



Slough Children First Annual Report 2024-25

Slough Children First Annual Report 2024-25

1.	Purpose of report
1.1	This report presents the performance of Slough Children First Limited for the year ending 31st March 2025.
2.	Executive summary
2.1	This Annual Report from Slough Children First (the Company) forms part of the wider annual review process for Slough Borough Council (the Council). It provides a comprehensive overview of the Company's performance for the year ended 31 March 2025. It evaluates key areas of progress, areas requiring improvement, and factors that may influence performance in the upcoming year.
3.	Briefing
3.1	<p>The aims and objectives of this Annual Review are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate the quality of practice and outcomes for children, young people, and families in Slough. • Provide assurance to the Council on the quality and impact of services delivered. • Confirm the fulfilment of statutory duties. • Identify lessons from past performance to inform improvements. • Support future planning and resource allocation.
4.	Governance
4.1	The Annual Report will be discussed at the Annual Review by the Strategic Commissioning Group and then presented to Cabinet, in line with the contract requirements.
4.2	<p>Following approval by the Company Board which occurred on 29 May, the following key milestones apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By 30 June 2025: Draft Annual Report to be reviewed by the Contract Monitoring Group. • By 31 July 2025: Report to be submitted to the Strategic Commissioning Group for Annual Review consideration. • August 2025: Scheduled Annual Review meeting of the Strategic Commissioning Group.
4.3	<p>The Strategic Commissioning Group will discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The content of the Annual Report • The contribution rates determined by the Local Government Pension Scheme Fund Actuary • Any matters arising in relation to the Financial Mechanism, including whether the Contract Sum for the forthcoming Contract Year remains appropriate considering the Annual Report • The proportionate share of any Surplus to be allocated to each Party • The results of any audits carried out by the Council during the preceding Contract Year • Any significant complaints made against the Company in respect of the preceding Contract Year • Any serious incidents (including serious case reviews) involving the Company in the preceding Contract Year • A review of the Key Performance Indicators and the Services Specification • A review of the Dependencies and the Support Services

	<p>A review of the governance arrangements to assess whether they remain appropriate and fit for purpose.</p> <p>The main governance arrangements are set out in the Articles of Association for the company and in the contract between the Council and Slough Children First. These provide for a Board of Directors to run the company. Board membership is in four classes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-executive director selected as Chair and appointed by the Member (under the statutory direction the current Chair was selected and appointed by Department of Education) • Chief Executive appointed by the member • Up to two additional executive directors appointed by the board • Up to three additional independent non-executive directors appointed by the board • Up to three Council directors nominated by the Council and appointed by the Board <p>The Board, at the date of writing, consists of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simon Baker, Chair • Raj Bhamber, independent non-executive director • Sue Butcher, Chief Executive • Debbie Jones, independent non-executive director • Steven Mason, Council director • Alex Pilgerstorfer, Executive Director • Ben Short, Executive Director <p>Executive directors are in a minority. The Board in May 2025 considered the results of a self-evaluation exercise which identified that the Board was operating in a satisfactory manner.</p> <p>There are three Committees of the Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit and Finance Committee • People and Practice Committee • Remuneration and Nominations Committee <p>In February 2025 as part of a review of the scheme of delegations it was agreed to move to the current committee structure. This was a reduction of one committee achieved by combining the work of the Audit and Governance Committee with that of the Finance Committee. Over the past 12 months there has been a reduction in the number of special meetings – both of Board and committees – that have needed to be called. This reflects the more stable operating environment.</p> <p>In 2024/25 two members have left the board (Leslie Haggar and Nina Robinson) and two new members appointed (Debbie Jones and Alex Pilgerstorfer).</p>
5	<p>Our Performance</p>
5.1	<p>Performance monitoring in 2024/25 has focused on demonstrating impact across service quality, leadership, and partnership effectiveness. KPI dashboards and qualitative audits indicate a maturing QA framework and a culture of continuous improvement. Internal audits and moderation processes have highlighted strengths in timeliness of assessments and areas for further work in case recording and supervision.</p> <p>Performance oversight continues via the Children’s Improvement Board, which monitors progress against the Business and Improvement Plan. Regular reports have been shared with the SCF Board and the Strategic Groups, providing assurance and scrutiny.</p> <p>We continually review our Performance and Quality Assurance Frameworks to ensure that they provide a clear line of sight to both practice and governance. This includes reviewing our practice</p>

