



Slough Children First Annual Review Report

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Report Summary:

This report presents the performance of Slough Children First Limited for the year ending 31st March 2024.

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. This Annual Report from Slough Children First (the Company) forms part of the wider annual review process for Slough Borough Council (the Council)
- 1.2. This report presents the performance of Slough Children First Limited for the year ended March 2024.
- 1.3. The composition of the SCF Board as at end June 2024 is as follows: -
 - Simon Baker Chair (from August 2023)
 - Lesley Hagger Independent Non-Executive Director
 - Raj Bhamber Independent Non-Executive Director
 - Nina Robinson Independent Non-Executive Director
 - Steven Mason Council appointed Non-Executive Director
 - Sue Butcher Chief Executive
 - Ben Short Director of Operations
 - Alex Pilgerstorfer Acting Director of Finance and Resources (from June 2024)
- 1.4. In addition, Chris Reilly was Finance Director from (July 2023) to February 2024 when his interim contract came to an end, but he was never a formal member of the Board given his interim position. Ketan Gandhi was a council nominated NED until February 2024 until he left the local authority in February 2024.
- 1.5. There are two vacancies currently for Council appointed Non-Executive Directors. Lesley Hagger is resigning and will leave the role in September 2024. Recruitment is underway for her replacement. A Company Secretary has been appointed, Andrew Nankivell, who will take up post at the end of August 2024.
- 1.6. The SCF Board is in a strong place to lead SCF over the coming year.

2. Aims and Objectives

- 2.1. The overarching aims and objectives of the Annual Review are:
 - 2.1.1. To consider the quality of practice and the outcomes for children, young people and families in the borough of Slough Borough Council
 - 2.2.2. To facilitate the Council's quality assurance of the Company
 - 2.2.3. To enable the Council to review the discharge of its statutory functions through the Services delivered by the Company
 - 2.3.4. To consider whether changes are required, having regard to the performance of the previous year and any factors that may affect the performance in the coming year
 - 2.4.5. To consider all applicable factors in relation to setting future Contract Sums

3. Governance

- 3.1. The Annual report will be discussed at an Annual Review, by the Strategic Commissioning Group, along with other key requirements (detailed in the contract), and then presented to with Cabinet for comment.
- 3.2. Following agreement of the Annual report by the Company Board, as part of the governance arrangements between the Company and the Council, the following key deadlines must be met:
 - 3.2.1. 30 June 2024 – The draft annual report should be shared with the Contract Monitoring Group to review the content of the report and agree.
 - 3.2.2. 31 July 2024 – The Contract Monitoring Group will submit the annual report to the Strategic Commissioning Group to consider as part of the Annual Review process.
 - 3.2.3. 15 August 2024 – The Strategic Commissioning Group to hold a scheduled meeting for the annual review.
- 3.3. The Strategic Commissioning Group will discuss:
 - 3.3.1. The content of the Annual Report
 - 3.3.2. The contribution rates determined by the Local Government Pension Scheme Fund Actuary
 - 3.3.3. Any matters arising in relation to Financial Mechanism including whether the Contract Sum for the forthcoming Contract Year remains appropriate having regard to what is set out in the Annual Report
 - 3.3.4. The proportionate share of any Surplus that will be allocated to each Party
 - 3.3.5. The results of any audits carried out by the Council during the preceding Contract Year
 - 3.3.6. Any significant complaints made against the Company in respect of the preceding Contract Year
 - 3.3.7. Any serious incidents (including serious case reviews) involving the Company in the preceding Contract Year
 - 3.3.8. A review of the Key Performance Indicators and the Services Specification
 - 3.3.9. A review of the Dependencies and the Support Services
 - 3.3.10. A review of the governance arrangements to assess whether they continue to be appropriate and fit for purpose

4. Our Performance

4.1. Provision 2.3.1 - a summary of the Company's performance of the Services in the immediately preceding Contract Year against the Key Performance Indicators

- 4.1.1. New contractual KPIs were approved and agreed in December 2023 by the Council's Cabinet.
- 4.1.2. There are 20 agreed KPIs, covering areas of Political Ownership; Governance and Accountability; Effectiveness of Partnership Working; Effectiveness of Business and Improvement Arrangements; Cultural Shift, Change Management and Communication; Participation, Voice and Influence; Sufficiency, Sustainability and Management of Resources; Workforce Planning and Staff Engagement and I Quality of Practice.
- 4.1.3. Overall KPI monitoring has moved from monitoring to showing impact during the year.
- 4.1.4. Areas for further progress include
- Developing the role of the Corporate Parenting panel to ensure effectiveness of oversight
 - Devising a process for updating the Scrutiny committee on the work of the SCF Improvement Board
 - Developing at pace assurance reporting to the Safeguarding Partnership to ensure good enough oversight and to include a multi-agency audit programme
 - Working with partner agencies to ensure attendance by other public bodies at key meetings
 - Developing analytical and reporting tools and skills to interpret data
 - Widening engagement and participation with young people
 - SCF needs to work with SBC finance colleagues to objectively consider whether the budget and MTFS reflects the real costs of running and improving children's services to safeguard Slough's most vulnerable children.
 - Continuing with management development and learning and development for front line team managers and Heads of Services
 - Developing a BRAG rating for each of the KPIs to monitor progress and change, with "Blue" denoting an action as complete
 - Presenting the Annual Report and the Business and Improvement Plan for 2025/26 - 2027/28 to Scrutiny Committee before Cabinet during 2024.
- 4.1.5. The Contract Monitoring Group has met regularly since November 2023, choosing specific areas to focus on alongside standing items. The IT Service Level Agreement has been reviewed to date, resulting in additional shared working towards developing a performance dashboard.
- 4.1.6. There has been progress in the Governance Review during the year with only two items now rated red linked to internal and external audit. They remain red due to capacity and the level of support available at SBC to support the internal audit programme however, new personnel have now been appointed to strengthen the programme. Although external audit arrangements in conjunction with SBC, who are still in the process of auditing prior year accounts, could be improved, the Company itself

experienced a successful and smooth 23/24 accounts process to sign off and submit to Companies House.

