



Slough Children's Trust Annual Report April 2020 to March 2021

Policy Owner:	Eleni Ioannides, Interim Chief Executive/ DCS
Version:	1
Date:	March 2021

Policy Summary:

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A hands-on approach to help children in Slough be
..... Safe, Secure and Successful

Foreword by Robert Tapsfield, Chair, Slough Children's Services Trust

Slough Children's Services Trust (the Trust) started 2020/21 dealing with the challenges of Covid-19, unsure at the time how prolonged the pandemic would be and what would be the full impact on children, families and staff in Slough. What has been clear over the last 12 months is the resilience and compassion of Trust staff who during several lockdowns have continued to provide services to the most vulnerable children and Families in Slough. The Trust Board are very proud and grateful to staff for their commitment and resilience.

The last 12 months have tested the Trust in many ways. High levels of demand for our services and more complex needs from children and families have become the norm, and this put significant pressure on our services and the improvements we made in 2019. Senior leaders took robust action and over the last year improvements have been made, with many of these described in this report. But we know there is more to do and everyone in the Trust is committed to continuously improving services to ensure children are safe, secure and successful.

On 1st April 2021, the Trust becomes a local authority wholly owned company. We have a new name 'Slough Children First' which signals the shared determination of the Trust and Slough Borough Council to continue to improve services to children and families. As a local authority wholly owned company we will be strategically aligned with Slough Borough Council whilst retaining operational independence. Our adoption service is moving to join 'Ambitious for Adoption' a Regional Adoption Agency run by Coram. We will also be implementing a new Contextual Safeguarding Team to safeguard vulnerable adolescents and are working much more closely with early help and targeted support services.

These changes are exciting ones for the Trust which puts it in a good position to focus on making sustained improvements whilst working collaboratively with the Council to improve services and outcomes for children and families. We look forward to continuing our improvement journey, taking all available opportunities to grow, innovate, and enjoy future successes.



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Summary

The Trust was already seeing increased levels of demand before Covid-19 but this demand continued. During 2020 the number of open cases increased every month to reach a peak on 14 December 2020 with 1891 children and young people being supported; the highest in the Trust’s history. This has resulted in child protection numbers which were almost double statistical neighbours, a growing number of children in need cases and high caseloads for staff.

The Trust was clear from its own self evaluation of practice about areas which needed to improve, and it implemented a Rapid Improvement Plan in the summer of 2020 which successfully addressed specific areas. An Improvement Plan developed in September 2020 sought to embed the progress made in the summer as well as deliver sustained outcomes. This plan, underpinned by permanent heads of service and their own service plans, has led to further improvements and evidence of good compliance over the last six months enabling the Trust to focus on achieving consistent quality too.

In October 2020, the Trust received a focused visit from Ofsted to look at social care statutory services and the Trust’s response to Covid. The Trust told Ofsted it would find varied but improving practice across the Trust but at the same time it would find areas of strength. This view was confirmed by Ofsted who saw during the focused visit the Trust continues to know itself well from a wide range of performance and quality assurance information. The Trust has focused significant time and resources to ensure staff are well supported and safe during Covid, and Ofsted agreed with the approach senior leaders had taken.

The Trust has undergone significant change in the last financial year and there remain further changes in the next financial year. Changes in strategic leadership will be finalised with the recruitment of a permanent Chief Executive/Director of Children’s Services, and the Director of Operations role has been stabilised with a committed interim. The Trust will transition to a local authority wholly owned company, strategically aligned with the Council but retaining operational independence. Services will become more integrated when early help and targeted support join the Trust in July 2021.

The biggest challenge for the Trust remains staffing. The difficulty in recruiting good calibre staff makes it difficult for managers to promote consistent good practice and the market for recruiting social work staff is highly competitive. The Trust has seen high levels of staff turnover for a variety of reasons which it is working to reduce.

Despite such changes and challenges, the Trust remains well placed to build on improvements made over the last year and further improve the quality of services.

Getting the basics right

Our strengths and where we have seen improvements in practice

Strong practice in the Referral and Assessment Service

Ofsted spent part of their focused visit in October 2020 reviewing the Referral and Assessment Service which includes the Trust's Front Door. Ofsted noted a number of strengths including an appropriate grip on threshold applications, as well as skilled and experienced MASH managers providing clear direction and additional rigour to decision-making. Ofsted also saw strong practice in the Assessment Teams who as well as undertaking assessments provide short-term, direct interventions to address needs and build resilience in families. In addition Ofsted saw a good response to children at risk of exploitation.