	audit framework, moderation and validation processes and looking to strengthen the availability of data and AI solutions.
6	Support Services Agreement
6.1	<p>Three contract monitoring meetings between the Council and SCF took place in 2024/25, followed with Strategic Commissioning Group meetings.</p> <p>During 2024/25 the DfE requested a review of support services to make efficiencies from the DfE running costs grant from 2025/26 from SCF and SBC.</p> <p>During 2024/25, a joint project group between SBC and SCF was set up to undertake a joint review of corporate services and any improvements required to allow for successful merger or transition of services to the Council with an initial target date of April 2025.</p> <p>Corporate services in scope included HR, Finance, Communications, Data and Performance, Commissioning and Procurement, Complaints, Property, Insurance, Business Continuity and other smaller services where an SLA currently exists (Compliance including Subject Access Requests, Freedom of Information requests).</p> <p>The review considered activity metrics, finances, an assessment of the quality of the service provision currently delivered across both SCF and SBC, opportunities for improvement and savings, benchmarking and KPIs with a view to report on each area with options for increased collaboration, merger of services or leave as is.</p> <p>Examples of areas where more joint working could take place included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioning – sharing of organisations contracts register to aid co-terminus end dates for increasing joint commissioning. • SCF Comms - staff to join SBC Comms team meetings. • Merger of teams into SBC that align. e.g. finance, HR. The benefit to SCF staff is they will then form part of ringfencing for the restructures. • Earlier possible merger of singular posts, e.g. complaints, FOI and SARs, compliance • Review and implement revised robust SLA's. • Shared management training and joint senior meetings, e.g. Joint Leadership Sessions <p>Joint work has determined that there is no capacity to immediately merge some functions, such as commissioning and data and performance where these services benefit from close alignment to operational services. Following the impending reform work required in Children's Social Care it was felt that functions critical to successful implementation of these were also best left with the company.</p> <p>The findings were reported to SCF's Improvement Board in January 2025.</p> <p>Another outcome of the review determined it would not be possible to achieve savings from any proposed merger or alignment in time for the 2025/26 budget setting process. However, a proposal for reduced funding from the DfE was put forward and incorporated into SCFs Business Improvement Plan for 2025/26.</p>
7	Finances
7.1	<p>The P&L shows a surplus of £248k for the financial year ending 31st March 2025. It became apparent during the financial year that SCF were predicting a large underspend of circa £2M and it was agreed at the Board meeting of January that this amount would be offered back to SBC in the form of a credit note. At March Board this amount was finalised at £2,820k, reducing the contract sum from £39,049k to £36,229k. This is a one-off contract reduction for 2024/25 and is non-recurrent.</p>

Expenditure for 24/25 at £43,733k is £2,463k lower than budget, whilst income at £43,981k is £2,215k lower than budget.

The closing balance sheet shows a small surplus of £249k, with assets higher than liabilities by this amount and the cash balance at year end was £7,060k.

The table below summarises the P&L position by major cost category type.

	Total £k	Budget £k	Variance £k
SBC Core Income	(36,225)	(39,049)	(2,824)
DfE Income	(708)	(749)	(41)
Other Income	(7,048)	(6,397)	650
Total Income	(43,981)	(46,196)	(2,215)
Salaries	16,738	18,051	1,313
Agency	2,901	1,633	(1,269)
Placement Allowances	13,608	16,995	3,386
Other Child Support Costs	5,303	4,438	(865)
Legal Fees	1,397	1,875	478
Other Overheads	1,577	996	(581)
SBC SLA's	2,208	2,208	0
Total Expenditure	43,733	46,196	2,463
Net (Surplus)/Loss	(248)	0	248

Areas of note within income in the management accounts include an overall adverse variance of £2,215k.

The reduction to the Core Contract is noted above. The DfE running costs grant was agreed at a slightly reduced value after budget setting, and there were small underspends across all agreed posts.

