

Slough Borough Council

Report To:	Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee
Date:	24 September 2024
Subject:	The OfSTED findings from its visit in April & May 2024 and Education Commissioner's report of April 2024
Lead Member:	Cllr Bedi
Chief Officer:	Sue Butcher , Chief Executive Slough Children First (SCF) and Executive Director People (Children)
Contact Officers:	Ben Short, Director of Operations (SCF) Neil Hoskinson Director of Education (SEND only)
Ward(s):	All
Exempt:	No

1. Summary

- 1.1 This agenda item relates to two reports regarding Sloughs progress in improving its services for children.
- 1.2 The first report is contained in the letter from Ofsted (Appendix A) together with a feedback presentation (Appendix B) which focused on SCF's work with Children in Need and Children in Need of Protection.
- 1.3 The second report (Appendix C), written by the Department of Education's appointed Commissioner, Paul Moffat, sets out the progress made in both children's social care and SEND services.
- 1.4 The Chair has invited Cllr Puja Bedi, Lead Member for Children's Services to explore, with the Committee members, the issues raised in these documents and discuss the services intended response.
- 1.5 Members are reminded that the [Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee's terms of reference](#) include sections on the committee's role in:
 - Policy Development;
 - Scrutiny (holding to account); and
 - Improvement Functions.

1.6 These include, inter alia:

- 'Monitor and drive improvement against any Directions by the Secretary of State and other external or internal inspections, reviews, performance information at their own discretion'; and
- 'question decision-makers about their decisions and performance, whether generally in comparison with service plans and targets over a period of time or in relation to particular decisions, initiatives or projects'.

2. Recommendations

2.1 The Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee is invited to

- a. note and discuss the findings of the reports from the Ofsted Inspector (Appendices A and B) and from the Education Commissioner (Appendix C) and make recommendations as they see fit; and
- b. Give consideration to implications or issues for the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee's future work programme.

Commissioners review:

I have no comments on the OFSTED report as it includes the DfE Commissioners report.

3. The Reports

Children's social care services have been in statutory intervention for 13 years and SEND services since August 2023.

3.1 The Ofsted Focused Visit was carried out in April and May 2024 and the subsequent report (Appendix A) sets out the following as headline findings:

- *Most children in need, including children subject to a child protection plan, receive timely and appropriate services;*
- *A reduction in staff turnover and an associated improvement in workforce stability have begun to have a positive impact on the consistency and quality of practice for most children in need and those in need of protection;*
- *The new senior leadership team recognises that further progress is needed to achieve their vision of a sustainable and resilient service for children, and a comprehensive improvement plan is underway;*
- *Children's services are delivered by Slough Children First (SCF), a company wholly owned by Slough Borough Council (SBC). Since the ILACS inspection in January 2023, relationships between SCF and SBC have been strengthened, leading to a shared understanding, appropriate challenge and agreed priorities for children in Slough; and*
- *What needs to improve in this area of practice.*
 - *Case recording, including records of visits and direct work with children.*
 - *The quality and impact of management oversight.*
 - *The effectiveness and progression of child-in-need and child protection plans*

- 3.2 The report from the Education Commissioner (Appendix C) has a helpful opening paragraph as follows.

In my work as commissioner, I have (therefore) focused on the effectiveness of the underlying levers for sustainable change, exploring the strengths and challenges which are apparent, and which will be the critical success factors in embedding the current progress of areas of achievement and improvement. In recognising the many areas of improvement, my challenge to local leaders has been the extent to which these improvements will endure. The past 18 months have seen significant improvements, with an escalation of the trajectory of improvement over the past year. The focus of intervention has moved from an authority failing many children to one which needs consistency, consolidation and stability to reach – and sustain – a standard which will warrant a consistent ‘good’ in inspection terms. The pathway to that achievement is now much clearer for local leaders; the improvements in leadership and management which were judged as inadequate at the last inspection augur well for further improvement. The improvement journey will need continued focus, prioritisation and support to ensure that embedded, sustainable improvement can be achieved, but there are grounds for cautious optimism.

4.0 Appendices

Appendix A: Letter from Ofsted HMI Chief Inspector

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12 July 2024

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

Focused visit to Slough local authority children's services

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

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

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

Headline findings

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

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

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

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

Main findings

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

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

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

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

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

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

Children are seen by their social workers, and in most cases, they build trusting relationships. For some children, changes of social worker and a reduced frequency of

visits do not assist with building relationships, limiting the progress of the plans in improving circumstances for children.

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

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

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

Children in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) benefit from increased management oversight. Thresholds are understood, and there is consistency in decision-making for children entering PLO, stepping down and initiating care proceedings.

When risks for children increase, decisions are mostly timely, and appropriate intervention is provided. A small number of children experience delay at the start of the PLO process. Letters to parents in pre-proceedings include the necessary information and are mostly written in accessible language, providing clarity about the concerns. Letters provide details about support for the child and their family and the assessments to be completed.

Engagement of the family network is promoted, which adds to the insight into children's experiences and better supports long-term planning for children.

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

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

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

A new quality assurance framework is becoming embedded and is starting to make a positive difference to practice with children. The involvement of practitioners in the audits

enables them to learn promptly regarding strengths and areas for improvement. Further improvements are planned, such as work around how actions from audits are tracked for completion, moderation and the inclusion of children and families' feedback.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Rodica Cobarzan
His Majesty's Inspector

APPENDIX B: Feedback Presentation



Slough Children's Services

Ofsted Focused Visit April/May 2024

Feedback

'HAPPY, SAFE & LOVED, THRIVING'

Happy, Safe & Loved, Thriving



Focus on Children in Need and Child Protection



- Two Inspectors, Two weeks overall, Two days on site
- One Quality Assurance Inspector
- Interviewed system leaders, Commissioner, Lead Member, Chief Exec, Chair of Safeguarding Partnerships
- Examined Quality Assurance Framework
- Met with individual Social Workers and one Head of Service
- Dip sampled case work
- Gave informal feedback before final feedback session (verbal)
- Draft report 9th May - received, aligns positively with initial feedback
- Factual Accuracy Check/Minor amends 16th May
- Final letter 24th May
- Published 3rd June

Communication Plan!

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Headline findings.