4.1.7. In agreement with SBC this document has been superseded by formal monitoring of risk and internal control by the SCF Board through its four sub committees. However, it does go to the Strategic Commissioning Group annually.

| | Red | Amber | Green |
|-----------------------|-----|-------|-------|
| September 2022 | 11 | 21 | 14 |
| November 2022 | 8 ↓ | 21 = | 16 ↑ |
| February 2023 | 5 ↓ | 23 ↑ | 18 ↑ |
| June 2023 | 2 ↓ | 16 ↓ | 27 ↑ |
| September 2023 | 2 = | 21 ↑ | 23 ↓ |
| January 2024 | 2 = | 16 | 28 ↑ |

4.1.8. SCF's own Improvement plan is monitored on a bi-monthly basis in Children's Improvement Group, made up of senior staff with each of the 10 workstreams lead by a Head of Service or Director.

4.1.9. For several actions, the work has been completed and is awaiting approval through our governance arrangements, which will take place during the next Children's improvement Group (CIG) meeting, to move the action to complete.

4.1.10. The repository of evidence to support the progress of each action is building well. This is embedded within the plan and 'stress tests' document laid set out by DFE Commissioner and is creating a reliable audit trail and a readily accessible pool of evidence to draw on for inspection readiness.

4.1.11. The programme has been resourced during 23/24 through funding of £336k f from the DfE Transformation grant. Going into 24/25, the work will continue through a Project officer funded through SCF general budgets, alongside a Head of Service lead and additional project officer funded through the SBC Transformation fund. Consideration is underway around embedding a specific improvement resource into the establishment.

4.1.12. At the end of March, this was the progress against the actions in the improvement plan:

| RAG | Number | %age (rounded) |
|------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Grey (not yet started) | 2 | 1% |
| Red | 60 | 33% |
| Amber | 1 | 1% |
| Green | 91 | 51% |
| Blue | 26 | 14% |

4.1.13. The last update reported some good areas of progress across all workstreams and a concern around loss of momentum related to annual leave and half term. This update reflects continued challenges from staff leave at the year-end coinciding with earlier school holidays this year and the festivals of Easter, Ramadan and Vaisakhi falling very closely together.

- 4.1.14. SCF are planning to review the annual leave year to avoid this in future years and are considering leave years running from start date to start date.
- 4.1.15. Momentum began to increase again in April but was then impacted by an Ofsted Focused Visit on Children in Need and Child Protection. There is evidence of greater rigour and management grip across the service which has been outlined in reports for the Improvement Board. Key risks remain around performance management and business intelligence but with clear plans to progress those actions in a collaborative manner with task and finish groups stood up and taking place.
- 4.1.16. There has been good progress in Youth Justice oversight with an increasingly robust Youth Justice Management Board chaired by the DCS. Board Members have benefitted from a one-to-one induction with the Chair of the Board and the Head of Youth Justice, and all new members receive the same induction. The Board also has regular 'away' sessions which now take place on a quarterly basis.
- 4.1.17. The Service are keen adopters of the Child First approach being implemented in practice. An LGA peer review has supported the development of practice, and a priority area is to embed the use of audit within the service. Youth Justice and Exploitation Services have now been separated into two different teams in recognition of the different needs of the children, whilst also being acutely aware of the potential links. A new Head of Adolescent Support post has been created and this will support a significant drive in improvement in the coming twelve months, including embedding Child First, audit and practice.
- 4.1.18. As well as the Youth Justice Grant, SCF received funding for the Turnaround initiative, enabling YOTs, using an Early Help approach, to improve outcomes for children on the cusp of the justice system. The Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley also awarded funding for a project called Act Now, for serious youth violence prevention work of which Slough was a part. The project has been successful enough for the PCC to want to continue an element of the funding in 24/25.

5. Support Services Agreement

5.1. Provision 2.3.2 - a summary of the Council's performance of its obligations under this Agreement and the Support Services Agreement in the preceding Contract Year

- 5.1.1. Three contract monitoring meetings and three strategic commissioning group meetings between the Council and SCF took place in 2023/24. These were all in the second half of the year and are regularly scheduled for 2024/25.
- 5.1.2. A deep dive review into all the Service Level Agreements between SBC and SCF has commenced and will continue during 24/25.
- 5.1.3. Along with these reviews, the DfE has requested a review of support services to make efficiencies from the DfE running costs grant from 2025/26 from SCF and SBC.
- 5.1.4. To meet the requirements of the DfE request, and continue the SLA review, an action plan, timetable including timeframes, key milestones and responsible officers has been set out and will form the basis of a comprehensive review of services during 24/25.

6. Finances

6.1. Provision 2.3.3 - the cost of performing the Services in the preceding Contract Year (including any Changes to the Charges agreed during that Contract Year) and a comparison with the budget set for the Company at the start of the preceding Contract Year

6.1.1. The P&L shows a statutory surplus of £5,313k following a decision by SBC to fund prior year losses and award this during this financial year. Outturn pre the settlement of prior year losses is largely balanced with a reduction in income of £178k offset by a reduction in costs of £180k to budget.

6.1.2. The closing balance sheet was therefore also a balanced position, showing that assets are equal to liabilities, and the cash balance at year end was £9,812k.

| Costs | Outturn 22/23 | Budget 23/24 | Variance | Comment | Outturn 23/24 | F'cast Var. to | Comment |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|---|-----------------|----------------|---|
| SBC Core Income | (32,606) | (40,515) | 7,909 | Approved increase in Contract Value | (40,514) | (1) | |
| DfE Income | (2,780) | (853) | (1,927) | Reduction in income from DfE running costs grant | (1,073) | 220 | Includes of Transformation grant; Reductions in funded posts, including Chair & FD |
| Other Income | (5,128) | (6,345) | 1,217 | Increase in Home Office funding for UASC offset by reduction from SBC for prior year in year requests | (5,948) | (397) | Decrease in Home Office funding for UASC due to lower volumes, offset by add'l income from Public Health, Adult Social Care and other grants |
| Total Income | (40,514) | (47,713) | 7,199 | | (47,535) | (178) | |
| Pay | 13,733 | 17,121 | (3,389) | Expected improvement in permanent workforce, plus 5% inflation | 15,898 | 1,224 | Tracking behind staffing ratios for permanent workers due to vacancies and more agency staff. |
| Agency | 5,693 | 3,495 | 2,198 | Reduction in agency workforce, most notably early release of Innovate teams | 4,164 | (669) | Additional posts funded through DfE Transformation grant, and Heads of Service embedding practice improvements |
| Placement Allowances | 16,435 | 17,564 | (1,129) | Overall increase in placement volumes by 11. Rate increase by £34 per week (5%) - growth in NMFA carer rates and inflationary uplifts on external providers | 16,830 | 734 | Lower volumes in care, especially in UASC and external residential placements; lower than budgeted average weekly rates |
| Other Child Support Costs | 3,676 | 4,531 | (855) | Growth in overall placement volumes by 13 careleavers (£455k), (£130k) growth in interpreting due to UASC growth, (£100k) in CWD packages of care and other contractual uplifts | 4,991 | (460) | Add'l Care Leaver costs due to unachieved savings in rates, increased spend on interpreting. High cost support to prevent entry to care, EDT costs; External inter agency adoption fees |
| Legal Fees | 1,894 | 1,814 | 80 | Reductions in counsel fees | 1,716 | 98 | Tighter controls around issuing proceedings and the ending of legacy cases are leading to reduced costs |
| Other Overheads | 3,676 | 3,188 | 488 | Reduction across all areas including recruitment, professional fees and staff allowances due to reduced overseas recruitment costs, reductions in subscriptions, printing and other overheads | 3,935 | (747) | DfE funded Participation contract, Tribunal costs and other professional fees related to quality and audit improvements and staff related pay |
| Total Expenditure | 45,107 | 47,713 | (2,606) | | 47,534 | 180 | |
| Net Surplus/(Loss) | 4,593 | 1 | 4,592 | | (1) | 2 | |
| Funding of Prior Year Losses | | | | | (5,312) | 5,312 | Funding of Prior Year Losses |
| Net Surplus/(Loss) | 4,593 | 1 | 4,592 | | (5,313) | 5,314 | |