A favourable variance of £650k in other income arose from prior year settlements of funding for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) income, offsetting the in-year funding being lower than budget due to fewer numbers of children in care from this cohort. 100% PbR from the Strengthening Families Programme was awarded to all LAs during the year, a further favourable variance from the 75% SCF budgeted for given the more stringent success criteria for 24/25. £150k of additional Transformation funding from SBC helped support an Improvement post and project support during the year. Additional interest income due to SCF's positive cash position and additional grants supporting spend in areas including Youth Justice, serious youth violence and supported accommodation for 18+ care leavers offset reduced contributions to placements and packages of support for children with disabilities from Health and lower DSG for PPG+ for children in care, again due to lower numbers of children in care.

Expenditure was favourable v budget by £2,463k.

Combined salaries and agency costs had a joint underspend of £44k, with a favourable variance in permanent staff from vacancies, some held deliberately due to lower caseloads. Agency costs were higher than budgeted, in part covering a high number of staff on long term sick leave or maternity leave and additional resource helping deliver on the Improvement plans. An element of the agency spend was funded by the SBC Transformation grant and was therefore not forecast in the original budget.

	<p>Lower than expected UASC volumes helped deliver a reduced placement spend, being £3,386k lower than budget, along with the additional oversight from the External Placement panel introduced during Summer 2023. Volumes of children supported in accommodation were 50 lower than budget, 23 being from the UASC cohort, and £72 per week lower than budget following rigorous challenge in External Placement Panel around support levels and alternative providers coming into the market.</p> <p>Increases in other child support costs arose from higher than budgeted family support costs preventing, or delaying, entry to care. Numbers of care experienced young people being supported in accommodation was 7 higher than budget, but at a reduced average weekly rate of £75 per week per placement leading to a small underspend in this area of £44k.</p> <p>Considerable reductions in legal costs are now being realised in terms of volumes in proceedings. Average volumes were 27 in proceedings for the first 9 months of 2024/25 v budget of 47. The legal gateway process is delivering robust decisions as to whether to issue proceedings and whether to engage the services of counsel, senior barristers, and the numbers of Independent Social Worker assessments being requested by court is also reducing.</p> <p>The savings target of £2,644k has been fully achieved during 24/25.</p> <p>Savings in staffing fell short of its target due to ambitious targets for reducing agency need in favour of permanent staff. At one point during the financial year, there were 12 agency staff covering maternity and long-term sick leave. Aside from the need for this extra cover, SCF move into 25/26 with much fewer agency staff in established posts filling vacancies.</p> <p>Another area falling short of its target was in Other Child Support costs due to delays in the recommissioning of short breaks.</p> <p>Legal savings were met in full and income and placements achieved more than target to help offset the above deficits.</p>
8	Changes to Agreement
8.1	<p>There were no additional requests for funding during the financial year 24/25, and as previously mentioned, SCF not only managed within its financial envelope, but achieved a cost reduction on its core contract of £2,820k and delivered a further surplus of £248k.</p>
9	Demand Analysis
9.1	<p>The rate of Children subject to a child in need plan per 10,000 is 89.9, which is higher than the 23/24 Stat neighbour rate of 77.6. It was 128.7 at the end of March 2024 and is coming more in line with other areas.</p> <p>The rate of Children subject to a child protection plan per 10,000 is 40.1, which is lower than the 23/24 stat neighbour rate of 42.2 and lower than the 44 per 10,000 which is where SCF were at the end of March 2024. 10.7% of repeat CP plans happened within 2 years and 21% had been on a CP plan at any other point (in line with stat neighbours).</p> <p>This is an area we are consistently testing through audit, and a programme of dip sampling is in place through our Quality Assurance programme.</p> <p>Numbers of looked after children have decreased over the last few months, with 181 (FT) CLA. The rate of full time Children looked after per 10,000 is 39.5, which is lower than the 23/24 stat neighbour rate of 56.3 and lower than the 45.0 per 10,000 which is where SCF were at the end of March 2024.</p>

