern for children are proportionate to risk and timely. The majority of strategy discussions include key partners such as the police, health and education services. Outcomes are clear, stating

the actions required, including contingency and safety planning. However, when concerns for children in need escalate during the assessment or intervention period, there are delays, firstly in the timeliness of some strategy discussions and then in completing child protection enquiries and convening initial child protection conferences.

5. Arrangements to manage allegations against professionals are effective. Extensive development work has taken place to improve understanding by partner agencies of managing allegations, but this has not been fully successful; not all agencies fully understand their responsibilities and refer concerns appropriately.
6. The quality of assessments and plans for children in need and children in need of protection is variable. Stronger examples evidence family engagement, with joint production of plans, leading to effective and timely intervention. However, others are too broad and lack sufficient depth, focusing primarily on the presenting need; consideration and involvement of fathers are often absent and there is insufficient attention to the child's voice and experience.
7. Most core groups are purposeful and regular. The parents involved have a strong voice, children are visible and partners are engaged, all of which support effective decision-making.
8. The oversight and the quality of work for children in pre-proceedings have been recognised by senior managers as areas for improvement. Some children benefit from pre-proceedings activity, with timely and authoritative action being taken. For some children, this means being successfully diverted away from care proceedings. However, good practice is not embedded. Too many children are subject to pre-proceedings for an extended period, which leads to significant uncertainty for children and their families.
9. The quality and impact of direct work with children are variable. Some children experience too many changes of social worker, which impacts on the quality of relationships and the timeliness and effectiveness of intervention and support to families. However, practitioners readily access interpreters when necessary to ensure that families can fully understand and engage with support and intervention.
10. The number of children known to be living in private fostering arrangements is very low, as is the number of children aged 16 and 17 known to be homeless. Work to ensure that partner agencies are informed and are able to identify these children and assess their needs has been ineffective. Risks and needs have not been assessed consistently and some children have not received the appropriate support and provision.
11. Senior managers appropriately recognise the need to further strengthen their approach to contextual safeguarding. Effective support from specialist workers allows for strong and trusting relationships to be built; this has had a positive

impact and reduces risk, enabling children to have hope and aspiration. The detached youth workers are responsive to community dynamics and support the local area when significant events occur. Systems are in place which enable managers to oversee children who are missing or at risk of or experiencing exploitation. However, multi-agency engagement is variable, and systems are not sufficiently robust to ensure that risk assessments are up to date and that agreed actions are followed through. There is some outreach work in the community, particularly through schools, but work with faith leaders is underdeveloped. For some children, the language used to describe their situations is victim-blaming rather than constructive and supportive.

12. Responses to children identified as at risk of female genital mutilation, honour-based violence or radicalisation are well understood, and appropriate protective actions are implemented.
13. Despite recent improvements to procedures around children missing education, managers do not know how many pupils are not currently attending full time.
14. The procedures to register children being electively home educated and to monitor the arrangements are robust. The number of these children has now stabilised but remains above pre-pandemic levels.
15. A range of effective support and services is enabling families to reduce domestic abuse incidents, and this has a positive impact on children's lives.
16. Disabled children's needs are identified well through detailed assessments. Children are seen regularly, and their packages of care are reviewed at least annually to reflect their current circumstances. Social workers work well with a variety of partners to identify and address need. The progression of child protection plans for disabled children is less effective. A lack of purposeful intervention and visits being undertaken by several different workers lead to a delay in these plans being progressed.
17. The frequency, quality and impact of management oversight and supervision in progressing children's plans are inconsistent.

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

18. Children are supported to remain with their families and their wider network when it is safe for them to do so. When children do need to come into care, this happens, in most cases, at the appropriate time. Many children experience the benefits of having a stable home with consistent carers.
19. Care plans are variable in quality. The majority consider children's needs and their wishes and aspirations. Stronger plans show creative planning and work with the wider family. Weaker care plans are not updated when situations change and so do not routinely reflect the child's current circumstances; they

are not sufficiently detailed and focused, and lack clear timescales to achieve goals, hindering the ability to assess and identify progress.