Improvements in social care compliance and green shoots for quality

Ofsted saw an improvement in compliance in areas such as visiting frequency, supervision and management oversight, all of which have since further improved. Both management oversight and supervisions in timescale met their 95% targets in January 2021, improving from a low base in April 2020. This provides a stronger grip on practice and should lead to improved outcomes for children and families. Audits in the 3rd quarter (September 2020 to December 2020) have indicated ongoing signs of improvement in the quality of management oversight.

Visiting frequency for Children in Need and children on Child Protection plans both met their 92% target in late 2020 with performance sustained into 2021. The visiting frequency for children looked after hasn't dipped below its 90% target all financial year meaning children and young people are being kept safe, and benchmarks well with other local authorities.

There have also been improvements in the quality of cases audited. In quarter 3, 63.5% of the 160 cases audited were graded as Requires Improvement or better, an increase from 51.1% in quarter 1. The increase in higher quality cases is coming from more cases rated to be good and less cases rated as inadequate.

Maintained face to face visiting during Covid-19 to keep children safe

During the first few weeks of Covid all children known to the Trust were risk assessed. This was completed to ascertain risk of significant harm so face to face visiting could be prioritised for those most at risk and at the same time protect frontline staff. Further functionality was added to the Trust's social care case file

management system to enable continued visiting risk assessments to be carried out by social workers to check the safety of face to face visits. After just 8 weeks, face to face visiting became the norm again, supported by the availability of PPE for staff. The expectation of managers has been maintained throughout Covid for all visits to be conducted face to face unless risks indicate otherwise.

Positive outcomes for the education of Children Looked After

Slough's Looked After Children continue to perform well academically despite disruptions to education for all children. This success continues to be achieved as a result of a strong and effective Virtual School which is held in high regard by school leaders and foster carers.

For the small cohort of Year 6 pupils, 64% of these children performed at age related expectations for all children, which is better than other children looked after nationally. In the cohort of 15 individuals due to take their GCSE's in summer 2020, for the 8 children who had two stable years in care, their attainment was almost identical to their non CLA peers and considerably better than CLA peers nationally..

Record numbers of our care leavers are accessing university. 9 young people secured a university offer for 2020, and from October 2020, 19 young people will be at university (Slough's highest ever number) studying a range of courses including medicine, education and law.

PEPs have continued virtually, with a process seen by Ofsted as '*effective*' and excellent timeliness has been maintained (99%) for the majority of the year. Whilst children and young people were learning at home in 2020, the Virtual School distributed over 300 laptops to support learning for vulnerable children and children looked after.

There has been strong attendance of Slough CLA in school. As of 4th February 2021, 83% of primary aged Looked After Children were in school, much higher than 54.6% recorded for other South Eastern region LA's. For secondary aged Looked After Children, 57% were in schools, double the 22% for other South Eastern region LA's. It was also pleasing to see 66% of all children looked after with an Education health and Care Plan (EHCP) were in school as well. Only 2 looked after children were refusing to attend with the remaining children and young people having their educational needs met at home or on-line, or were in the process of moving schools.

Placement stability for Children Looked After

Placement stability for Children Looked After in Slough continues to outperform both Statistical Neighbours and the South East region, meaning children remain settled in a placement which is meeting their needs.

The Trust targeted itself to increase the percentage of children looked after in the same placement for 2 years or more to 75%, and it has both met and consistently exceeded this target since June 2020, peaking at 88.5% in January 2021. This is better than Statistical Neighbours (65.5%) and South Eastern region (68.0%), though their data was for the 2019/2020 financial year.

Children looked after with 3 or more placements in the last year continues to improve month on month to 4.5% in February 2021, significantly reduced from 15.7% in April 2020. This is a pleasing reduction and testament to the hard work of social workers and foster carers to keep children and young people safe, secure and happy.

Positive Peer Review of the Youth Offending Team

The Youth Offending Team (YOT) in Slough took part in a peer review in March 2020. The peer review team was provided by the South Eastern Sector Lead Improvement Partnership (SESLIP) and noted staff in the YOT were '*a credit to the organisation*' and the principle of 'child first' was a golden thread which went through all the work reviewed. From this peer review the team have developed an action plan to address areas where practice could be further strengthened. The YOT is currently working towards an HMIP inspection in 2021 where it hopes to perform well.