	<p>The strengthening of the services downstream in Early Help, CIN, CP and PLO are positively impacting entry into care.</p> <p>Part of this could also be explained through the low numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASCs) that SCF are supporting at present – 27 v 0.07% number of 44 and v a budget of 50 which was set against the context of the high numbers we saw in 23/24.</p> <p>27 UASC’s currently in care amounts to 14% of the entire cohort. We are currently not up to numbers of UASC quota. Our quota is 44 so we have space for 17 UASC. SCF have reached out to the National Transfer Scheme offering to support 5 additional children.</p> <p>The proportion of number of children escalating into care proceedings have reduced as most work is undertaken in pre proceedings preventing children coming into care. Evidence for this is contained in quarterly reports that we receive from JLT. The report gives us an analysis comparatively to our Berkshire neighbours.</p> <p>Young people eligible for services as care experienced young people is stable with 241 young people. Following changes to the Ofsted inspection framework, and feedback from other local authorities we are improving our offer to care experienced young people age over 21 and up to 25 to ensure they all remain open to the service for ongoing help.</p>
10	Social Care Statutory Changes
10.1	<p>This section outlines the effects of changes in children’s social care legislation or guidance on the delivery of services, as well as any actual or anticipated changes in law (Clause 15), and the implications of such changes.</p> <p>Mandatory Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse</p> <p>In January 2025, the government confirmed plans to introduce mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse as part of the Crime and Policing Bill. This measure aims to ensure that professionals report instances of abuse promptly, enhancing the protection and welfare of children.</p> <p>Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill (2024–25)</p> <p>Introduced in late 2024, this Bill proposes several reforms impacting children’s social care. This is one of the largest and most significant legislative changes which will directly impact the way in which social care services are expected to be delivered nationally. As well as seeking to strengthen the involvement of the whole family, the proposals will in effect combine Targeted Early Help, Assessment and Child in Need work under one framework of Family Hep, requiring an ‘end-to-end’ system’ of support and an introduction of multi-agency child protection teams.</p> <p>The legislation also brings into prominence other areas of support, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandating local authorities to offer Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) meetings before initiating care proceedings, promoting family-led care plans. • Enhancing support for kinship carers and family networks. • Strengthening child protection and safeguarding measures. • Improving support for children in care and care leavers. • Regulating care workers and establishments under the Care Standards Act 2000. <p>Early Education and Childcare Entitlements Expansion</p>

Effective from April 2024, the government expanded early education entitlements to include:

- 15 hours of free childcare per week for eligible working parents of 2-year-olds.
- From September 2024, 15 hours for children aged 9 months to 2 years.
From September 2025, 30 hours for children aged 9 months to 3 years.

Revised ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’ Guidance (December 2023)

The Department for Education (DfE) published an updated version of the ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’ statutory guidance in December 2023. This revision emphasises strengthening multi-agency collaboration across the entire system of help, support, and protection for children and their families. Key updates include:

- A child-centred approach with a whole-family focus.
- Enhanced expectations for multi-agency working applicable to all individuals and organisations involved in safeguarding children.
- Clarification of roles and responsibilities among safeguarding partners.
- Emphasis on building positive, trusting relationships with parents and carers to deliver tailored support.

‘Stable Homes, Built on Love’ Strategy Implementation

The government’s ‘Stable Homes, Built on Love’ strategy continues to guide reforms in children’s social care. While the terminology has evolved under the current administration, the core objectives remain focused on:

- Providing timely and effective family help.
- Developing a decisive multi-agency child protection system.
- Unlocking the potential of family networks.
- Ensuring every child in care experiences love, stable relationships, and a supportive home environment.
- Valuing and supporting a skilled social work workforce.
- Creating a system that continuously learns, improves, and utilises evidence and data effectively.

Children’s Social Care National Framework (December 2023)

Issued as statutory guidance, the National Framework outlines the purpose of children’s social care, principles for practice, enablers of good practice, and desired outcomes for children, young people, and families. It serves as a foundational document for local authorities and partner agencies in delivering effective social care services.

Adoption of Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic

In July 2023, Slough Borough Council and Slough Children First recognised care experience as a protected characteristic. This initiative aligns with a broader movement among local authorities to acknowledge the unique challenges faced by care-experienced individuals and to promote equity and inclusion in service provision.