20. Although only a small number of children live with connected carers, some of them experience delay and poor planning, leaving them in vulnerable situations with risk not being fully assessed. Some of these arrangements do not receive sufficient oversight. Placements which have not been approved by panel lack the subsequent senior management oversight and any necessary increased visiting or support.
21. Permanency planning for children is improving. There is effective engagement from key professionals, although the quality and impact of the plans remain variable. Records of permanence panels provide an update, but lack analysis, a rationale for decision-making and specific, measurable and timely actions. Some children living in foster families are progressed in a timely manner to permanence, in line with their wishes and best interests. However, many are not. Too many children experience drift and delay in achieving permanence.
22. Some children experience lengthy care proceedings. For some, the delay is attributable to the complexity of international proceedings. For others, there is a lack of urgency in the progression of planning for the child and delays in assessments. Changes of social worker also slow the progress of many plans.
23. Children make progress in their placements when they and their carers receive the support that meets their needs. For many, essential support which may include practical help is not swiftly provided and, despite very committed carers, this limits the likelihood of successful outcomes.
24. For children who are placed with parents, social workers complete detailed assessments and evaluations before the children return home of how parents will meet their children's needs. However, case records lack evidence of the 'placement with parents' agreement.
25. Although most children are seen regularly by their social workers, there is limited evidence of purposeful direct work to help children to understand their histories or the plans being made for them. Some children have experienced changes in social worker, although most have had a consistent social worker for the past six months. Children benefit from a consistent independent reviewing officer to oversee their care plans.
26. Children's identity and the need to promote their culture, language and religion are considered and addressed creatively. Foster carers create memory boxes and gather photos to contribute to future life-story books for children. Life-story work has not been completed for some children and this impacts on them being able to make sense of their stories and identity.
27. Children approaching transition to adult services are consulted about their wishes and aspirations for their future. This information is included when developing their pathway plans.

28. Social workers are considerate and alert to the risks associated with exploitation. In most cases, they take appropriate steps to safeguard children in care. For some children at risk of exploitation, it is unclear what intervention is being provided to reduce risks. It is not always clear that allegations are being followed up, or that risk assessments are being undertaken with sufficient urgency to ensure that children are protected.
29. For most children, their basic health needs are met, although dental care is not always prioritised. There are challenges in accessing specialist assessments. This can delay care planning and the identification of permanent placements for children.
30. Children in care are known well by staff in the virtual school. These staff work tirelessly with schools, both in the borough and beyond, to support children in care to have positive academic outcomes. Children in care in Slough make better progress than their counterparts nationally.
31. When children's placements show signs of fragility, intervention and support are provided, although in some situations this is not provided quickly enough. For some children, this impacts negatively on decisions being made for longer-term matching and permanency.
32. Adoption is progressed appropriately for most children, although there is some evidence of linear planning and delay in assessing foster carers as potential adopters alongside the agency search for adopters.
33. For some children, there is early consideration of whether they can be placed with brothers and sisters (together or apart), but for others this is delayed. For a small number of children, this is not reviewed when their circumstances change. The rationale for decisions is not always evident on children's case records.
34. There is currently one child living in an unregistered children's home, with a high level of oversight of this arrangement. Although the current arrangements are not the preferred option for the local authority, the child is well cared for and there are safeguards in place.
35. Many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children live in supported accommodation. Many are currently undergoing age assessments. The children are seen regularly by social workers, who have good oversight of their needs and ensure that these are being met and that children are safeguarded. There is a good understanding of the issues faced by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and their cultural and religious needs are prioritised.