- Most Children in Need, including subject to a CP Plan receive timely and effective services.
- Reduction in staff turnover and improvement in staff stability having a positive impact on practice
- No surprises, we know ourselves and know that we have more to do.
- Better working relationships with the Council, leading to shared understanding, appropriate challenge and agreed priorities for Children

- **Marked increase in demand**
- **Growing population**
- **Recognition of diversity.**



Overall areas for development

Case recording, records of visits and direct work with children
Effectiveness and progression of CiN and CP Plans
Quality and impact of management oversight.

Positive feedback from verbal feedback session

- Sharing of Vision to make sure that Slough is a place where children are **HAPPY, SAFE & LOVED, THRIVING**
- On-going financial challenges
- Considering how to manage demand.
- Embedding the Slough approach '**STAR**' – this is helping to make a difference for families

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Progress (1)



- **Children in Need of help or protection are identified appropriately** and receive the most suitable help to meet their needs.
- **Improvement plan focused** on the areas that make the most difference to children.
- Well attended **strategy discussion meetings** that are timely and with rich information,
- Assessments are **culturally sensitive**
- **Children are seen by social workers** and in most cases build trusting relationships.
- **Families do not wait** until assessments are completed to receive support
- **Effective work with extended families** who are involved in decision making.

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Progress (2)



- Strengthened involvement in **pre-proceedings**, focus has been on keeping children in families
- **Initial Child Protection Conferences** are timely, parents and carers are supported to attend, and their voice is clear,
- **Young people at risk of CCE and CS** receive timely responses from specialist workers. Risk assessments inform practice
- **Children w' Disabilities** – a variety of services in place, compassionate, knowledgeable workers
- **Young carers** are identified and offered time away from caring responsibilities.
- There are significant efforts to **recruit permanent staff**
- Our **Quality Assurance systems** are being embedded into practice. Positive involvement of practitioners. Beginning to make a difference.
- **Social workers are committed to working in Slough** They appreciate the rich population diversity

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Not Only but Also.....



Words that come out of **some** of the feedback '**most, some, not consistent, i.e. variability**'. E.g.

- Assessments are mostly strong, better with multi-agency input
- Direct work with children is undertaken but the quality is variable.
- Thresholds are mostly appropriate
- The quality of plans is not consistent, they are mostly reviewed regularly and in timescale. Some actions don't give enough pace.
- In some situations, information is not sufficiently analysed so risk is not reduced for some children.
- Domestic abuse – a lack of analysis has had an impact on safety planning.
- Attendance at CIN meetings, Core groups and Review CP Conferences suffer from inconsistent attendance by partners.
- Positive views about supervision but variable quality
- Actions from audits need to be tracked for completion, moderation and feedback from children and families

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Comments



Most disputed area **during** the inspection period. **'Caseloads are (still)complex and high'**.

- Long working hours
- Affects practice improvement
- Team managers can be reactive.

Response

- Agree this is the situation over the last two months. Otherwise, manageable.
- Spike in demand at front door – under analysis
- Affected by using leave before end March, Ramadan, Eid, Easter, school holidays
- Vacancies including sickness
- 4 permanent workers and 4 agency staff (2 for sickness cover) starting in May.

Ofsted said in verbal feedback. 'You have taken assertive action to recruit and retain staff.' Request 'Still' to be changed to 'currently'



Appendix C: DfE Commissioner Report

DfE Adviser / Commissioner	Paul Moffat
DfE Case Lead/RISL	Dan Hendrie
Local Authority/Children's Trust	Slough Children First and Slough Borough Council
Reporting Period	April 2023 – April 2024

Introduction

This is my first report since being appointed in October 2022. In presenting this report I wish to start out by acknowledging the support of DfE colleagues. I am grateful for the good working relationship with Lead Case Worker and Advisors where we have formed a cohesive, responsive and focused team. My particular thanks go to Dan Hendrie, Liz Flaherty, Eleanor Deathridge and Rory Bick who have been reliable, well-informed and responsive throughout.

It is important that this report is considered in the context of a very long history of failure, support and intervention over a period of 13 years – effectively a generation of children - and the recurrent themes which are apparent over that period. Change has been a constant. The period has seen significant organisational turbulence; there have been three delivery models, two different administrations, 5 DCS/CX postholders, two Board Chairs, 5 Chief Executives of the Council, 3 DfE commissioners and 5 DLUHC commissioners. There have been very significant financial crises, including the S114 declaration, and the Council and Slough Children First company (SCF) have faced the challenge of delivering services through the pandemic. The Council is currently experiencing a further period of instability, with significant changes at corporate leadership level. The current and historic financial situation is an immense challenge to the council, the company and their partners; in my view this has compounded the toxic nature of the relationships in the past and has inevitably left some residual problems in core areas such as IT, Performance Management and HR which continue to impact on the Improvement Programme for children's services.

Since 2011 there have been seven inspections of Children's Social Care, including full inspections, focused visits and monitoring visits. Throughout this period, every inspection except for one has identified areas of inadequacy. No elements have been graded above 'Requires Improvement to be Good'. Among the key themes, including relationships between the Council and the Trust/Company, governance, engagement from members, financial management, organisational culture, pace of improvement, quality assurance, quality of practice and outcomes for children, there are many examples of short-term improvements which are recognised as 'green shoots' and positive indicators of likelihood of further improvement. However, these have been most often followed by either a significant fall back to being active barriers to improvement, or a failure for these improvements to be sustained and embedded.



It is important to note that such judgements are always contextual and involve variables; inspections do not always examine the same areas, different leaders, commissioners and inspectors may have a more optimistic or pessimistic analyses of similar information and work across the sector has changed markedly over the period, from the impact of the pandemic, rising demand and costs and increasing awareness and knowledge of safeguarding issues outside the home. Nevertheless, the attritional nature of the improvement journey is clearly apparent locally, where many other LAs and Trusts have weathered these challenges and transformed services and outcomes for children.

In my work as commissioner, I have therefore focused on the effectiveness of the underlying levers for sustainable change, exploring the strengths and challenges which are apparent, and which will be the critical success factors in embedding the current progress of areas of achievement and improvement. In recognising the many areas of improvement, my challenge to local leaders has been the extent to which these improvements will endure. The past 18 months have seen significant improvements, with an escalation of the trajectory of improvement over the past year. The focus of intervention has moved from an authority failing many children to one which needs consistency, consolidation and stability to reach – and sustain – a standard which will warrant a consistent ‘good’ in inspection terms. The pathway to that achievement is now much clearer for local leaders; the improvements in leadership and management which were judged as inadequate at the last inspection augur well for further improvement. The improvement journey will need continued focus, prioritisation and support to ensure that embedded, sustainable improvement can be achieved, but there are grounds for cautious optimism.