11 Strategic Priorities for 2025–26

11.1 Corporate Parenting

The key Strategic Priorities contained within the Corporate Parenting Strategy are:

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

There is increasing corporate support for the delivery of Corporate Parenting, including from key partners in Adult Social Care, Housing and Public Health that has enabled a more cohesive and joined up approach to how we support young people during their transition to adulthood and supporting them to access their homes. Pathways for both strategic and operational oversight and delivery are now in place and coming increasingly embedded across the system.

Partners from the ICB further strengthen the support for our care experienced young people and opportunities to develop a care leavers hub are looking promising with support from corporate partners in property.

We are working closely with colleagues in Regeneration to connect with local businesses to advocate for our children and young people to be given priority for jobs and careers locally.

Children's Social Care Reforms

Following on from the publication of *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023*, the Children's Social Care Review, *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, and Government response, the DfE published *Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive* in November 2024, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, December 2024 and the Families First Partnership Programme Guide in March 2025.

The legislation and the guidance will significantly shape the landscape of children's social care and the journey of children, young people and families providing support that is delivered at the right time, by the right practitioner at the right level of need maintaining the consistency of the Lead Practitioner.

Implementation of the reforms will require significant transformation across Slough Children First, services for children to enable the local design of an end-to-end system of support and protection to rebalance the system whilst keeping children safe.

The key strands of the transformation nationally and locally are;

- **Family Help** – the merging of existing Targeted Early Help Service and Section 17, (including the potential for partner agencies taking on the Lead Practitioner role in multi-disciplinary teams) providing seamless support for children, young people and their families

- **Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPT's)**, the creation of a specific team to lead all safeguarding and child protection activity from a strategy discussion, S.47 enquiries / investigations, through to a Child Protection Conference and Child Protection Plan, including the Lead Child Protection Practitioner, chairing of Child Protection Conferences, quality assurance and Risks Outside of the Home.
- **Family Led Decision Making**, embedding a Families First approach to empower families to successfully care for their children, including Family Group Conferences before the Public Law Outline and Care Proceedings.

The implementation of the reforms will require;

- **Engagement with children, young people families, communities, colleagues, partners, Safeguarding Children's Partnership-** co-producing new ways of working and approaches associated with the child's journey and evidenced based practice based on the unique needs of children and young people in Slough.
- **Data and needs profiling-** updating the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), understanding needs at a locality level, Risks Outside of the Home, vulnerability and risk profile
- **Improved Information Sharing, Data and Intelligence** including partnership intelligence and data sharing, and an outcome's framework.
- **Revision of policies and procedures** - Safeguarding Children's Partnership, Threshold and Continuum of Need and the Local Protocol for Assessment and Support.
- **Stakeholder Engagement and Communication-** internal, external, partners, children, young people, families, communities, members and partners

Conversational Model

In response to the reforms Slough Children First is developing a conversational model at the Front Door, that will transform the approach to making a referral about a child / young person in need or in need of protection. This will see a model that will move away from electronic referrals to Social Workers taking calls directly to have a conversation about the needs of the child, strengths of the family, vulnerabilities and risk factors.

The introduction of the conversational model is in line with our vision of children are *Happy, Safe & Loved, Thriving* and working with our communities to meet need at the earliest point of opportunity.

A multi-agency Strategic Implementation Group (SIG) has been developed to oversee the reforms, chaired by the Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive of Slough Children First. The workstreams for Family Help, MACPT, Family Led Decision Making and the Conversational approach will report into the SIG and the Safeguarding Children's Partnership.

12	Social, Demographic and Other Factors
12.1	This section summarises any social, demographic or other relevant factors (as determined by the Company in consultation with the Council's Chief Executive) which affected the Services in the preceding Contract Year and/or may affect the Services in the immediately following Contract Year.

The local social and demographic context remains complex, with continuing diversity in need and presentation. Slough continues to serve a fast-growing, highly mobile and ethnically diverse population of children and families, which places consistent demands on early help, safeguarding, and care services.

One significant demographic shift has been a reduction in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) supported in-year, which has contributed to a lower-than-budgeted looked after children (CLA) population (see 2.3.6). While this has resulted in some cost savings, it has also reduced the associated grant income. To mitigate this, Slough Children First is working proactively with the Home Office to explore increasing UASC placements.