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

36. Care leavers benefit from positive, trusting and stable relationships with their personal advisers (PAs). PAs show genuine interest and care for young people and are tenacious in seeking to form strong relationships. They actively support young people who are experiencing very challenging circumstances. They work effectively with their colleagues and others to ensure that young people receive the most appropriate support and assistance.
37. Most young people approaching 18 have already been in contact with their PA for some time. This allows them to form supportive relationships and promotes their transition to adulthood.
38. PAs actively support and encourage young people to address their physical and emotional health needs. PAs report that care leavers have access to their health histories, provided by the looked after children nurse, although this is not recorded consistently on case records. If young people need support with their emotional well-being but do not meet the criteria for adult mental health services, clinicians in children's social care offer advice, guidance and, in some cases, therapeutic support.
39. Disabled children who are in care and approaching transition to adult services have their needs considered in a timely way. The transition planning panel is effective. It supplements the transition process for disabled children by bringing together all the key people in this planning and decision-making forum. This promotes a seamless transition for young people as they move to adulthood.
40. The local offer is currently being reviewed, with some input from care leavers. Information about the local offer is available for care leavers on the Slough Children First website. However, it is not easily accessible to young people whose first language is not English or who may need this in an easy-to-read format. PAs have a comprehensive understanding of the offer and so they share this information with young people. Young people who spoke to inspectors said that they do not always have access to the internet in their accommodation. Senior managers are considering this in the current review of the local offer.
41. Pathway plans are mostly comprehensive and are co-produced with care leavers; they reflect their goals, aspirations and ambitions for the future and are reviewed every six weeks. They evidence young people being supported to sustain relationships with their families. Some care leavers are supported to return to live with their families if this is their choice. They are also supported to move into their own accommodation when ready. Some plans do not routinely evidence the engagement of key professionals and some plans are not updated when young people's circumstances change. PAs are aware of the safeguarding risks for the young people and work with young people and partners to address this. PAs have conversations with young people to try to

help them to understand potential risks and vulnerabilities and to help them to make informed decisions.

42. Care leavers who have been offered places on university courses are supported very well by both their PAs and virtual school staff. Other care leavers are supported by PAs, who can get additional advice from the virtual school staff when needed. PAs encourage young people to reach their potential in terms of education and employment. They are ambitious for their young people and encourage them to aim high, although currently about half the care leavers in Slough are not in education, employment or training and very few are in apprenticeships.
43. Most care leaver records evidence that young people have their birth certificate, passport and provisional driving licence. Not all care leavers receive their national insurance number in a timely way, which leads to delays in applying for and securing a range of benefits.
44. PAs support care leavers to consider the housing pathways which are available to them, taking into account their individual needs and level of independence. Not all young people have a smooth transition from foster care to independent or semi-independent accommodation. Some care leavers who spoke to inspectors said that decisions about moving are not timely and do not provide them with an opportunity to have a proper ending with their carer or sufficient time to prepare them for their next move.
45. Administrative delays mean that not all care leavers receive their savings and other financial benefits when they reach 18. This causes them distress and additional worry while trying to develop their independence.
46. Not all care leavers are helped to understand their histories, including why they were in care. This is affected by the quality of their case records. When some young people ask to view them, they find key decisions and information regarding their histories are missing. This impacts on young people's sense of identity.
47. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported in making their asylum applications and are offered support by the Red Cross tracking system to find their families. Interpreters are used appropriately when needed.
48. Care leavers are supported for as long as needed, up to the age of 25. When care leavers reach the age of 21, consideration is given to them being stepped down, if this is in accordance with the young person's wishes and needs. If this is not the case, PAs continue to support the young person.
49. Care leavers' participation in the corporate parenting board is underdeveloped. They do not have direct access to the corporate parenting board or senior leaders. A small group of care leavers meets with the participation officer to discuss what they think is needed to improve service development. However,

senior leaders have been slow to act on their previous suggestions and so engagement by the group has reduced.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: inadequate