6.1.3. Areas of note within income in the management accounts include an overall adverse variance of £178k.

- 6.1.4. Both DfE grants were agreed after budget setting and the transformation grant received offset a reduction in running costs grant.
- 6.1.5. An adverse variance of (£397k) in other income, arose from Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) income (£1,615k) due to lower numbers of children in care funded by the Home Office, partly offset by full recovery of Strengthening Families payment by results £110k, additional public health funding £571k, interest income £175k and other grant funding.
- 6.1.6. Expenditure was favourable v budget by £180k.
- 6.1.7. Combined salaries and agency costs had a combined underspend of £555k, with a favourable variance in permanent staff from vacancies offset by higher than budgeted agency spend. An element of the agency spend was funded by the DfE Transformation grant and was therefore not forecast in the original budget.
- 6.1.8. Lower than expected UASC volumes helped deliver a reduced placement spend, along with the additional oversight from the External Placement panel introduced during Summer 2023.
- 6.1.9. Increases in other child support costs arose from higher than budgeted external adoption agency fees and high family support costs preventing, or delaying, entry to care.
- 6.1.10. Considerable reductions in legal costs are now being realised in terms of volumes in proceedings. Year-end volumes were 22 in proceedings v 62 at the end of last year, a result of reduced court delays following covid and more scrutiny at legal gateway.
- 6.1.11. £1,540k of the £1,564k savings target was achieved during 23/24.
- 6.1.12. The business support review achieved £102k more than target due to vacancies in the system pre the re restructure. Growth in Special Guardian Order arrangements with 7 additional children moved onto such permanency orders favourable to budget, aided by the legal gateway process.
- 6.1.13. Delays to the re-configuration of the Short Breaks service offer to children and families and being unable to secure lower rates on Semi-Independent accommodation for Care leavers meant savings were not achieved in these areas. The tender exercise did not result in reductions in rates due to market conditions preventing it from being possible. (inflationary pressures).
- 6.1.14. Additional savings delivered through the external placement panel review of all placements with 3rd parties, additional bank interest from overnight money market investments and commissioning negotiations on contract renewals, along with an in-year adjustment for under accrued Home Office income offset additional cost pressures, including from an increase in pension rate contribution that wasn't included in the budget workings.
- 6.1.15. At this early stage, savings targets for 24/25 look likely to be achieved in totality, with some movements between initiatives that look more difficult to achieve than others. For example, Savings in placements, legal and income appear on track, or overachieving, offsetting a few more difficult savings lines in staffing and short breaks.

7. Changes to Agreement

7.1. Provision 2.3.4 - In addition to Para 2.3.3, a summary of any changes to the agreement agreed between the Parties during the relevant Contract Year pursuant to the Change Control Procedure

7.1.1. There were no additional requests for funding during the financial year 23/24. The company managed within its financial envelope.

8. Demand Analysis

8.1. Provision 2.3.5 - summary of the demand analysis in respect of the Services in the immediately preceding Contract Year, which shall outline any increases in the demand for the Services in the preceding Contract Year against the assumptions made by the Company in agreeing the relevant Contract Sum

8.1.1. Some of the key metrics driving costs are in the table below.

| Key Metrics | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Budget | Actual | Variance |
| Permanent Staff | 326 | 295 | -31 |
| Agency | 47 | 51 | 4 |
| Total Staff | 373 | 346 | -27 |
| Children open to SCF - Statutory | 1640 | 1706 | 66 |
| Children open to SCF - Early Help | 806 | 632 | -174 |
| Children open to SCF - Total | 2446 | 2338 | -108 |
| Children on a CIN plan | 420 | 487 | 67 |
| Children on a CP Plan | 259 | 236 | -23 |
| Children Looked After | 262 | 225 | -37 |
| Care Leavers in accommodation | 65 | 61 | -4 |
| UASC <18 | 51 | 27 | -24 |
| UASC >18 | 41 | 38 | -3 |
| Total UASC | 92 | 65 | -27 |

8.1.2. Caseloads were predicated on a 0.40% population growth in the 0-17 age population. Although ONS data predicts a falling population in this age bracket, Slough has one of the highest fertility rates in England and has been adjusted to take account of this. The average age of a Slough resident is 34, compared to 41 for the Southeast and 40 for England. Slough has the second largest proportion of children aged 15 or under (25%) in England and Wales.

8.1.3. Caseloads were assumed to reduce from a high in 22/23 following an expected spike in demand for services due to the cost-of-living crisis in the prior year.

8.1.4. Offsetting this was a further expected growth in the Children Looked After population following the opening of several asylum hotels in the Slough area which increased the numbers presenting to Slough as Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children.

8.1.5. Census data also demonstrates that Slough's population growth is far higher than the England average, 13% between 2021 and 2011 v 7.5% in the Southeast and 6.6% in England.