Social care service delivery in 2024/25 has also been influenced by internal factors, including caseload stability and workforce pressures. Average caseloads remain above target at 20.2, and workforce churn has contributed to instability, with over half of CLA experiencing two or more social workers in the year. These pressures impact continuity of care and are being addressed through targeted workforce recruitment and retention activity.

A further factor affecting service planning has been the persistently high proportion of assessments and child protection investigations that result in no further action (NFA). In 2024/25, 61% of assessments and 74% of S47 enquiries ended in NFA, suggesting continued concerns around threshold application and decision-making at the front door. Monthly fluctuations in repeat referral rates also indicate inconsistency in how risk is assessed and managed.

In contrast, some areas of practice are performing strongly and reflect stable and timely statutory compliance. These include:

- Contact and referral decisions (98.3% and 97.4% completed within one working day respectively),
- Child Protection Reviews (98.1%) and Children Looked After Reviews (95.8%) completed in timescale,
- Statutory visiting for CLA (90.6%), and
- High performance in care leaver accommodation (97.2%) and EET outcomes (59.3%).

However, sufficiency and placement stability continue to pose challenges. Only 20.3% of CLA are placed in-house, with most foster placements commissioned externally. Over a third (33.1%) of children are placed more than 20 miles from home, reflecting pressures on local provision. This has implications for cost, quality and relational continuity.

There are also ongoing equity concerns in terms of representation in statutory services. Black children remain over-represented in safeguarding and care, while Asian children are under-represented relative to the borough's school population. A disproportionate number of white children make up the looked after population. Addressing these disparities remains a focus for the coming year and will be supported by targeted data analysis and community engagement.

Looking ahead to 2025/26, anticipated changes to statutory guidance (see Section 9) and growing national emphasis on Family Help, early intervention, and partnership-based safeguarding are likely to shape how services are configured and delivered locally. Strategic alignment with these changes, alongside continued investment in quality improvement and workforce capacity, will be essential to sustaining progress.

13 Audit and Surveys

13.1 **Audits:**

An independent review of 23 audited and moderated cases (July 2024 to March 2025) was commissioned to provide assurance on thresholds, quality, and consistency. The review found examples of well-written audits, strong audit engagement used as learning opportunities, and an increasing focus on practice development through new dedicated roles. Several cases required escalation to senior managers due to significant concerns, with appropriate action taken in each instance.

Strengths identified:

- Significant throughput of audits across the children’s pathway.
- Audits increasingly used as tools for reflective practice and learning.
- Auditors and moderators demonstrated respectful challenge and constructive feedback in many cases.
- Steps taken to improve audit consistency and impact, including appointing additional auditors and establishing practice development roles.

Areas for development:

- Inconsistent application of grading and thresholds, with some audits focusing on process rather than impact for children.
- Gaps in completion and reliability of some audits; nearly 40% lacked collaborative discussions.
- Weaknesses in the quality of moderation, with less than half of cases receiving a moderation grade.
- Poor feedback loops, meaning actions arising from audits were often not tracked or followed through.
- Lack of consistent audit visibility on children’s records and minimal evidence of follow-up in supervisions.

Practice concerns highlighted through audits:

- Missed opportunities to assess risk related to male caregivers and safeguarding thresholds.
- Over-reliance on process compliance instead of assessing outcomes for children.
- Variability in recording quality, including extensive copy-pasting and use of inaccessible language.
- Need for cultural shift in embedding learning and promoting ownership of quality across all levels.

Next steps include a planned re-audit of all open cases graded as inadequate, revisions to audit documentation to strengthen moderation transparency, and targeted learning sessions for auditors and moderators. The Quality Assurance team will also improve tracking mechanisms to ensure audit actions are completed and reviewed in supervision. In addition, SCF’s Academy will play a key role in supporting social workers, team managers, and heads of service in understanding and engaging with the audit process, and in responding to learning identified through audits—helping to close the learning loop and embed continuous improvement across the workforce.