Section A – Headline Messages

- History of improvement but not always sustained. Clear evidence of improvement with current leadership team which is stable supported by political leadership team which has made ‘children’ in the borough a priority.
- Some turbulence in the wider corporate leadership team which may impact on the pace of improvement in children’s services.
- Over a decade of intervention there needs to be a clear plan going forward of the requirements need for de-escalation of the Departments involvement but only when the evidence is provided by SBC that services for vulnerable children will remain a priority and appropriate governance arrangements are in place to ensure effective monitoring.
- Company Board is showing increasing signs of stronger grip on financial management and oversight of children’s social care and clearly better relationship with Council colleagues. Given the history of the relationship between the Company/Trust and the Council the closer collaboration is welcomed by regulators and staff.
- SEND and Social Care Improvement Plans are more realistic and focused but more pace required over coming months now foundations are in place.



Section B - Progress made during current reporting period.

In this period, my work has included detailed and challenging discussions with local leaders, collaboration with DLUHC commissioners, focused meetings with staff and children and young people, close engagement with the new Company Board and using the Improvement Board – known as the ‘Getting to Good’ board - to hear from staff and leaders about progress in critical areas and to hold them to account for their individual and collective work. This period has only included one regulatory inspection – of the Breakaways short break provision - from Ofsted, which has resulted in a ‘good’ grading. However, I have conducted two in-depth reviews with DfE officials, Slough staff and partners; one into social care in November 2023 and one into SEND in February 2024, and these have supported some of the basis for these observations. There is no Improvement Advisor in place, although the Company has used DfE grant funding for an experienced former senior leader in the sector to support key aspects of the improvement agenda over a period of seven months from September 2023 to March 2024.

There are many examples of improvement to report, which are now more effectively captured through a transformed improvement programme. The new plan and improvement arrangements were approved by Cabinet in December 2023, and went live from January 2024. Revised project management arrangements and project support are in place which have facilitated greater grip in the governance, oversight and accountability of improvement activity. The Children’s Improvement Group is designated as the programme board, and new Terms of Reference are in place. The board meets monthly on a face-to-face basis. New arrangements are in place to report progress to the board, and new change control arrangements are in place. Actions are not signed off as ‘completed’ until evidence of impact is demonstrated.

The finalised new plan includes ten workstreams, each led by a senior leader as follows:

- Leadership, governance and resources
- Partnership working
- Workforce
- Embedding a learning organisation
- Change, culture and communication
- Quality of practice
- The child’s journey
- Cared for children, permanence and sufficiency
- Participation, voice and influence
- Improvement, performance and quality assurance

Each workstream has between 12 and 26 actions. Each of the actions has a single lead, and a small, nominated group to support the action. The actions from the original plan have been transferred, along with a set of new actions designed to strengthen the breadth of improvement work, to drive pace and build in sustainability and to further improve governance and oversight. Support is being delivered via the additional capacity role until March. There has been sound progress against the plan with key successes around policy and strategy outlined below. However, gaps in



staffing resulted in some delays in November and December, with requests for extensions across most workstreams. Progress was very good in January, but February and March saw a dip in pace and progress, largely related to leave during half-term and in late February due to the need for staff to take leave before the end of the leave year. The Council's and SCF's policy around the annual leave year would benefit from review to avoid so many staff taking leave at the same time in order not to lose entitlement. A more flexible approach to annual leave arrangements would easily remedy this.

An equally rigorous approach has been applied to the required SEND improvements. There has been considerably more progress against the individual actions in the Written Statement of Action (WsoA) since the development of a new SEND 0-25 Improvement Action Plan presented to the SEND Partnership Board in July 2023 and the Statutory Direction last summer. The plan is based on five clearly defined workstreams and ensures a much tighter concentration on the individual actions as well as a closer alignment to the WSoA impact measures.

From the publishing of the Local Area Inspection Report in November 2021 up to the Summer of 2023, only twenty actions had been completed of which nine were health. This represented just over 20% of the total number of actions in the WsoA. Since the implementation of the improvement plan, another seventeen actions were completed by September 2023 and a further thirty-six actions were on track to be completed by the end of January 2024, meaning that less than a quarter of the total number of actions will remain to be completed.

It should be noted that, although the actions themselves may be considered complete, they will not be signed off by the DfE until there is evidence of sufficient impact.

Workforce

A key area of success has been the stabilisation of the workforce. This is one of the core indicators of embedding sustainable change and there is demonstrable continued progress, with SCF now being much less reliant on agency workers. The two 'managed teams' were ceased over April to June 2023, releasing an annualised budget commitment of £1.4m. The vacancy management arrangements are now contained in SCF, and this has led to a tighter grip on requests for agency workers. In January 2023 the percentage of permanent fieldwork staff was 70.1% and in January 2024 this had risen to 77.9%. There are no plans for any further international recruitment campaigns, as vacancy levels no longer warrant this. The increase in applications for key posts shows an improving offer and external reputation, for example 18 applicants for SW role in referral and assessment and 4 applicants for the recent recruitment to the permanent head of service for Cared for Children. Staff absenteeism has reduced from 3.5% in January 2023 to 2.9% in January 2024.

There are now permanent staff across all operational Heads of Service roles, and a permanent designated Principal Social Worker is now in post. A new permanent quality assurance manager is now in post. Some staff changes have resulted from a recognition of the need to raise standards of leadership, in order to increase the pace of change, and leaders have not shrunk from these difficult decisions. The operational Heads of Service are talented and committed, but all are first-time post-holders at this level. They have benefitted from a good range of training and reflective learning offered for managers on



developing leadership skills and embedding a distributed leadership model within the Slough Approach. The mentoring of HoS by the SLIP partner has continued and an extended SMT took place in February which also included 16 team managers, exploring supervision and management oversight in the context of the Slough Approach. A further development session on the DfE framework and associated indicators took place in February as part of the work to strengthen skills and knowledge on performance management for leaders. One staff member has completed the YJB 'Elevate' programme - a six month mentoring programme to support the progression of Youth Justice middle managers from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds into strategic management. Two managers have been nominated for the Staff College 'BALI' programme for Black, Asian and Minority ethnic leaders.