- 8.1.6. During the year April 23 – March 24, caseloads have followed previous trends, being highest at the beginning of the year over Spring, reducing over the Summer and then increasing after September's school return.
- 8.1.7. Overall, caseloads have been lower than budget, although statutory caseloads have been on average higher than modelled, and Early Help have been lower. The budgeted was predicated on a baseline that was higher than expected at the end of 22/23, as expected demographic and cost of living growth did not materialise as forecast.
- 8.1.8. Statutory caseloads at the end of March 24 were higher than budgeted expectations by 229 cases. The growth was seen in the volumes of Children in Need which grew to 571 by year end. This spike is under analysis but thought to be partly due to using leave before year end, school, and religious holiday leave.
- 8.1.9. The annual leave policy is under review so it can be better spread throughout the next financial year.
- 8.1.10. Offsetting the growth in statutory caseloads, were lower than expected Early Help cases. Early Help ended the year at 649, 153 lower than budget, despite having 2 additional targeted Early Help teams tasked with an additional 100 cases in Early Help and away from CIN.
- 8.1.11. The net change between step ups to social care from Early Help, or down to Early Help from social care was 92 additional cases in Early Help, in line with Priority 1 in the Business and Improvement Plan.
- 8.1.12. More detailed breakdown of cases by type, actual v budget showing increases in CIN cases, but reductions and favourable variances in CP and CLA are shown in the graphs below.
- 8.1.13. A major factor was lower than predicted Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking children entering, or remaining in care, resulting in an overall reduction in CLA of circa 60 during the year, offset by rises in CIN towards the end of the year.
- 8.1.14. Throughout 23/24 permanent staff have tracked below budget expectations. As caseloads were lower than expected, some posts have been held vacant, for example, in Fostering Services, whilst actions are taken to set up Resilience Fostering.
- 8.1.15. Agency headcount has remained in line with budget, despite additional interims being funded short term by DfE Transformation grant, not included within the original budget.
- 8.1.16. Budget numbers included a reduction during the year, reflecting the release of the 2 Innovate teams in June and September. Although the managed teams were released early, a small, focused team were brought in to help move children out of those teams. Whilst this has assisted in control of costs, it didn't favourably influence the permanent: agency split.
- 8.1.17. Following the success of the international recruitment programme, turnover in the workforce has remained relatively stable, retention of permanent staff being between 77-85% each month.

8.2. Provision 2.3.6 - the expected demand for the Services in the two (2) Contract Years immediately following the Annual Review. Reference to the demand for Services shall consider the Company's Business and Improvement Plan, as determined by the Company in consultation with the Council's Chief Executive

8.2.1. Some of the key metrics driving costs over the next 2 years are in the table below.

| Key Metrics | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2023/24 Act | 24/25 Bud | 25/26 Bud |
| Permanent Staff | 295 | 324 | 321 |
| Agency | 51 | 23 | 29 |
| Total Staff | 346 | 347 | 350 |
| Children open to SCF - Statutory | 1706 | 1747 | 1763 |
| Children open to SCF - Early Help | 632 | 684 | 697 |
| Children open to SCF - Total | 2338 | 2431 | 2460 |
| Children on a CIN plan | 487 | 490 | 494 |
| Children on a CP Plan | 236 | 250 | 252 |
| Children Looked After | 225 | 248 | 254 |
| Care Leavers in accommodation | 61 | 78 | 76 |
| UASC <18 | 27 | 50 | 50 |
| UASC >18 | 38 | 57 | 57 |
| Total UASC | 65 | 107 | 107 |

8.2.2. Caseloads for 24/25 and beyond have been predicated against the national trend of falling birth rates and a reducing 0-17 population. Slough assumes a growth of circa 0.6% for the following 2 years. However, the cost-of-living crisis impact has been removed as growth did not materialise as expected in the preceding years.

8.2.3. The 24/25 Business and Improvement Plan also retained the UASC growth assumptions as high volumes were seen at the time the budget was being prepared.

8.2.4. The budget for 23/24 assumed a continued growth of children into care, especially through Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking children, and as can be seen above, our numbers of children looked after were lower than budget. As this expected intake did not materialise, our baseline for 24/25 budget and beyond for numbers of children in care, and placement costs has been set too high and will be amended downwards.

8.2.5. As the main dip has been through a lower-than-expected number of UASC's, our income from the Home Office grant supporting this cohort of children and young people is also likely to be forecast downwards.

8.2.6. This reduced income should offset the reduced placement spend.

8.2.7. Following the success of the external placement panel reviewing all external placements, several children either stepped down to Foster Care or were able to return to live with their birth parents. The number of children in residential placements was therefore an average 19 v a budget of 24. This favourable reduction in the volume mix means there are fewer more expensive placements, further adding to a likely reduction in budgeted weekly rate in 24/25.

- 8.2.8. For those over 18, although numbers are lower than budget, a knock-on effect of the UASC reduction, the rates have been higher than expected due to a failed tender exercise to commission semi-independent accommodation at more favourable rates.
- 8.2.9. Permanent staff volumes are broadly in line with 23/24 monthly averages, but there is a budgeted savings target to reduce the average number of agency staff within SCF to 23.
- 8.2.10. The assumptions are that 93% of the workforce will be permanent and 7% on average will be agency. In 23/24, the permanent: agency ratio was on average 83% permanent and 17% agency. The improvement in permanent staff is one of the more difficult savings targets SCF have for 24/25.

9. Social Care Statutory Changes

9.1. Provision 2.3.7 - the effects of any changes in children's social care legislation or guidance on the delivery of the Services and/or any actual or anticipated Change in Law pursuant to Clause 15 (Change in Law) and the implications of such changes.

9.1.1. The DFE published the revised Working Together to Safeguard Children in December 2023. The document is influenced by its previous versions and more recently following the Stable Home, Built on Love and the Six Pillars:

- Family Help - right time
- Decisive multi-agency child protection system
- Unlocking the potential of family networks
- Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care
- A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one
- A system that continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data.

9.1.2. There is a significant focus on providing Early Help (Priority One in the Business and Improvement Plan) and opportunities to develop in relation to a change in statutory requirements enabling non-social work qualified Lead Practitioners to undertake assessments and provide services under Section 17 Children Act 1989 (decision on a child level to be made by a social work qualified manager). This provides opportunities to review and develop our local offer of support under Children in Need. This is also priority area for England's Children's Commissioner in her Business Plan 2023-24.

9.1.3. Working Together will require plans to be developed this year, which SCF will be a key partner in, to develop the multi-agency Lead Safeguarding Partnerships and Chairing arrangements.

9.1.4. Slough Borough Council and Slough Children First adopted Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic in July 2023, a position adopted by several local authorities nationally and within the South-East region. A Regional discussion will take place through the Assistant Directors Network meeting in June to identify collaborative opportunities to develop the idea across the area and to share ideas and approaches to support those children in our care and those who have cared for experience.