13.2 **Survey:**

As part of our commitment to continuous improvement and staff engagement, Slough Children First conducted the “Our People Poll” staff survey in 2024. Key themes emerging from the feedback

	<p>included the need for stronger internal communication, improved leadership visibility, and clearer career development pathways. In response, a comprehensive action plan was developed, including increased visibility of senior leaders, the rollout of whole service meetings to communicate progress and priorities, and the launch of aspirational management development opportunities. These actions will be reviewed regularly through staff meetings, supervision, and appraisals to ensure impact and embed a culture of openness, development, and collaboration.</p> <p>Internal Audit:</p> <p>There were no internal audits undertaken during 2024/25. It is understood that 30 days have been allocated to undertake audit on SCF from Slough Borough Council's audit team during 2025/26. Areas for consideration include;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster carer payments – purchase to pay process; • CWD panel process – for agreeing packages of support; • Financial forecasting – process, comprehensiveness, assumptions and accuracy • Timeliness of payments – Audit on completeness, accuracy & timely recording of authorised expenditure.
14	Ratification Plans
14.1	There were no such plans required during 2024/25.
15	Central Government Funding
15.1	<p>The agreed contract sum for Slough Children First was approved in December subject to agreement at full budget council in March. Following the central government settlements in February and March, the contract sum remained as previously agreed at £38,353k.</p> <p>The DfE announced 2 new grants for 2025/26. £1,535,372 has been awarded to Slough under the Children and Families Grant. This grant is a like for like replacement of a number of grants already received by SCF and included in the budget. The following grants have all been consolidated into this new grant - Supporting Families; Supported Accommodation; Staying Put; Virtual School Heads extension to previously looked after children; Leaving Care uplift and Personal Advisors extended duty.</p> <p>The additional grant is a new national grant for all Local Authorities called the Children's Social Care Prevention Grant and £649,810 has been awarded to Slough to implement the Families First Partnership social care reforms.</p>
16	Risks & Issues
16.1	<p>There are significant changes that Slough Children First will need to engage proactively with over the coming two years:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childrens social care reform, summarised in section 10 of this report • The ending or extension of the contract with Slough Borough Council

- Local government reform

The first of these is within the control of Slough Children First with action plans and funding in place. It will require a wholesale restructuring of service provision which service users and colleagues will need to be supported through.

The contract with Slough Borough Council and local government reform are significant in terms of how children’s services are provided – but do not directly impact on service provision. The Council is considering the most appropriate method of delivery going forward supported by the provision of external advice. The contract is currently due to end 30 July 2026 with services to transfer to the Council at that point. The company relies on the Council for significant parts of its infrastructure which will support any transfer. There are a number of options for how to structure the Council going forward should the contract end which the company will seek to support the Council in working up.

Local government reform could result in changes in how children social services are delivered. However, given that local changes will not occur imminently Slough Children First is monitoring but not proactively responding. The priority in the immediate term is to successfully implement children social care reform within the context of a potential imminent end to the contract with the Council.

16.2 Slough Children First has adopted the Council’s new risk methodology and co-ordinates with the Council’s risk management system. An extract from the Council’s corporate risk map for Slough Children First for Q4 2024/25 is shown below:

CR01 Safeguarding Children and Young People – Child Death
Risk owner: Sue Butcher

Corporate risk overview

Current Risk Score	4	Impact	4	Likelihood	21
Target Risk Score	4	Impact	4	Likelihood	21

Risk score has moved to 21 (RAG Red) from 18 (RAG Amber) reflecting a rescore of the current impact of poor data quality on the work of SCF. The target risk score has increased from 18 to 21 reflecting a reassessment of how quickly improvements can be made to accessing data. Poor data production is an underpinning risk impacting on SCF’s cost effectiveness, staff satisfaction and achieving fully effective performance management. The core data is held – but across multiple systems and is not straightforward to access or keep upto date.

A number of risks remain on the corporate risk register despite now being judged as unlikely to occur. This reflects their significance and that they have been ongoing risks until recently. Two relate to staffing. The current position is that caseloads per social worker are low. Attracting and retaining permanent staff is also not a current risk – reflecting work done over the past few years. A number of international recruits as they end their contracted period with SCF are looking to move to parts of Britain with lower costs of living. Nationally there is a national significant change in how childrens social services are delivered out over the next 12 months. This will mean that roles for current staff will be redesigned and competition for strong staff will increase. This could impact on retention. A number of staff are leaving as a result of performance management – most of these should exit in Q1.