However, the establishment in SCF is extremely lean, and the periods in between departures and appointments, despite creative attempts by leaders for cover have seen dips in the pace of improvement. The appointment to the Head of Quality and Improvement has been particularly impacted by this, with a gap of 8 months between post holders. More recently, appointments have moved more quickly; when the finance lead left in February, arrangements were swiftly put in place for an interim role and the permanent role was very quickly advertised. Similarly, the new Head of Service for Cared For Children was also appointed very quickly, and these examples point to a more responsive and flexible system now being in place. A new post of Company Secretary has been agreed, and is currently out to advert.

Two key appointments of a highly experienced Principal Education Psychologist [PEP] and the securing of additional interim educational psychologist [EP] capacity have had a significant impact on driving the SEND improvements. There was significant turnover in the team in February 2024 because five case officers decided to leave the authority - each for different reasons but the focus on performance that is now possible using the Case Tracking System is clearly a factor by increasing the level of individual scrutiny. SEND leaders flagged this as a risk and acknowledged that there would be a short term impact on performance. However, new appointments were swiftly made and there is confidence that the refreshed team will be more fit for purpose. New appointees have acknowledged the service's improving reputation as a factor in their applying for the roles. have an appraisal, which is a significant improvement in staff engagement. The quality of the appraisals has been variable, but this has been an important part of embedding the expectation that appraisals are now business as usual, and the focus for the next round in July will be on securing consistent quality. A detailed review of business support in SCF has been completed, resulting in a managed restructure; one positive element of this was that the process had a brief purposeful pause whilst senior leaders reflected on staff feedback and revised the structure in light of this.

A new 'manager's licence' has been developed, focusing on the aspects of management which fall outside of casework. The programme commenced in March, with finance as the first module. Subsequent modules include appraisals, information governance, managing people performance and health and safety. The staff induction pack has been reviewed and is ready for re-launch from April. Attendance at mandatory training has significantly increased and a new 'Stop the Clock' approach commences from April, giving all staff designated learning time every month. This will be supported by a new monthly 'Learning lunch' offer for staff, to examine learning from each monthly audit programme. The proposal for a Slough Children First Academy is in development. This will build on the ASYE academy work and will form



part of a new progression framework for all staff. A policy of staff transfer across service areas has been agreed, ensuring that staff have the opportunity to develop skills across the whole pathway.

Staff engagement

Communication and engagement with staff has seen considerable improvement. The SCF Chief Executive holds a weekly online staff meeting, which now regularly attracts an average of 150 staff. The meeting is used for information sharing, celebrating good practice, welcoming new staff and setting clear expectations of staff on key areas. In recent weeks, Non-Executive Directors of the Company Board have each joined a meeting to introduce themselves to staff and to explain their role. Quarterly face to face all-staff meetings now take place, and the March event included a joint staff awards event with adults services. Leaders are very visible and accessible. The CX in particular is frequently seen in staff work areas, chatting with staff and learning about their experiences. At every weekly meeting, she gives out her mobile number, and reminds staff that she can always be contacted. The staff 'Shadow Board' is an open invitation to all staff to look more deeply into key issues, with the most recent including explorations about housing, and the initial findings of the recent staff survey; an approach called 'Stop, Start, Continue' gives staff a chance to review what is (and is not) working and to come up with innovative ideas for change. Board members and some elected members over recent months have 'walked through the child's journey' with the relevant staff in each service, and this level of interest has been well-received by staff. All staff now see key messages including the weekly 'our week in numbers' through the on-site digital message board.

Recently, there has been an increase in the frequency and quality of communications to staff from the council. Quarterly face to face roadshows have been introduced, as well as a new series of blogs and vlogs from the Chief Executive. A key recent development is agreement for a bi-monthly 'Line of Sight' event attended by the SBC Chief Executive and Lead Member to undertake a 'deep dive' exploration of a key issue for children and families. The first event is planned to take place in one of the local communities in Slough.

Recent messages about the SBC senior leadership restructure were timely and transparent. The message to staff from the Leader of the Council in February about the council tax increases was a very good example of a sensitive and respectful communication about a difficult subject. Both the Council and SCF are now conducting staff surveys to capture staff views and to understand what their working lives are like.

The role of political leaders and relationships across the council and SCF

There are some improvements in the visibility and engagement of elected members, but there is more to do. The new Lead Member is visible across the service and is a strong advocate for Cared for Children and Care Experienced young people. The Lead member is attending the forthcoming Company Board meeting. Both the Council Leader and the Lead Member regularly attend the Getting to Good Board and the SEND Board and the written statement of action meetings, as does the Chief Executive. They have also attended the quarterly staff events, and sent a motivational New Year message to all staff. The Leader is a keen advocate for children and has responded quickly and appropriately



to issues raised by the Commissioner. The Lead Member led on Cabinet approval in March of Slough becoming a 'fostering friendly' employer.

The Corporate Parenting Strategy has been revised, with consultation events with members, though there has been relatively low attendance at these events, despite awareness training having been delivered. The strategy has still not yet been approved at Cabinet, having experienced delays through the governance journey. The former Lead Member still chairs the Corporate Parenting Panel, which is a good example of cross-party collaboration in this priority area, as the Leader recognised the need for continuity in this key area.

There is still no bespoke scrutiny panel for children's services. This is highly unusual for the sector, and a dedicated children's scrutiny board would add momentum and assurance to the improvement journey. The Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee did consider a proposal at its March meeting to launch a Task and Finish Group focusing on developing community involvement between SCF and community and faith groups, with the aim of improving outcomes for children in need, including those with SEND. One Scrutiny Committee meeting did carry out a deep dive into SEND holding the Lead member and the CX/DCS to account for progress but this seems inadequate given the history and challenges with SBC and its oversight of children's services .

Leaders at political and officer level describe relationships between the council and the Company as improving. Formal contract management arrangements are in place and working well with a stronger focus on collaboration rather than the conflict which has characterised previous years. There is as yet no direct involvement between SCF Board and Cabinet yet but clear intention and is scheduled to be discussed at the SCF Board at the end March 2024. The Lead member and SCF Board chair have met to start building relationships.