10. Strategic Priorities for 24/25

10.1. Provision 2.3.8 - the strategic priorities and outcomes likely to be relevant to the commissioning of the Services in the immediately following Contract Year

10.1.1. Year one of our 2023-26 business plan represented bringing SCF into a steady state, focused on improving the quality of practice and building solid foundations on which to deliver our key priorities.

Priority 1 Children and their families should be able to easily access Early Help and know where to go and who to speak to when they need it.

Priority 2 Education and learning are vital to ensure that our children have the best start in life and are empowered to go on to rich and fulfilling lives through work.

Priority 3 Children in our care will have a stable place to live and our care experienced young people can access their own affordable homes.

Priority 4 Children and their families will have effective support and care from a stable workforce. This will mean that children do not experience lots of changes of worker and they can develop a trusting relationship with someone who will help them and their family.

Priority 5 We will work with our children and young people to enable them to participate and shape services with us.

Priority 6 We will work in partnership with colleagues across the Council and all services that work with children, young people and their families. We believe that it is only together that we can make a difference. We value our relationship with Community and Voluntary Sector partners who know their communities well.

10.1.2. Slough Children First vision remains for all children and young people of Slough to be “Happy, Safe & Loved, Thriving”, complimented by our values below:

- Child-focused
- Honest and respectful
- Improving constantly
- Looking ahead
- Delivering together

10.1.3. Our 24/25 Business and Improvement Plan is supported by both our Children and Young People’s (Placement) Sufficiency Strategy and Corporate Parenting Strategy.

10.1.4. In year 2, and those that follow, we will drive forward business re-design and our ‘invest to save’ projects that will create further improvements, efficiencies and value for money.

10.1.5. Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023) gives further opportunity to look at re-design of Early Help and initial assessment services which will be a consideration for SCF’s Business and Improvement plans 25/26 onwards.

- 10.1.6. The Sufficiency Strategy was approved by the SCF Board and then approved by Cabinet in November 2023 highlighted 5 priorities:
1. Strengthening Early Help and developing 'Edge of Care' and reunification support.
 2. Fostering Recruitment and Retention and developing options for children to exit residential care.
 3. Ensuring robust commissioning arrangements
 4. Achieving permanence for children at the earliest opportunity
 5. Providing care experienced young people with a variety of placement options and support to independence.
- 10.1.7. To drive forward our 'Invest to Save' projects, our resilience fostering model will be rolled out as an alternative to residential accommodation, allowing young people with complex needs remain in a family environment.
- 10.1.8. The investment in additional staff is contained within the 24/25 budget with related savings part of the 24/25 efficiencies programme in the latter half of the year.
- 10.1.9. An independent feasibility study was commissioned on the benefits of opening our own in-house children's home. Along with a review of our small numbers in a residential setting and analysis of weekly costs across the market, it found that SCF is getting relatively competitive rates and that the option would not be financially viable.
- 10.1.10. 2024/25 will also see a redesign of the existing Exploitation and Youth Justice Services within Slough Children First to move into a new Adolescent Support Service bringing together services under a new Head of Service Role (Head of Adolescent Support and Youth Justice). This approach will bring together into one service:
- Youth Justice
 - Contextual Safeguarding and Exploitation
 - Serious Youth Violence Prevention
 - Edge of Care
- 10.1.11. Coinciding with SCF's own priority of increasing more in house foster placements is the sector lead joint recruitment hub, aimed at increasing foster care recruitment across the Southeast, and increasing the number of Mockingbird arrangements to provide support and resilience to more foster carers.
- 10.1.12. For our Care Experienced young people, Housing remains a key issue. Our care leavers service is strengthening relationships with Housing in SBC with a view to increase the numbers of successful applications to Social Housing. This has seen a shared Housing Panel in place to secure a pipeline for care leavers to access their own property, whilst also providing information to Housing to support their future planning.
- 10.1.13. SCF is reaching out to Planning colleagues to understand if there are opportunities within S106 agreements to secure more housing for those aged 18+.
- 10.1.14. For our care leaving population with no recourse to public funds, our Commissioning team is leading market engagement with private housing providers to secure tenancies at more affordable rates.
- 10.1.15. SCF is looking to have Housing as a partner at all key meetings, including the Improvement Board and has already secured engagement at the Corporate Parenting Board.

10.1.16. The Corporate Parenting Strategy was approved at May Cabinet. The key Strategic Priorities contained within the Corporate Parenting Strategy are:

1. Supporting engagement and achievement in education, training, and employment.
2. Ensuring that our children looked after, and care experienced young people have stable homes and the right help.
3. We will listen and respond to the voice of our children, young people, and care experienced young people. They will help to develop and shape our strategic plans and delivery of services.
4. Ensuring that our children, young people, and care experienced young people are healthy. We will help our children and care experienced young people to have access to help for their physical needs and emotional wellbeing.
5. Developing a highly effective Care Leavers partnership to provide ongoing help in various ways.
6. Supporting children, young people and care experienced young people to have fun and have new experiences to develop their own interests.

10.1.17. To ensure we meet these key priorities they have become incorporated in our Corporate Parenting Strategy.

10.1.18. A new Participation Officer was employed full-time to ensure wider participation of our young people and that their voice is heard.

10.1.19. The Slough Social Work Academy, which is in the formation stage, will work to pull together all strands of development for staff, supporting clear career pathways and acting as a key retention initiative.

10.1.20. A variety of recruitment initiatives remain in place to support the ongoing stabilization of the workforce. This includes international recruitment, albeit on an ad hoc basis rather than a focused campaign, ASYE's, Step-ups and supporting the Frontline Program. These initiatives will sit within the Academy which will form part of the support network for the individuals involved.