Impact of clinicians on work with children and families

Clinicians support frontline staff to influence planning and also carry out direct work with children and families to build family resilience, prevent family breakdowns and reunify children looked after back home. Ofsted saw in the focused visit the value of clinicians in terms of how contact for children looked after had been supported during Covid, the support provided to Care Leavers who had been struggling with isolation, as well as their direct work with families. Clinicians have also been supporting their colleagues in the Trust during Covid and have been invaluable to staff during difficult times.

Breakaway refurbishment

In late 2020, Breakaway, our six bed respite unit for children and young people with disabilities moved to a property next door to enable the existing property to be fully refurbished to address Ofsted recommendations about the living environment for children and young people. Breakaway provides overnight short breaks, after school visits and occasional day care for children from 6 years of age up to their 18th birthday. Breakaway as per other children's homes and respite units receives regular Ofsted visits, and is awaiting its next inspection. In February 2020 Ofsted noted a 'sustained effectiveness' which meant Breakaway was still achieving "good" outcomes and the work staff have undertaken at Breakaway to move premises puts it in a good position to sustain its current good judgement.

What we are still improving and how we are doing this

Improving the quality of practice

The focus for the Trust for the next year is to maintain good levels of compliance and continue to develop the quality of practice to ensure good outcomes for children and families. This will be achieved by continuing to support frontline staff to understand what good looks like, using on-line training modules, cake and learn 'bite size' sessions, whole Trust sessions and practice learning weeks which have continued throughout Covid. This is underpinned by senior leaders' efforts to provide manageable caseloads.

A previously delayed frontline management programme run by the Staff College is now able to start in spring 2021. This will be delivered jointly to Trust and Council Children's Services managers to provide a series of leadership development sessions to develop managers and strengthen management at all levels in Slough.

Improving the quality of children's plans (Ofsted area for improvement)

The Trust knew from its performance information and quality assurance activities it needs to focus on the quality of practice for children subject to child in need plans and in need of help and protection. This view was confirmed by the Ofsted focused visit in October 2020. The Rapid Improvement Plan brought some quick improvements in these areas and future, sustainable changes are underpinned by detailed service plans to promote the aim for all children and families to receive consistently good services.

Despite the need to further focus on improving practice, the low figures for repeat CP plans is good evidence of social work plans effectively resolving needs of children and families. Just 13.5% (ytd) of CP are currently repeat plans (ever), showing a much stronger performance than both statistical neighbours (20.9%) and SE region figures (23.4%) for 2019/2020. Only 5.6% (ytd) of CP plans started are repeat plans within 2 years against a target of Trust target of 10%. There are no regional comparisons for this performance indicator

Audit activity shows practice in relation to care plans is stronger. The percentage of cases rated Requires Improvement or better has remained constant between Q1 and Q3 at around 71.5%, with double the number of audits completed in Q3 indicating practice is improving.

Support and planning for Care Leavers has been consistently good with 93% of 18 – 21 year old Care Leavers living in suitable accommodation, an increase of 7% since April 2020. The proportion of Care Leavers of the same age in employment, education and training has reduced from 43% to 34% since April 2020, but this is the impact of Covid whereby many employment sectors which provide jobs for young people such as retail, hospitality and leisure are closed. A post 16 worker located in the Virtual School supported 26 out of 28 young people who completed year 11 in summer 2020 to find employment, education or training, but the employment, education and training opportunities for young people in Slough is a focus for improvement.

Making the Independent Fostering Agency 'Good'

The Trust's Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) was judged inadequate by Ofsted in April 2019. A third monitoring visit in May 2020 confirmed the IFA was heading in the right direction when all but one of the requirements were lifted (just suitable and experienced staffing remained). As a result of Covid, the regulatory inspection framework was suspended and so the IFA continued to deliver its service plan and recruited to all of its Practice Manager and staffing vacancies.

Having a stable management team and experienced staff has resulted in a stronger focus on outcomes for children rather than process and compliance. It was therefore pleasing in November 2020 when Ofsted conducted an assurance visit and lifted the

last requirement from the 2019 inspection. The inspection team confirmed the IFA “*had a focus on quality*” and “*had the vision to become good*”.