However, I am mindful that this relationship something which has been reported as improving at several points over the past decade, without the resulting impact on quality of services and outcomes. The recent changes at CLT level in the council mean that new relationships will need to be formed and this may present a risk in terms of momentum. The last Ofsted report highlighted the predominance of financial matters which led to a loss of focus on improvement. There is still some evidence that this remains a dominant factor; SCF is demonstrating improved financial management, and is on target to deliver a balanced budget at the year end.

This is a very significant achievement given the challenges across the sector. There are good examples of improved financial grip and rigour; SCF has taken control of its Expenditure Control Panel process to ensure that the social care perspective is fully considered. It also now controls its own vacancy management arrangements, and developments in commissioning and placement oversight are yielding tangible benefits in cost reduction and quality.

However, the company runs on an extremely lean basis, and remains dependent on external grants and short term funding to deliver its core functions, and the cost of improvement work is not embedded within the revenue budget. It is positive that in 2023 the Council revised its budget for children's services following intensive negotiations but SCF has then had to find savings in 2024 which is challenging given increasing demand, the 'placement market' and increasing costs of cared for children. The council and SCF



need to objectively consider whether the budget reflects the real costs of running – and improving - children's services.

The Council remains on track to meet the deficit control and reduction targets set out the 'Safety Valve'. All RAG ratings have remained Green other than the risk of legal challenge by way of appeal, judicial review and to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) which has remained Amber.

The 2023-24 Period 8 (November 2023) position for High Needs DSG has total forecast spend of £24.9m against a budget of £25.1m. This contrasts with the period 5 position of a forecast spend of £22.3m. However, the previous report identified the potential risk of the backlog of 290 EHC plans with additional forecast spending of £2.6m and this is now factored into the outturn position. Therefore, the predicted position for 2023-24 is largely unchanged from the Period 5 position at an underspend of £0.155m. The actual predicted DSG Deficit position for the end of 2023/24 is a reduction to £11.0m once the Safety Valve contribution of £3.2m is received.

The level of requests for Needs Assessments is higher currently than at the time that the Safety Valve was originally agreed and future mapping shows that requests for EHC plans will continue to increase. The backlog of cases that are currently being cleared will impact on High Needs Funding in future years as well. However, as the number of EHC plans increases there are likely to be further increases in the High Needs Block allocation. Therefore, a higher level of EHC plans does not necessarily mean that the authority will fail to achieve a balanced in-year budget, but it will remain a key area for vigilance.

Whilst there is increasing collaboration at middle and senior manager level around the development of joint protocols and initiatives, there is room for further improvement to joint operational working which results in improved outcomes; there are examples of enthusiastic council officers who are keen to work closely with SCF, but the work is very slow, and the results of these good intentions are not yet being seen at operational level. A good example of this is in securing independent accommodation for care experienced young people. Care experience has been adopted by the council as a protected characteristic, but there are many examples of significant delays in finding suitable accommodation for them, including long delays in even accepting them onto the housing register. Even when accepted, these young people with this protected characteristic are placed only at Category B of housing need. As well as impacting on the young people themselves, this has a financial impact on the council and on SCF through funding their semi-independent accommodation for longer than is required. This golden thread of embedding the good policy and strategy intentions at delivery level is one of the key indicators of sustainable improvement, and it will require further collaborative work and cultural shift to achieve this consistently.

The 2023 Osted report noted that the governance arrangements between the Council and the company were 'cumbersome', and there is still some evidence that this fetters the pace and momentum of improvements. The passage of reports requiring consideration and approval from Cabinet can take weeks, with examples being apparent of multiple amendments and comments adding further time and missing a whole cycle. There was a significant delay in reporting the November SEND inspection outcome to Cabinet, leading to Cabinet not being able to formally approve the WSoA. For this reason, Cabinet asked for regular updates to be formally reported to assure itself of progress.



At times there appears to be an acceptance that this slow pace is 'just how it is'. The history of improvement efforts has shown a tacit acceptance of lack of urgency and pace over time, and this has been one of the major barriers to embedding sustained improvement. At one GTG board, a council officer noted with weary resignation the 'painfully slow' progress of change, without proposals for changing it, and this resignation and acceptance strengthens the tolerance of mediocrity and stifles innovation and energy. At another meeting, a discussion around the desperately needed Business Intelligence developments heard that the council expected to take another year before resolving this. The children and young people for whom services are not yet maximising their outcomes do not have the time to wait for these 'leverage' improvements to happen, and a further shift in the expectation and resourcing of improvement is required.

There are very good developments with commissioning in both the Council and the Company, with evidence of good collaborative work between the two. A transformation programme is in place with associated workstreams some of which are co-chaired. This work is also linked to the SEND developments. The commissioning work in SCF is seeing tangible improvements for children and for value for money. Restructure proposals for the SCF commissioning function were agreed by the SCF Board in February, drawing together commissioning and placements into a single streamlined service function. Work to review all SLAs is progressing well, with good evidence of rigour and tenacity in contract management; recent examples include a reduction in the hourly rate charged by a care provider from £30 per hour to £25 per hour, recovery of substantial direct payment monies when a family left the country, and a discount negotiated with a provider that reduced an annual cost of a placement by £8,000. The uplift policy has been agreed with providers, and alongside the work of the external placements panel, is driving down the costs of high needs packages and placements. Joint work is under way to establish improved communication between SCF and Planning on all potential applications relating to children's homes and to consider S106 implications to benefit Slough children. This progress with commissioning represents the sound development of foundations for ongoing sustainable improvement.

There is as yet no children's JSNA locally. Slough has had a shared DPH post with other sub-regional authorities, and a JSNA for Slough has recently been produced. This is a detailed and comprehensive baselining of need, but some of the information used for children is out of date, relying on 2022 figures. The planned development of a bespoke DPH role in Slough will bring greater focus to this important underpinning of understanding local need.

Partnership working

During the November DfE review, partners spoke positively about improving partnership work and relationships. There is evidence of good collaboration over MACE work at a strategic and operational level, including new joint tools and processes being developed. The work to address serious youth violence has had strong partnership support and the 'Operation Cuba' project has delivered tangible impact to some of the borough's most vulnerable young people. The learning from Op Cuba is helping to reshape bespoke processes for contextual safeguarding, outside of traditional child protection system models. Further exploration of two similar models in the South East region is supporting this work.