50. Governance arrangements have proved cumbersome and take up a disproportionate amount of time for senior managers, who need to be more directly focused on improving outcomes for children. Professional relationships between the council and Slough Children First have improved. However, the wider strategic leadership has not fully understood and embraced its collective responsibilities and accountabilities for Slough children. Strategic leaders at the highest level have not worked collaboratively or with determination to improve the experiences and progress of children who need care and protection. There have been changes at all levels of senior leadership in Slough. A permanent chief executive for Slough Children First has recently been appointed and the inspection coincided with a handover period. This person is also the director of children's services.
51. The council was issued a section 114 notice in 2021 and, as a result, commissioners have been appointed to oversee and scrutinise the use and management of funds. Much senior leadership time has been focused on the authority's financial challenges, although inspectors saw operational managers who have been tireless in their efforts to achieve and sustain improvement for children. The situation remains fragile and at risk of decline if key areas are not addressed swiftly.
52. Leaders are aware that more needs to be done to improve the consistency of practice across children's social care services. They have focused on stabilising the workforce, ensuring compliance and providing good support to staff. This has been at the cost of other areas of practice, so key areas, such as the quality of assessments and plans, have not developed or improved sufficiently or at pace. There is also little evidence of critical reflection on practice and the impact of practice on children and their families.
53. The focus on compliance is now broadening to encompass the impact and quality of practice, but this is not embedded or seen consistently across all case work or borne out by what children said to inspectors. There is a focus on strengths, and insufficient consideration of the vulnerabilities. The social care environment has been one of high support and low challenge. There are some signs that the level of challenge is beginning to increase.
54. The self-evaluation is not sufficiently questioning of practice and does not lead to a suitable plan to achieve improvements within set time frames. There has been a lack of focus on planning to consider the whole of the child's journey, to ensure that there are sufficient resources to support all aspects of social care intervention and support. Business plans have not been implemented at pace.

They have taken too long to be agreed, caught up in the authority's additional layers of scrutiny and oversight.

55. The corporate parenting board is underdeveloped. It is ineffective in demonstrating that children matter in Slough, that corporate parents and strategic leaders collectively and fully comprehend their responsibilities and that they respond to children. The current participation strategy does not ensure that children and young people are able to provide their views and engage in service development.
56. Children who spoke to inspectors feel unable to influence and shape service provision and delivery. Children's voices are not heard or swiftly acted on by senior leaders. Young people said, 'They ask us, we tell them, they don't listen. So, what is the point?' The 'Reach Out Group', a Slough participation group, has not met any senior leaders since the group started in October 2022, and members of the group do not know who the senior leaders are.
57. Partnerships with other agencies such as schools, health services and police have improved from a low baseline. Partner agencies have worked together effectively to respond to the needs of refugee families placed by the Home Office in hotels for an extended period of time. Relationships with partner agencies are not consistently strong and effective in decision-making forums or in the development of services. This is now improving, and schools spoke positively about the responses of some key staff but noted that more needs to be done to assure and raise partners' confidence in the authority. In addition, there is a lack of clear information held by the authority about the numbers of children missing education and those pupils who are on part-time timetables.
58. Senior leaders understand their diverse community and the challenges that some children and their families are experiencing. However, there has been insufficient education of partners about risks such as honour-based violence and private fostering.
59. Learning and development opportunities and practice learning sessions have a positive impact on staff knowledge and understanding about practice and the needs of children. All staff report being well supported and enabled to improve and develop their practice. Practice learning mentors work alongside staff, helping them to reflect on their practice. Staff recruited from overseas have been well supported, ensuring that they are equipped and informed about personal and professional learning and development. Newly qualified social workers on the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) programme are well supported through a detailed programme of learning and reflection opportunities, along with protected caseloads.
60. Audit activity is completed without social worker involvement and is descriptive rather than evaluative, focusing on compliance. Audit findings indicate that most of the practice reviewed requires actions to improve impact and quality. Subsequent actions are ineffective in making the necessary changes in a timely

way to improve children's circumstances. For example, when young people ask to view their records, they find gaps in their histories and so they are not well supported to fully understand and make sense of the circumstances which have affected them.

61. There has been some improvement in workforce stability. This has had a positive impact on social workers' caseloads, making them more manageable. However, these improvements continue to be fragile. There continues to be some negative impact on children and their families who experience too many changes in the workers involved in their lives. Staff are well motivated and can describe positive work and intervention with families. However, there is much variability in the quality of management oversight and supervision, meaning that some children's cases are affected by drift and delay, and some risks are unassessed.

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