Foster Carers within the IFA continue to receive local and national recognition. In October 2020, Sam and Des Cox who are the Home Hub carers within the Trust’s Mockingbird scheme were acknowledged for their incredible work supporting vulnerable children in Slough and other foster families by receiving a ‘Make a Difference Award’ from BBC Three Counties Radio.

Also in October 2020, a foster carer within the IFA was recognised nationally for the great work she has done supporting vulnerable children in Slough. Karen Embury was shortlisted in the Outstanding Contribution to Foster Care category at the Foster Carer Excellence Awards run by national charity, The Fostering Network.

An Ofsted recommendation from April 2019 was for all children’s case files to be of a good standard and immediately afterwards the IFA re-introduced paper files which in subsequent Ofsted visits was deemed to have met the need for good quality children’s files. In 2020 Slough invested in Charms as the new case file system for the IFA in Slough and this went live in February 2021. The IFA awaits a formal judgement inspection which is expected in spring 2021 and is resolute in its intention to become “good” or better.

The provision of services for privately fostered children (Ofsted area for improvement)

In the summer of 2020, the total number of private fostering arrangements in Slough peaked at five children but this has since reduced to two. Slough has a policy of where there are identified risks, a child and family assessment is undertaken to follow a safeguarding approach instead of a private fostering assessment. This is to safeguard children and is reflective of the complex and diverse make up of families in Slough.

We refreshed our private fostering action plan in the autumn to support awareness raising activity to professionals, partners and communities. This plan has a specific focus each month so there is a regular cycle of awareness raising underpinned by social media messages. Information about private fostering, including a one minute guide has been sent to children centres, education providers, GP’s and pharmacies since autumn 2020. Activity planned for spring 2021 has a focus on community, sporting, youth and charity groups scheduled to coincide with the lockdown roadmap.

Strengthening our approach to vulnerable children and young people (Ofsted area for improvement)

An area we know as a Trust and as a partnership we need a sharper focus on is contextual safeguarding. Slough has a number of vulnerable individuals on child protection plans for child exploitation and there is a significant but complex landscape of activity at preventative, early help and statutory levels in Slough which needs to be aligned.

To bring this work together and address the needs of young people, we are setting up a Contextual Safeguarding team to reduce the impact of exploitation on young

people. This will happen in phases so that the team can become a fully functioning, multi-agency service which provides wrap around support and interventions to children, young people, their families and friends. DfE funding has been obtained to pump prime the development of this team and there are plans for this team to start in its first phase at the end of April 2021.

To support this change, the Youth Offending Team (YOT) has been integrated with the Front Door to enable it to work with a broader continuum of children and expand its preventative scope. The most recent practice learning week in March 2021 had the theme of contextual safeguarding, and was designed to increase the knowledge base of frontline staff and understand current practice so as to make further improvements in this area.

The co-location of partners in the Referral and Assessment service has strengthened communication around thresholds and enabled better identification of next steps. Covid has meant strategy discussions have been largely virtual over the last 12 months and there has been the need on occasions to instigate workarounds in response to technology and personnel issues, but all agencies are committed to making strategy discussions. Ofsted noted in the October 2020 focused visit, strategy discussions were timely, with good multi agency attendance and the outcomes of those seen were the correct ones, but did provide some areas where practice could be further strengthened. These are being followed up by the service.

Stability of Workforce

The recruitment and retention of staff is a challenge for the Trust

The turnover of staff in the Trust has been one of the biggest barriers to sustaining improvements. Turnover remained around 25% to 28% between April 2020 and August 2020 and then reached a peak of 41% in November 2020. This peak corresponded with the Trust's re-structure which saw 9 members of staff accepting redundancy, but at the same time there was turnover of other staff. Turnover has stabilised to around 30% since December 2020, but is a figure the Trust would like to reduce further, to ensure children have a consistent social worker.

There continues to be a significant challenge in recruiting experienced permanent and agency social workers despite recruitment activity and a relationship with a master vendor. Slough's historical reputation in the marketplace and speculation about the future of the Trust is taking longer to change than we would like. As a result a large number of frontline staff are relatively inexperienced, for example, in the Safeguarding and Family Support Service, 64% of permanent staff are social workers either in their assessed year of practice (ASYE) or social workers who have completed their assessed year within the last six months.