The Safeguarding Partnership executive group recently held a systems leadership event that was well received by partners. The Safeguarding Partnership is currently undertaking



a three-month review of effectiveness, culminating in a successful partnership summit in March which engaged partners in considering priorities for the coming year. The work to finalise these priorities and establish associated action plans will need to progress at pace. There is active discussion at present about the programme of multi-agency audits which should drive partnership assurance around the quality of work. The programme of bi-monthly was suspended in early 2023. Some very small samples of front door MA audits commenced in February and a further round is planned. This programme now needs significant expansion for partners to have good enough oversight to assure themselves of quality across the children's pathway. There have been three rapid reviews held in 2023/24 and one Safeguarding Practice Review into a death involving serious youth violence. These reviews have been well received by partners.

There is joint work across children's and adults to improve transitions for children to adult services. Shadowing opportunities are being developed to build on relationships with schools with staff from one of the secondary schools being invited to shadow work in the MASH and front door teams. A MASH operations group is in place and agreement in principle has been reached to co-locate an IDVA from a local voluntary organization into the MASH. Police are still not co-located in the MASH, and approaches to probation for co-located staff have not been successful.

The SEND board is demonstrating more effective challenge as it matures. There has been steady progress with SEND since the Directions were initiated in August 2023. However a review of its 'strategic objectives' and 'operational activities' needs to be undertaken swiftly to avoid drift and repeating mistakes of the past. The senior leadership team in children's services are establishing good foundations, galvanising a workforce that has been let down in the past and a lack of investment means they are working from a low baseline. Improved panel processes chaired by the PEP have been a significant factor in the improvement journey, with decisions being made now confirmed as being in line with the SEND Code of Practice. However, initial quality assurance of EHC plans by the PEP have indicated that they are compliant but that there is room for improvement in their quality, and issues remain in the communication with schools and families. There will also need to be increased attention on annual reviews moving forward now that the EHC assessment process is operating more efficiently.

The Youth Justice Service Board is showing improved effectiveness from taking forward the recommendations of the Peer Review in September. A new manager is in post, and a dynamic '100 day' plan is in place. The YJB has upgraded its oversight assessment from 'requires improvement' to 'satisfactory'. Youth Justice services have now been sited in targeted support, and arrangements are in place to develop a bespoke Head of Service role to oversee these functions.

Most key partners engage with the improvement boards, either through regular attendance or to present a focused issue. However, health partners and police have been limited in their engagement.

Early help delivery is a strength. Work to refresh the parenting strategy has commenced with good partner engagement through the Early Help implementation group. Multi-agency early help champions are in place. The revised DVA strategy is due at Cabinet in March. An Early Help Partnership Strategy is in place, and this is overseen by the Children and Young People's partnership board which is chaired by the DCS. The board also oversees



delivery of the participation strategy plus a themed action plan. The broader partnership arrangements would benefit from further review. The 'golden thread' through vision,

strategic plans and delivery is not yet fully transparent and collectively owned, and the work of the Children and Young People's Board is key to strengthening this. Partners do not consider that an external Peer Review would add value at this point, preferring to work together on a collaborative local review of effectiveness. This work will need to progress at pace to achieve the cultural shift and system change required to drive improvement at both strategic and delivery level.

Policy, strategy and operational developments.

There is very good evidence of the strengthening of the practice, policy and strategic framework within SCF. Over the past year there has been a plethora of reviews and revisions of policies and strategies, and over that period, this has seen a more formal programme and project management approach, resulting in better grip of the resulting practice developments. A very good example of this is the new Sufficiency Strategy, a wide-ranging programme for better understanding matching needs and services across the child's journey, and especially in relation to cared for children. The programme has formal workstreams for driving the activity around edge of care, fostering, commissioning and permanence. This formal and rigorous approach to change management is one which will drive and embed sustainable change through evidence based change, risk management and formal capture of impacts leading to continuous learning and development. Other examples of policy and strategy development are apparent across all service areas, including the parenting strategy, the early help strategy, permanency strategy, supervision policy, fully revised panels for Legal Gateway, external placements and additional resource requests, revision of the Local Offer, pre-birth assessment framework, MACE procedures and tools, the delegated decisions framework. These are very good foundations of the architecture for sustained improvement and the rigorous approach is building consistency in the application of the delivery model.

There is evidence of good work to raise practice standards through learning and focused support. The practice standards are currently being revised with a view to a relaunch in April. A proposal for a new Social Work Academy approach is being developed. Additional temporary capacity has been secured to develop the 'Building Practice' Team; this is a small team of practice development staff who have offered a good range of learning opportunities for staff around key fundamentals for quality of practice. The team have undertaken deep dive exploration of service areas using performance and audit information, and complete overview reports with key actions required. When audit findings highlighted that recording does not always reflect the detail and quality of work undertaken, a focused learning input was offered by BPT on this from January to March.

However, the BPT funding ends in March, and some funding has been found to maintain a smaller proportion of the staff for a further three months, which does not present a sustainable picture of foundation-building. The impact of this approach has been good; quality assurance shows an emerging movement of some work into 'good' and this needs to be consolidated as the majority of audited work is either 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement'. In order to maintain – and build - momentum and SCF would benefit from this being fully embedded within the core functions of the company, as this stage of the recovery and improvement process requires



acceleration and focus to make the shift across 'poor to fair' and then beyond, and there is insufficient capacity in the core establishment to drive this.

Performance and quality arrangements

The performance management arrangements remain very poor. The company is data rich and analysis poor. A lack of a reliable Business Intelligence tool means that there is a reliance on a plethora of spreadsheets and trackers – some of which are generated ad hoc within service areas. The current systems offer little in the way of automation. Managers are often presented with raw data on a case-by-case basis about performance and they have neither the time nor the specialist skills for effective analysis of these. There is no real time dashboard available to managers to support them in the day-to-day work and throughput of their teams. There have been protracted discussions between the council and SCF over some years regarding the roll out of the PowerBi system. At the February GTG Board, the Council's lead on this was asked to account for this and to describe the next steps. PowerBi dashboards and reports have been available in the Council since June 2023. Whilst a small number of licences have now been issued to SCF analysts to build familiarity, it is considered that it will take a further year for this to be fully rolled out to SCF. This is an unacceptable delay. The lack of a fit-for-purpose business intelligence system is a major risk to the effective and efficient delivery of children's services, and places SCF well out of kilter with other LAs and Trusts across the sector. This delay also relates to adults' services. Leaders in SCF have now taken steps to seek other means of improving the analytical capacity within the company, and developing its own dashboard, and additional specialist training is planned for the SCF performance team. This raises issues around cost-shunting, with SCF resorting to using its own funding on core responsibilities which should be delivered by the council, as this would be a significant drain on SCF's resources. The performance management capacity represents a significant barrier to the progression of the improvement plan, and sustainable improvement cannot be assured unless and until this is addressed. The Council and the Company need to address this issue urgently, through a focused joint project which will aim to complete within 6 months.