11. Social, Demographic and Other Factors

11.1. Provision 2.3.9 - summary of any social, demographic, or other relevant factors (as determined by the Company in consultation with the Council's Chief Executive which affected the Services in the preceding Contract Year and/or may affect the Services in the immediately following Contract Year

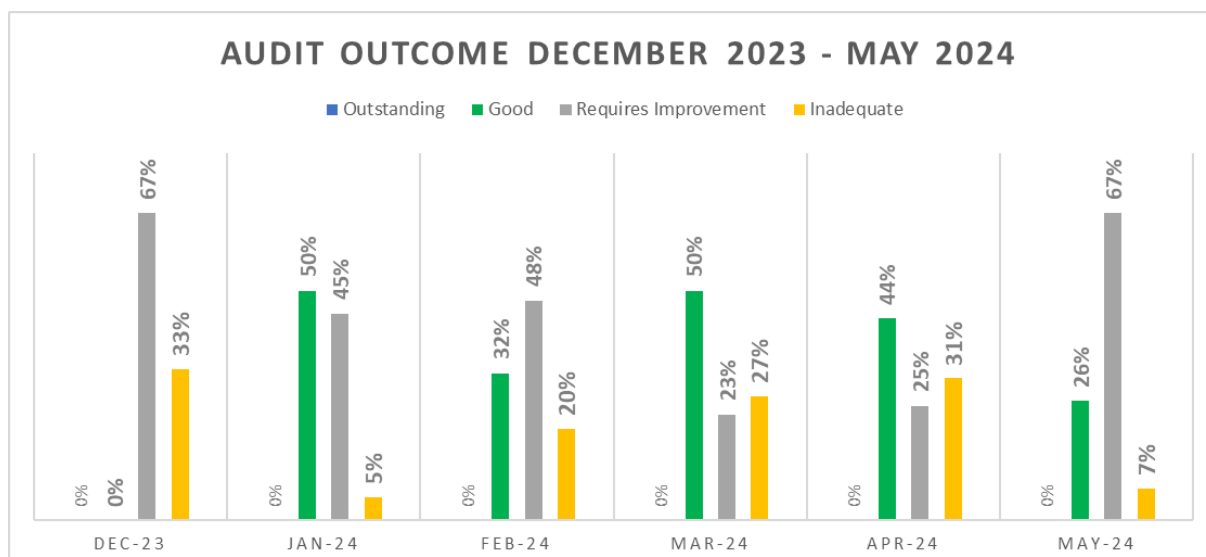
11.1.1. Other than those mentioned above, there were no other factors of note affecting services during the financial year 2023/24.

11.1.2. The budgeted baseline for the expected volumes during 24/25 of children in care is higher than outturn (see 2.3.6). This means it is likely there will be fewer children in care than budgeted for. However, as the area where the reduction has been seen is Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking children, it is likely any cost reductions will be offset by a loss of income. Due to the lower numbers in Slough, we are liaising with the Home Office to offer to increase our intake.

12. Audit and Surveys

12.1. Provision 2.3.10 - the results of any audits or surveys including, where applicable, a summary of the outcome of any surveys of Service Users and relevant stakeholder and third parties in relation to the Services carried out during the previous Contract Year

- 12.1.1. Internal Audit carried out an audit on the theme of Safeguarding Children during 2023/24. The audit found that many controls around Children's Safeguarding are being applied consistently and effectively but highlighted 2 areas of concern - Children's Safeguarding Training for the Council and the review of Safeguarding policies and procedures. Actions for training and publishing Safeguarding policies were recommended. The overall finding was that the framework of governance, risk management and control is adequate and effective in this area to give substantial assurance.
- 12.1.2. Children's Social Care has developed the Performance, Quality and Improvement Framework which has had a significant impact on our quality assurance and audit activity.
- 12.1.3. A monthly audit is completed by Team Managers, resulting in over 25 monthly deep dive audits into children's files and these are moderated by Heads of Service. Each audit is graded in line with Ofsted Judgements – Outstanding, Good, Requirements Improvement and Inadequate. All inadequate audits are reviewed by the QA team manager alongside the social work team, including head of service in order that any remedial actions are undertaken. The audits are 'themed' each month with specific focus on areas such as, supervision, domestic abuse and neglect. This helps us to ensure a 'spread' of audit findings to support ongoing development of our practice improvement.
- 12.1.4. A monthly audit report is completed and shared with the senior management team and identifies any thematic learning which is then addressed through the Practice Learning program led by the Principal Social Worker and Strategic Lead for Improvement. This program includes:
- 'Lunch and learn'; a monthly celebration of audit and good practice
 - Tailored one to one learning with a Building Practice Champion or specialist.
 - Team or group seminars or workshops
- 12.1.5. The audit reports are presented to the Improvement Board to provide an overview of findings and to provide an assurance of how we are addressing areas of practice which need to improve, The audit process is increasingly business as usual and many of our frontline staff comment that they find the process helpful and an opportunity for further reflection on their work.



12.1.6. A new Participation Strategy was approved by Cabinet in November 2023. This is a partnership strategy with engagement with local agencies and stakeholders. An external agency, Participation People, was engaged to support the development and embedding of the strategy.

12.1.7. A number of key events have taken place to support the engagement of young people, these include:-

- Appointment of new Participation Officer
- Young people attendance at senior level interviews
- Young people attendance at the Corporate Parenting Panel
- SCF first Big Business Challenge
- Participation Mapping Session
- Children in Care Celebration event
- Relaunch of Children in Care Council
- Relaunch of Kids Care too Council

12.1.8. Feedback is being gathered from young people throughout these sessions to assist in the identification of areas requiring development. Key themes identified so far: -

- Communication – keeping the young people up to date on requests/information
- Speaking in a language they understand
- Keeping promises
- Active listening – hearing what is being said

12.1.9. A series of summer workshops are being planned which will supporting addressing some of the above-mentioned challenges and will allow for further, enhanced engagement with young people.

12.1.10. Reporting metrics are being developed to support tracking of engagement levels and to support the identification of underrepresented groups as part of participation.

13. Rectification Plans

13.1. Provision 2.3.11 - the outcomes of any Rectification Plans

13.1.1. There were no such plans required during 2023/24.

14. Central Government Funding

14.1. Provision 2.3.12 - a high-level review of applicable central Government funding generally, including details of any anticipated Central Government funding (or changes to Central Government funding) directed to the Services in the immediately preceding Contract Year and/or the Contract Year immediately following the Annual Review (and future Contract Years where applicable)

14.1.1. 1.2 In the December 2023 Cabinet report approving the contract sum for 24/25 and made the following comments” The Council’s financial situation is that it requires SCF to contribute to savings requirements for the Council to meet its medium-term financial strategy. Having realistic projections of the contract sum required for future years and ensuring that SCF does not require in-year adjustments is critical for the Council’s financial planning and sustainability. The estimated contract sum for 2024/25 is £39.049m, a reduction of approximately £1.4m from 2023/24.

14.1.2. The approved 3-year business plan for 24/25 incorporates total savings of £2.4m, including an additional savings ask of £495k to help SBC meet their MTFS targets for 24/25.