The implementation of IR35 in April 2021, postponed for a year has caused some anxiety for agency staff. Having learnt from last year senior leaders have been holding a series of drop in meetings for agency staff to understand the implications of IR35 and hear about the benefits of becoming permanent. Despite this activity, we know some staff, especially those who live a distance away from Slough, will be leaving which will increase turnover rates again.

However, there are still a number of agency staff who are committed to the Trust and there is a small core of staff who have been working in Slough for sometime. Despite the challenges of recruiting to frontline staff, all substantive Heads of Service posts are filled by permanent staff and four frontline managers in the last few months have converted from temporary to permanent staff. One excellent outcome of the hard work by senior managers to encourage agency staff to become permanent is in the Children Looked After and Support Service where all individuals in managerial posts are permanent.

What the Trust is doing to address recruitment issues

The Trust continues to try and capitalise on its success of converting agency staff to permanent whilst at the same time it is reviewing its approaches to recruitment and marketing and understanding the impact of different activities. Senior leaders are working to develop Slough's unique selling position (USP) and change the narrative about Slough as a place to work. The Trust is also re-starting recruitment activities which have been curtailed as a result of Covid, including overseas recruitment.

There is a detailed workforce action plan to deliver on the many aspects of workforce development, Trust culture, values, diversity, pay and benefits as well as recruitment. This work is scheduled throughout the course of 2021 with the aim of reducing the turnover of staff and increasing the percentage of permanent staff.

Growing our own

The Trust has created a place where newly qualified social workers want to come and work. In October 2020 we welcomed the eighth cohort of newly qualified social workers to complete our Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme.

Historically the Trust had a strong retention rate of ASYE's but in line with turnover levels, the number of ASYE's leaving after their programme has also increased. To combat this trend a post ASYE group has been introduced with nine social workers to promote their professional development and support their retention. The first meeting was a success and this group will be continued and replicated with future post ASYE cohorts.

As part of the transformation programme, a new career pathway became available to frontline staff when the Trust introduced the role of Assistant Team Manager into social work teams. The Trust was very pleased when two long standing senior social workers successfully stepped up to become Assistant Team Managers. These two members of staff were in early ASYE cohorts following the Trust's inception and have developed their careers within the Trust since that time.

The Step up to Social Work programme is successfully implemented within the Trust and we welcomed 10 new students in the last year. Our aim will be to keep as many of those on our ASYE programme next year. The Trust also offers placements to final year students as part of our recruitment strategy and four students are currently undergoing their final 100 day placement.

The Trust has offered three apprenticeships in partnership with Slough's adult social care service and three members of staff started their social work apprenticeship in February 2021. Their training is over a three year period and we look forward to these members of staff having successful social work careers in Slough.

Effective Leadership

Strong Covid-19 response

Ofsted saw in the focused visit how leaders had acted decisively to safeguard children during Covid and supported staff with effective and regular guidance and PPE. Despite high rates of infection in Slough and a diverse workforce potentially at greater risk from Covid, strategically the Trust took the decision to keep services open and operational in its main work base and maintain face to face visiting of children and families.

Early in the pandemic the Trust modelled the potential impact of Covid on its workforce and developed business continuity plans for each service area based on a worst case scenario of significant numbers of staff becoming ill or having to self-isolate. Despite approximately 1/3rd of the Trust's workforce impacted at some point by Covid either through illness or shielding, business continuity plans have only had to be enacted a few times to deep clean premises. But the Trust has to note with sadness the death of one valued member of staff in January 2021 which had significant impact on colleagues within the Trust.

The Trust maintained a commitment to employing and retaining only quality staff during 2020, despite the pressures in the market for social work recruitment. The Trust has not been afraid to move on those whose work quality is not good enough, which has contributed to the increased levels of turnover of staff and the Trust has not employed anybody who refused to carry out face-to-face visiting.

Listening and supporting staff

The Trust uses various mechanisms to hear from staff including professional development opportunities which have been reinvigorated over the last 12 months. Covid has meant face to face contact has been less frequent and in smaller numbers, meaning regular two way communications between staff and senior managers has been more difficult. The Trust has continued with staff briefings, service sessions and training events throughout Covid, but meeting virtually is no substitute for face to face engagement and conversations. Senior leaders are working to reinvigorate mechanisms for staff to meet with peers and managers through the constraints of Covid and enable staff to provide their views and feedback for the leadership to respond and act upon.