Quality assurance is an area which features in each of the inspections highlighted above, and until recently it has been significantly underdeveloped within SCF and across the partnership, however there are good grounds for optimism going forward. A new Performance, Quality and Improvement Framework has been developed in SCF and was approved at Cabinet in December 2023, and work is ongoing to align EHC plan quality assurance with this framework. The Improvement Plan contains the actions to implement the Framework. SCF did engage external support to improve audit arrangements, and a new process and template was established, which included formal moderation arrangements. It is starting to make some traction, and the appointment of the new Head of Service and the new Audit Manager is already seeing strengthening of compliance and quality, and this has included a new audit framework which builds compliance and engagement in the process, strengthens family involvement, builds rigour in identifying and tracking actions and significantly strengthens the learning cycle. Some emerging good practice is apparent, for example thematic contextual safeguarding audits took place in January and following a recognition of an increase in re-referral rates, a thematic audit of re-referrals took place in February, with a view to testing adherence to thresholds and analysing patterns of practice at assessment and closure. The Safeguarding Partnership



suspended the regular programme of audit in early 2023, and this has not yet recommenced, though a small programme of multi-agency dip-sampling commenced in February at the front door. The Safeguarding Partnership has engaged an audit

specialist from January to March to develop its audit arrangements. Nevertheless, if Ofsted were to arrive in the next quarter, they would undoubtedly be critical of a period of over a year with no multi-agency audit programme in place, and insufficient means for the partnership to assure itself of the effectiveness of safeguarding provision. The new Head of Service for QA in SCF and the new Audit Manager both commenced in post in February. Both bring very sound experience from their previous authorities, and this augurs well for strengthening audit arrangements within the company, and supporting the QA work across the partnership.

Work to strengthen accountability and oversight is encouraging. The Operations Director has put in place new regular inspection preparation meetings, and new accountability arrangements for Heads of Service to report across a range of workforce and operational matters in their service areas. This then feeds through the 'line of sight' thread to the Company Board and to corporate and political leaders. New ward-based performance reports are being developed to better inform and engage local members.

Innovation

It is encouraging to see a focus on innovation within the improvement activity. The fostering service has launched a new therapeutic fostering scheme – Resilience Foster Care – aimed at supporting young people aged 5-16 who currently live in residential care or who without this provision would likely be placed in residential care. A second Mockingbird constellation is being developed, and there is a feasibility study underway regarding establishing an in-house residential home. These two innovations have been developed through external funding, and the council and SCF will need to have clear plans for mainstreaming the approaches into the medium term. 'Operation Cuba' has been a very successful joint initiative with Thames Valley Police which has targeted serious youth violence through focused multi-agency working with very high risk individuals which has resulted in significant reductions of risk for the young people involved, and for their local communities.

Participation, Voice and Influence

This is an area which has been significantly underdeveloped in both SEND and social care. There are now early signs of improvement but there is more to do. There is now a focused workstream which is building on developments in 2023 to significantly strengthen this work and this now needs to progress at pace. The Participation Strategy has been approved, and the existing participation officer has been mapped. DfE funding has been secured to engage an external company to drive the work from January 2024 to engage a broader group of children and young people, to re-establish representation opportunities, to deliver training to staff and members. A new participation officer commenced in post in March. There has been very good involvement of young people in senior appointments including two recent Head of Service appointments and the recruitment to the Director of Education post. The council and SCF have worked together to ensure that vulnerable and marginalised children and young people will have guaranteed places on the Youth Council. The



company recognises that the pool of young people currently participating is small, and extending the reach is a major priority within the workstream. There are now four Care Experienced young people who are apprentices, and one who has successfully moved into a permanent role.

Section C – Forward Look

- There has been good progress across many areas in SCF over the past year. The Company led by the Chair and Chief Executive is showing signs of maturity and grip. There is still work to do and in the next 6 months should collaborate with the Council to undertake a 'back office' review of services and at the same time provide further evidence of it's longer term sustainability. This would reassure partners and the general public that Slough has turned a corner in Children's Services and thereafter open discussions about future support from the Department. This would send a strong message to staff and partners about the intentions of the Council supported by clear evidence of strong governance and oversight of social care and SEND services. It will also allow time for the Council to focus on those areas still seen as weak alluded to in recent updates by colleagues in DLUHC. This will clearly require focused consideration and collaboration between Section 114 Officer and the Company's Finance Director supported by their respective Senior Leadership Teams Cabinet and SCF Board.
- The Department has financially supported Slough for many years and although this has been reduced since 2022 a significant contribution is still being made to maintain the Company's back office functions. Given the work already underway by SBC with regard to the efficiency and effectiveness of departments it is imperative that the Company undertakes it's own review to ensure alignment with a clear plan for integration of those services when the time is right. This would provide the Minister and the Department of Education the assurance that the Council will be able to manage these services at a given point in the future. Without the evidence it would remain speculative and therefore a 'risk'.
- Scrutiny and assurance has improved but without a dedicated Children and Young People scrutiny committee overseen by Council members there will always be a gap in the governance and assurance arrangements of SBC which will continue to create nervousness with the Department whilst the Statutory Directions are in place.
- Business intelligence is an area of weakness within the Council and needs careful attention by the Council in the forthcoming months. It is imperative that the Council and SCF undertake an urgent review of the back office functions (ie within 6 months) given the concerns expressed within this report and DHLUC Commissioners letter to the Council recently. At some point the DfE's own financial contribution to the Council and SCF will need to be reviewed and brought to an end and therefore each organisation needs to be making the appropriate arrangements to prepare for this in 2024/25.
- Further work needs to be undertaken to engage Police and health partners at the Improvement Board and an analysis of the effectiveness of the safeguarding strategic partnership so the authority can assure itself that all of the appropriate alignments at a strategic level are working effectively.