14.1.3. Funding from Central Government for Slough Borough Council grants for 24/25 appear largely to be in line with budgeted expectations.

14.1.4. Whilst the Social Care grant increased nationally, with a further increase announced just before the settlement, no specific increase to the Children’s Social Care budget was asked for in SCF as it was felt SCF would work towards living within its means, following the agreement of the Business and Improvement plan and funding levels within that. That meant the increase could contribute solely to SBC pressures in Adult Social Care.

14.1.5. The New Homes Bonus increased by circa £500k and the Services Grant reduced by £830k.

14.1.6. The S25 statement reported that the Revenue Support grant increased in line with CPI as expected.

14.1.7. Due to the current financial situation within SBC, having issued a S114 notice in 2021, council tax rates increased by 7.99% and the Adult Social Care precept by 0.51%.

14.1.8. The financial situation remains uncertain in SBC with a draft outturn for 23/24 showing a significant overspend. It remains to be seen the impact that may have on 24/25 delivery of savings for SBC, any additional in year requests SBC have for SCF and the budgets going forward.

14.1.9. During the financial year 2023/24, SCF were awarded the usual grants to fund specific services and activity. The DfE continued with their standard funding of pupil premium for looked after children, additional support for children with a social worker, staying put and extension of duties to care experienced young people. The Youth Justice Board

continued their standard funding for supporting children on Remand and the Youth Justice Service. Other annual awards supporting Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, Young Carers and funding to Reduce Parental Conflict continued. SCF received funding from the Strengthening Families programme and managed to meet successful change criteria for 100% of payment by results funding.

14.1.10. One off grants successfully applied for in year included £336k of Transformation funding from the DfE. This helped fund one off improvement and participation activity.

15. Risks and Issues

15.1. Provision 2.3.13 - matters relating to the risk register pursuant to Clause 16.3 (Contract Monitoring) of the Agreement

15.1.1. The profile of the Board and changes to the Executive team over the year is such that now there is much more stable leadership upon which to strengthen the infrastructure of the company going forward. It includes two nSBC nominated Non-Executive Directors (NED) one of whom left in February 2024, 2 SBC nominated NED vacancies, 3 Independent NEDs, a Chair appointed in August 2024, a permanent Chief Executive Officer/Director of Children's Services via secondment from SBC, a permanent Director of Operations and an acting Director of Finance and Resources shortly to be supported by our first ever, qualified and experienced Company Secretary.

15.1.2. The risk register for SCF is aligned with SBC (including using their risk scale) and we are awaiting the SBC updated risk management strategy to also ensure it is aligned with that. However, SCF Board via Audit and Corporate Governance Committee has a strong oversight of risks faced by the Company.

15.1.3. During 24/25 SBC have appointed a new Risk manager in place and SCF have appointed a new Company Secretary. There is a proposal to review the risk register in line with SBC's risk strategy during 24/25 along with a review of the process of reporting risks up to SBC.

| Ref | Risk Title | RISK SCALE | | | | | | | | Status | Comments |
|-----|---|------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---|
| | | Nov-21 | Apr-22 | Jul-22 | Nov-22 | Feb-23 | Jun-23 | Aug-23 | Oct-23 | | |
| R1 | SCF a Going Concern | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 20 | 20 | 16 | ↓ | With approval of BIP proposed reduction in Likelihood |
| R2 | Independence and Effectiveness of SCF Board | N/A | N/A | 35 | 35 | 35 | 20 | 20 | 12 | ↓ | With monitoring of governance audit and significant reduction of number of reds, reestablishment of SCG, proposed to lower Likelihood rating |
| R3 | Strong, stable and skilled leadership | 15 | 24 | 24 | 24 | 24 | 10 | 8 | 8 | ↔ | Risk rating remains as is with continued focus on permanent appointments |
| R4 | Inability to recruit and maintain a stable, skilled and experienced workforce | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 10 | 8 | 8 | ↔ | Risk rating remains as is with lowest turnover rates currently being seen |
| R5 | Failing to continuously improve and transform services and getting to good | 20 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 20 | 16 | 16 | ↔ | Risk remaining high until able to evidence progress in achieving improvement plan priorities |
| R6 | IT Systems are not rapid or robust enough | 28 | 24 | 24 | 24 | 18 | 12 | 12 | 12 | ↔ | Risk remains high as whilst business plans/cases progressing not demonstrable difference seen |
| R7 | Business continuity plan not up-to-date | 20 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 10 | 6 | 6 | ↓ | Corporate BCP being drafted and aligning with SBC - service level BCPs being produced, multiple ICS shutdowns (including whole server move) have allowed back up processes to be tested |
| R8 | Lack of SBC NEDs on the Board | N/A | N/A | 20 | 20 | 20 | 12 | Closed | Closed | ↓ | Risk closed at June 23 Board |
| R9 | Covid-19 restricting access to building | 35 | 35 | 35 | Closed | Closed | | | | o | Risk closed at July 22 AARC |
| R10 | Whistleblowing's resulting in negative culture | 20 | 20 | 20 | Closed | Closed | | | | o | Risk closed at July 22 AARC |
| R11 | Back-office review | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 18 | 6 | 3 | 3 | ↓ | Left on register as not confirmed to be closed but no further information received |
| R12 | Outcome of Foster Care Tribunal re employee status | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 12 | 12 | 12 | ↔ | No change as national case |

15.1.4. During 23/24, the majority of the Companies risks have reduced. Approval was granted for both the 23/24 and the 24/25 Business plan & Improvement plan and this positively impacted several risks. An agreement at Improvement Board of a revised and more in-depth improvement plan also had a positive impact on the risk register at the Programme Level. Closure of some operational risks is seen to be a positive move with evidence being provided of impact of some of the recent initiatives.

15.1.5. A new identified risk during 23/24 has been an employment tribunal claim linked to a national case, set to determine the employment status of Foster Carers. It is anticipated that this case will continue to the Court of Appeal. The implications of any decision and any costs may be significant.

16. Inspections

16.1. Provision 2.3.14 - the outcome of any regulatory inspections (23/24)

16.1.1. April/May 2024: A Focused visit was undertaken with a focus on children in need and those in need of protection. There is no judgement grade in relation to the focused visit, however the letter which will be published on 12 July shows expected progress with no priority improvements identified.