The Trust has employee groups to provide safe spaces for individuals to provide valued and respected opinions. The Employee Engagement Group has been running for several years and this year it has re-instated the monetary reward in the staff 'Thank you' scheme and suggesting ways to keep staff safe during Covid. More recently, the Values Group was set up when the Trust's new values were launched to assist their implementation. These two groups are being combined into a single

group to further increase the impact of staff working with senior managers. The Safe Space Diversity Group was set up last year by two Trust staff in response to Black Lives Matters. We are pleased to see such groups are able to flourish in Slough, run voluntarily by staff for staff.

To understand staff views about working for the Trust, each year Trust staff are invited to complete an annual health check which is benchmarked against the previous year. Nearly 60% of respondents indicated they were satisfied working for the Trust, a figure which is comparable with the previous year's survey and pleasing since the survey was completed during the difficulties of working through Covid and lockdowns. A common theme running through this and previous surveys was the need for better IT, retention of staff and ensuring better resources, whilst new areas of focus included better teamwork and communication which reflects frustrations and difficulties of remote working away from colleagues. We know our staff have experienced changes and have worked under extremely difficult circumstances over the last 12 months. The Trust has ensured staff have the support and resources required to meet the demands of Covid and to keep themselves, children and families safe. Over the next year we need to focus on the other areas to ensure more staff feel supported, all staff have the resources they need to carry out their work and we continue to improve the dialogue between staff and senior managers.

Leaders addressed rising caseloads

The impact of Covid caused a sustained increase in the volume of referrals meaning caseloads were sustained for too long at above desired levels. This was addressed by the Trust in the summer, who with the support of the Council, invested in 3 additional social work teams placed within the Safeguarding and Families Support Service who have overseen work with around 300 children between them.

These three additional teams created more capacity which reduced caseloads significantly. Between April to July 2020, some Safeguarding and Family Support teams were experiencing average caseloads of over 30 children per social worker, far exceeding the Trust target of 22 children for this service. Caseloads were reduced to an average of 19.7 children between August 2020 and January 2021, a much safer level of staff to operate.

The introduction of these teams also enabled Assessment Teams to transfer children and provide them with much needed capacity to focus on the increased demand at the Trust's Front Door. The impact of the Innovate teams has been widespread. By adding capacity and delivering stability in the level of caseloads, in doing so they have supported the focus on compliance and practice and have been a fundamental part of improvements seen over the last six months.

We are pleased funding has been agreed to enable all three additional teams to remain in Slough until June 2021 with a review to be held in May 2021, to ascertain if any teams are required for longer. As well as this significant investment in children's social care by Slough, there is agreement for a fifth permanent team in the Safeguarding and Family Support service which helps formalise these interim arrangements and will provide capacity to support the drive for manageable caseloads and good quality social work practice.

Transformation by and within the Trust

2020 and 2021 has been a time of significant change and transformation for the Trust. In early 2020, the Director of Operations took a period of extended leave before stepping down later in the year and an interim Assistant Director was appointed in late March 2020 to cover the duties of this role.

A full restructure of the Trust was able to commence in the summer after several, unavoidable pauses, and on 22nd September 2020 the Trust transitioned to a new structure based around principles of a maximum of three steps to permanence for children, building resilience and capacity, strengthening management capacity as well as ensuring effective back office support.

At the end of October 2020, the Trust Chief Executive and Council Director of Children's Services left their respective posts and a joint interim Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services (DCS) took up post at the same time in readiness for the transition of the Trust to a local authority wholly owned company in April 2021. This new role has brought together the leadership roles responsible for children's services in Slough. The intention is that this will build trust, mutual confidence and understanding, and assist the Trust and Council to work and plan together. Recruitment is currently underway for the substantive Chief Executive and DCS postholder, but at the time of writing this report, the post has not been filled. To maintain stability whilst strategic changes happen in the late spring/early summer 2021, the interim Assistant Director for Frontline Practice and Improvement has agreed to remain in post for a further 12 months.

The opportunities for collaboration and increased integration between the Trust and the Council is starting with early help, not in employment education and training (NEET) and targeted services coming into the Trust in July 2021. This is resulting in changed conversations and a collective ownership of improvements in all of Children's Services. This will serve to bring better outcomes for children and families in Slough.