Section D – Assessment of Performance and Quality of Practice

As described above, performance management and business intelligence are long-standing areas of weakness. The limitations of these arrangements have supported an approach of performance monitoring rather than performance management. More recently, in addition to the work by SCF to seek data management improvements independently, some positive focused work on key performance indicators has been taking place. KPIs have had a lack of focus over recent years, with several measures not being reviewed since 2016, and a programme is now in place to comprehensively review them alongside key leaders and managers to develop new 'baskets' of indicators for improvement and governance purposes. All of the statutory KPIs are being reviewed in the light of comparator performance, with new two-year targets being set to reflect the stretch required to meet Slough's improvement ambitions.

As the current year closes, there is a mixed picture across performance indicators, though with some promising signs of improvements. Allocation of work is strong, and caseloads are within acceptable tolerances, though there is some variation across the pathway with these. Caseload monitoring reports are now produced twice weekly. The average percentage of children each week with visits on time has been consistently below 90% over the past quarter, and the range for this is between 57% and 98%, indicating not only a need for improvement but also consistency in this important indicator.

In social care and SEND, demand is high and increasing, and this reported to be a significant factor for neighbouring authorities too. The largest number of referrals come from police who also report increased demand. Efficiencies in police MASH did drive increased demand across the summer as they worked across their own backlog of work, though this appears to have settled more recently. Re-referrals have increased over the year and there is an ongoing upward trajectory. This raised issues around thresholds and tolerances, hence the audit work which is described above.

The Front Door service was reviewed by internal audit which resulted in the highest level of assurance.

A high number of assessments are accepted into the service each month. Further work is planned to examine conversion rates and possible step-downs, again to determine whether thresholds were correctly applied when accepted and at the end of the assessment. The company invests a significant resource in the assessment teams; they have high caseloads but good performance in meeting statutory timescales, and further work has started to explore whether all of these families needed to be brought into high-cost statutory service provision, sometimes with no further support. This 'Child's Journey' project within the improvement plan has been established to examine the child's experience through services, focusing on conversion rates, thresholds and tolerances. For example, at the front end of the pathway, in the year to date, less than 30% of contacts progress to referral, 99% of referrals progress to assessments though over 60% of these



do not result in further social work intervention, and less than 30% of S47 investigations lead to ICPCs.

There has been focused work which has led to significant improvement in the timeliness of child protection conferences and reviews. Timeliness of ICPCs has been a concern over several years, and recent improvements have included a 100% achievement in January 2024 compared with 64% in January 2023, with the year to date exceeding statistical neighbour and national performance comparators.

Management oversight and supervision show high levels of compliance at 95% and 93% in the last quarter. Audits show that quality is variable in supervision. The supervision policy is being revised, and additional training is now in place for managers, alongside leadership and management sessions which clearly set out expectations and standards in this area. From April, this improvement area will be enhanced by observations of supervision, alongside observations of home visits and of other areas of engagement with families.

The numbers of children looked after have reduced by 20% over the last 12 months. In February 2023 there were 263 and in January 2024 there were 203. The number of children entering care has varied over the last few months, 12 children entered care in October -November 2023 compared with 37 over the same period in 2022. From April to December 2023 there were 52 entries into care, compared to 119 in the same period the same period in 2022. The decrease in entries into care has been impacted by the increased focus and resourcing on managing risk to enable children to remain in the care of their parents. The legal gateway process has been reviewed together with the threshold to issue court proceedings. The year to date rate of CLA has also decreased and is now 45.6 per 10,000 below that of comparator groups – statistical neighbours 58.7, South East 57, England 71. Some of this relates to reductions of unaccompanied asylum seeking children, but the introduction in April 2023 of the new Legal Gateway arrangements has brought a new rigour and oversight to this process. The Legal Gateway Panel has set new standards for requests for PLO or for issuing proceedings, with an expectation that this will only be agreed when every avenue to support a family has been explored – other than in exceptional circumstances. The work has raised standards in safeguarding work, and this was reflected by HH Judge Moradifar, the Designated Family Judge for Thames Valley in a recent visit to the company, in which he met with staff and leaders. His feedback was that he and his colleagues have experienced demonstrable improvement in the quality, timeliness and presentation of work put before the court over the past year, and he commended staff for that, noting that the courts now has greater confidence in decision-making from Slough staff.

The percentage of children leaving care through SGO or adoption has improved slightly from last year, but at 14.3% it sits below all comparators.

Leaders continue to test out the thresholds applied to decision-making about children at risk. All S20 children have been reviewed for appropriateness of status. The transition of children across services protocol was agreed in February 2024 with the purpose of easing transfer blockages across the pathway. Step-down pathways and processes have been established. During 2023 a programme of reviewing all children subject to child protection plan for more than two years and then 18 months was completed. This resulted in all but



two 2 year plus plans ending with appropriate next steps being in place. In the 18 month cohort, some were escalated into PLO whilst others were stepped down to CiN plan or early/targeted support. These additional reviews now routinely take place at 9 months plus. This recalibration of children across the system is building confidence that children

and families are at the right place to receive services which match their need. This needs further work across the system, and the 'child's journey' project as described above is part of that recalibration.

Performance against timeliness of initial health checks is poor, averaging only 42% in the year to date. This appears to be systems and communication issue across the partnership, which the new Head of Service is addressing. Timeliness for subsequent health checks is better at 86% but clearly there is also further room or improvement here.

The percentage of care leavers aged 19-21 in EET has reduced over the year to 46%, and is below all comparators. For those aged 16 plus, this is 50%. However, the percentage of the 19-21 cohort of care leavers in suitable accommodation, at 88% is higher than all comparators. For care leavers aged 16+, this is 76%.

The improved level of Educational Psychology [EP] assessments and Education, Health and Care [EHC] plans being finalised or sent out as drafts has been maintained. As a result, the backlog of EP assessments has been cleared and the backlog for EHC plans is beginning to slowly reduce. The increased level of EP assessments completed each month has remained at a much higher level than in the first months of 2023. The backlog of unallocated assessments that stood at 130 in June 2023, and which had reduced to eighty by November, has now been cleared completely, so the team are now focused on meeting ongoing requests within statutory timescales.

The cumulative percentage of EHC plans that have been completed within the twenty week statutory timescale rose consistently throughout 2023 and ended the year at 17.6% compared to 11% in 2022. This is despite clearing backlog cases that were already well over the timescale when allocated to the case officer. However, there needs to be a greater focus on timeliness for new cases and it is being proposed to report on backlog cases separately in the future so that their impact does not mask the performance of the team for new cases.