16.1.2. The ILACS inspection of 2023 identified:

Feedback from the OFSTED inspection in February 2023, suggested that:

- Audit activity was completed without social worker involvement and is descriptive, not evaluative.
- 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.
- Since then, with the support of a Department of Education funded building Practice Team, the quality assurance and improvement service has made a significant contribution to improving practice. There is an established monthly deep dive collaborative audit programme in place - all frontline teams consistently participate in this.
- There is increased engagement and participation of practitioners/managers in audit collaborative meetings – this has been embedded as a crucial element of the ‘Audit to Excellence’ framework.
- Quality of audits has improved; most are now analytical, and most are now useable.
- New managers are receiving audit training as part of their induction to ensure consistency in the quality of audits produced.
- There is a steady increase of cases graded as ‘Good’ within the monthly audit programme.
- Building Practice Team has been supporting practitioners where inadequacies have been found to implement learning as well as to develop and strengthen practice.
- Statutory teams that have received support from Building Practice have also seen improvements in audit outcomes.
- 308 DIP Sample/Themed audits have been completed across 2023 and 2024 within Children in Care/Care Leavers, Safeguarding & Family support, Assessment & Intervention and Youth Justice Service Teams in addition to the monthly deep dive audits.
- There is good data available from all the audits completed; this has been invaluable both with regards to the depth of information obtained concerning each service area’s strengths/weaknesses, the insight they have provided into the direction of travel concerning performance/improvement, as well as the baseline they have provided to enable SCF to assess the impact of its services/interventions more robustly going forward.
- Annual Audit Programme has been developed for 2023 to 2024; this will enable the Company to steadily assess its strengths and weaknesses across all key areas of need. Monthly DIP Samples/Themed audits will further strengthen this assessment process by providing good insight into key issues arising in practice/ impacting service delivery/impacting outcomes for our children/families.
- Multiple initiatives have been developed and are being implemented to further strengthen audits’ impact on practice and to ensure that learning from audits is disseminated well across the whole service.

16.1.3. February 2024 – Breakaway Children’s Residential home providing short breaks for children with complex needs maintained a Good Ofsted grading.

17. Proposed Changes to the Agreement for 2023/24

17.1. Provision 2.3.15 - subject to Paragraph 2.11, any Proposed Changes to the Agreement to be considered as part of the Annual Review including (without limitation and where applicable) changes to the Services Specification, the Key Performance Indicators and/or Schedule 5 (Financial Mechanism) for the following Contract Year

17.1.1. KPIs have been agreed at the Strategic Commissioning Group and will continue to be monitored during the 24/25 meetings. Additional BRAG rating will be added to monitor progress and change.

17.1.2. A Commissioned Adoption Service, under Regional Adoption Agency arrangements is delivered by Coram through a contract with SBC. Since the RAA was set up it has not been able to fulfil the volumes of internally sourced in house adoption placements expected. To fill that gap, SCF has had to procure more expensive externally sourced homes for our adopted children. In recognition of the reduced volumes, Coram have reduced their contract fee for 24/25 resulting in an underspend in SBC, offsetting an overspend against external placements in SCF. Consideration is being given as to whether it would be appropriate for SCF to manage both budgets under Core Contract arrangements which will be further explored in the Business and Improvement Plan.

17.1.3. A proposal will be put to the SBC to request a re-presentation of the Core Contract to include the £100k contribution to the Virtual School Head, rather than have it as a separate funding line. This will be presented to the SCF Board in July for approval.

17.2. Provision 2.3.16 - such other matters that the Parties may agree in writing from time to time

17.2.1. No other matters are required to be discussed.

18. Other – Summary of complaints

18.1. The total number of complaints received in year was 176, a significant increase in complaints being made compared to the previous two years (152 in 2021/22 and 131 in 2022/23).

18.2. Of the 176 complaints made 23 (13%) were from children and young people. 16 have been able to access the statutory complaints procedure and seek resolution to their concerns, 10 were supported by an advocate.

- Statutory Complaints – 21
- Corporate Complaints – 38
- Representations – 27
- Complaints made but not put through – 34
- Complaints declined – 37
- Coram – 1
- Councillor – 7
- Member of Parliament – 11

18.3. Complaints progressed to Stage 2

- 4 Corporate complaints
- 0 statutory complaints progressed

- 18.4. No complaints progressed to Stage 3.
- 18.5. No complaints escalated to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO).
- 18.6. The number of complaints that do not meet the threshold for either a statutory or corporate complaint but are categorised as 'complaints not put through' increased from 30 in the previous year to 34.
- 18.7. This data is captured to help understand the issues being raised and signposting the complainant to the most appropriate place to resolve their issues. This often prevents a complaint from developing further.
- 18.8. The number of complaints that have been addressed as representations has slightly increased from 25 last year to 27 this year. It is important that we continue to offer this option to complainants, recognising the benefits of early resolution without the need to access more formal procedures.
- 18.9. The complaints policy continues to be updated through the year with improvements made based on feedback from professionals and from the LGSCO, this includes amending the letter template to include ensuring managers who investigate complaints seek contact with the complainant with more face to face discussions/ telephone meetings taking place; ensuring where complaints are upheld or partially upheld team managers are following up with the learning points in team meetings and one to one supervision.
- 18.10. The complaints training has been developed into an E- learning course. The number of staff undertaking the training is an area of development to be addressed in the coming year to ensure staff have adequate training to respond to complaints.
- 18.11. A proportion of complaints have been focused on the attitude and behaviour of staff, reflecting the need to continuously be aware of the way in which we speak to service users, being respectful and relationship based.
- 18.12. Complaints have enabled managers to focus on areas for improvement within their services and staff behaviour is addressed through individual supervision, staff training and embedded within SCF Behaviours and Values Policy. Although the category 'attitude/ behaviour' is quite broad, the complaints are mostly regarding poor communication by social workers with the young people or families and / or not being accessible i.e., not answering their emails and phone calls, and or relaying information without empathy so the complainant believes they come across as disrespectful.



18.13. It is acknowledged that social workers must have difficult conversations with service users and these conversations may cause some service users to be unhappy, it is equally important to reflect on the experiences of our children and families and consider whether there is a different way to communicate difficult messages.

18.14. There has been some turnover of managers within SCF which has resulted in some inconsistencies in adhering to the process and timescales, this has also impacted on the capacity to take time to reflect and learn from complaints as robustly as SCF would aspire to.

18.15. Compliments

- 28 compliments were recorded, the same as the previous year 2022/23 (28)
- 27 were in relation to social work practice, 1 was related to case management.
- Compliments made by a range of people parents, adopters, family members, young person, other agencies.