In January 2021 the Trust moved from St Martins Place to join Council colleagues in Observatory House. The new offices provide an airy, open plan environment but as a result of social distancing regulations, all staff have not been able to enjoy the full benefit of the working facilities on offer. In the 2020 Trust health check, 68% of staff surveyed felt their working environment was suitable for the work they do. This was conducted whilst many staff were working from home and before the move to Observatory House, so we look forward to hearing what staff have to say about their new working environment in the 2021 health check.

On 1st April 2021, the adoption service (called a Voluntary Adoption Agency) will join a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) hosted by Coram. This move comes from a government directive mandating all local authority adoption services to join a Regional Adoption Agency. The adoption team in Slough has already enjoyed many successes in previous years in terms of the number of children adopted and with excellent timeliness in doing so. Joining a regional adoption agency will widen the pool of potential adopters for Slough children and we anticipate continued future adoption successes in Slough.

Being sustainable

The Trust's financial position

Over the last financial year there have been a number of key elements driving the financial picture

- Ensuring continued and sustained improvement in services and outcomes for children and families
- Continued focus on delivering savings, achieving 94% of the £2.5m savings target in year.
- Managing sustained high levels of demand on services
- Challenging financial context for children's services across the country.
- Challenge in recruiting and retaining good quality staff
- Setting a balanced budget and work within this financial envelope to provide greater stability
- Historical debt carried by the Trust

Negotiations between the Council and DfE on the resolution of historic net liabilities have now been concluded, which means for the first time in the Trust's history it is technically solvent with the net liability position wiped out.

This is addition to the fact there has been significant in year pressure on the budget which is recognised in year demand, funded by the council understanding the pressures have exceeded the financial support provided by central government. This has led to the Trust being able to report a break even position for the financial year; again a first.

The development of the in year mechanism has helped provide sufficient transparency of demands against budgeted assumptions to support the case for additional in year funding.

The increase in demand for all types of statutory children's services has been the new normal for a while now. Most noticeable has been significant growth in the numbers of children subject to child protection plans. At 69.6 per 10,000 population the Trust remains higher than statistical neighbours (44.6) and England (42.8) averages (these are 2019/2020 figures and pre Covid).

The Trust has also seen an increase in children subject to a child in need plan over the last 15 months. Numbers increased from 353 in August 2019 to 563 in December 2020, the highest number recorded, and this figure has only slightly dropped to 553 as of end of February 2021, and they account for around a third of all referrals.

The number of children looked after has risen resulting in a slight increase in per 10,000 population from 45.0 overall 2019/2020 to 51.1 as of February 2021. But Slough remains below statistical neighbours averages per 10,000 population (63.3) for 2019/2020.

Based on the predicative modelling of the Covid impact, the Trust were able to early identify the need for additional resources. With the support from the Council we were

able to secure three additional teams through Innovate, a model of providing established teams who have a history of working together and able to hit the ground running. Even though this proves more costly than the conventional agency route, it provided far greater stability and improved outcomes. This has added £1m of cost against budget in the financial year.

With a third lockdown currently underway, we are anticipating an increase in the number of referrals once professionals see children and families face to face once more. There has been a societal impact of Covid-19 on children and families with domestic abuse, mental health, poverty and parenting capacity coupled with substance and alcohol abuse all being reflected in the increasing complexity of referrals received.

The increase in social care activity has had an impact on the level of workforce required to meet the demands leading to the recognition and approval of an additional permanent team going forward. Recruitment and turnover continues to be a challenge and plans are afoot to address the issue, but we recognise this is not a quick win.

The Trust continues to target efficiencies and savings with £2.3m projected for 2020/2021. The summer 2020 re-structure as part of the Transformation programme delivered £0.6m of savings and the Trust is targeting £1m of savings for 2021/22. The Trust is working closely with the council to explore the scope of services delivered to ensure there is a strategy for addressing needs in the community, where possible developing the right preventative solutions to avoid the escalation of need and increases in statutory interventions at greater cost. In addition the Trust will undertake deep dive reviews of specific areas to identify any opportunities to drive more effective practice, for example legal fees.

The Trust has submitted a successful bid for funding from the DfE focused on 6 key areas of investment to deliver further improvements, address needs identified by both Ofsted and the Trust, develop services offered to children and families and improve the cost base of the company. The 6 workstreams are currently being worked into a detailed project plan for immediate delivery which will be scrutinised by an Improvement Board chaired by the Children's Commissioner for Slough, Trevor Doughty. These 6 workstreams are:

- Workforce development
- Quality of service
- Contextual safeguarding
- Developing local sufficiency
- Clinical offer to children and families to support practice
- Working with domestic violence

Sufficiency of placements and the quality of services for homeless 16 and 17 year olds (Ofsted areas for improvements)

The sufficiency of suitable placements for adolescents with complex needs remains a challenge. Rates have increased for residential care, reflecting more complex needs from vulnerable and exploited young people as a result of exploitation, gang and drug activity. This is not unique to Slough, but adds to the complexity of finding suitable

placements to match needs and a necessity to place children and young people outside the borough for their own safety.

The percentage of children looked after placed in Slough or within 20 miles of the borough has increased over the past financial year. In April 2020, 62.7% of children looked after were placed in Slough or within 20 miles and this has increased to 72.1% at the end of February, just 2.9% off Slough's 75% target. This is excellent performance given Slough is a small borough and the increasing risks of some children and young people.

The sufficiency of local placements has been supported by the Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) being in a much stronger position than two years ago. 29 in-house placements have been made between April 2020 and January 2021 and the IFA continues to account for 22-23% of all CLA placements. The IFA has continued to recruit throughout Covid and since April 2020, there have been six fostering households approved, with four more due to panel before the end of March 2021. Two further approvals have been put on hold due to Covid, which if they had progressed would have enabled the IFA to meet its annual target of 12 households. With just two resignations received throughout the whole of 2020/2021, this shows the IFA supports its foster carers well, evident in a strong retention rate of foster carers.

Slough continues its strong performance in relation to the suitability of accommodation for care leavers. 93% of 18 to 21 year old care leavers live in suitable accommodation compared to Statistical Neighbours 84.5% and the SE region 80% (both 2019/2020 figures). No care leaver lives in bed and breakfast accommodation, something the Trust is pleased to state has not happened for many years.

A fully staffed Commissioning team with a Commissioning lead has been able to embark on several workstreams to strengthen work with providers to support effective and sufficient local placements. This has included the promotion of local fostering and residential capacity, refreshing protocols to improve decision making, increased quality assurance of providers and a focus on increased value for money. The Trust has added new providers to its accredited list of 16+ semi independent provision and in May 2021 it starts a pilot for five young people aged 16+ with complex needs to live in semi-independent provision with wrap around support. All of this work has resulted in the increase in the number of placement providers, but there is still an issue with emergency placements.

Integration between the Trust and Council is enabling the joint use of funding on successful projects. Both organisations have been undertaking a joint commissioning programme for support and accommodation for young people aged 16-25 years. This has resulted in better pathways into housing and independent living for Care Leavers having an impact via a reduction in the number of care leavers in semi-independent housing at significant cost. There has also been an improvement in the assessment and provision of services for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds where these young people are assessed and offered support to meet their needs.

Going forward

In the next financial year the Independent Fostering Agency will receive its regulatory

judgement inspection, Youth Offending Services will be subject to HMIP scrutiny and the adoption service will receive its next inspection. At the same time the partnership across Slough is expecting a SEND Local Area inspection and the prospect of a Joint Targeted Area Inspection is always a possibility.

This will be against a backdrop of Covid-19 continuing and a roadmap out of lockdown. We continue to develop our understanding of the long term impacts on children, families and staff in Slough to refine how services should be delivered to meet these varied needs.

The Trust is in a different position to where it was 12 months ago. Services have improved following a dip but there still exists a level of variability in areas of practice and now is the time to push forward to ensure services are good or better. The Trust's biggest challenge is the stability of its workforce and turnover needs to be reduced to embed changes and improve outcomes for children and families.

The bringing together of Council and Trust strategic leadership roles, a maturing partnership with the Council and integration of services puts the Trust on a solid footing to realise ambitions for consistently good services for vulnerable children and families in Slough. Everyone in Slough is determined to deliver high quality services which change children and young people's lives for the better. We believe our plans to turn our ambitions into reality are clear and achievable, and we know what we need to do to get there.