SCF in 2025/6 is expecting to deliver a balanced budget.
Children’s Social Care is subject to a Statutory Direction from the Department of Education overseen by a DfE Commissioner.

Risk appetite statement (Averse/Balanced)

The risk SCF risk appetite is supported by robust evidence informed service planning.

The safety of children is paramount to the organisation however it is not possible to prevent child deaths or serious harm from taking place.

Risk profile

Refer to slide 7 for risk assessment score instructions

Sub risks related to this principal risk

Ref	Status	Risk title	Sub-risk owner	Change in period / outlook	Management Review/ Explanation of movement
01.01	●	Insufficient financial resources	SCF Director of Finance/ Resources (Alex P)	↔	SCF is currently managing within its means however there are financial challenges over the next 12 months, including external price pressures potentially being higher than budgeted for 25/6.
01.02	●	Attraction and retention of qualified workforce	Head of HR (Kate McCorriston)	↕	SCF is attracting a reasonable level of applicants for most positions. Turnover has increased although largely for appropriate reasons.
01.03	●	High Caseloads for frontline staff	Director of Operations (Ben Short)	↕	Caseloads are monitored on a weekly basis and reported to the Improvement Board chaired by the DfE Commissioner. They are currently largely within range reflecting a reduction in demand and a more stable workforce. Until recently they were much higher.
01.04	●	Underperformance of staff	Director of Operations (Ben Short)	↕	Training and development is delivered consistently. Workforce development strategy rolled out. The social care academy is being strengthened to support to roll out good practice. Performance dashboards being rolled out
01.05	●	Data production does not support effective practice	Head of Service, Quality Assurance and Improvement (Picklu R)	↕	SCF is reliant on manual intervention to produce necessary reporting. There are several key IT systems from which it is hard to extract data for a variety of users. A key difficulty is combining data held across systems and the risk of error through manual evaluation.

16.3 Until recently the company struggled to operate within budget. However, since it was reset the company has operated within budget and through strong contract management and invest to save initiatives has for the last two years delivered improving services at less than the contracted budget. The current financial year has a deficit forecast, reflecting cost pressures that emerged after the budget was agreed. There is a contractual mechanism in place to respond to such pressures. Subject to final confirmation from the Council it is intended to manage the 2025/6 overspend by drawing on a reserve held from 2024/5.

16.4	The reform agenda will require spend to deliver – and earmarked funds have been provided by central government for this purpose. The company will carefully monitor grant conditions to ensure that it does not need to be returned and that reform objectives are delivered to time.
16.5	Staff stability until recently was a challenge, particularly for qualified social workers see paragraph 12.1. Work over several years has however resulted in almost all qualified staff being permanent with a consequent reduction in staff turnover. The stable workforce has resulted in caseloads per employee being relatively low. As the reform agenda rolls out care will need to be taken to contain staff anxiety as roles are redesigned.
16.6	Now that financial and staffing pressures have reduced the company is concentrating on developing practice. A significant constraint is the labourious nature of data input and retrieval. There are IT systems with limited interconnectivity for data reporting and separate capacity constraints reduce the opportunity to roll out PowerBi as widely as is desired. Where in place it has enabled significantly faster and more tailored performance monitoring. Manual compilation of performance data continues. While this is sufficient it impedes performance improvement, is costly and manual compilation increases risks to data integrity.
17	Inspections
17.1	<p>Focused Visit – April/May 2024</p> <p>Ofsted undertook a focused visit to Slough Children First on 30 April and 1 May 2024, with a focus on children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. The visit found that most children receive timely and appropriate services, and that the workforce has benefited from improved stability and reduced turnover. Inspectors noted progress in quality assurance processes and strategic oversight. Areas for improvement include the consistency of case recording, management oversight, and progression of child-in-need and child protection plans. While there is no formal judgement for focused visits, the published letter (12 July 2024) indicates expected progress and did not identify any priority actions.</p> <p>Fostering Inspection – March 2025</p> <p>In March 2025, Ofsted conducted a full inspection of Foster with Slough, SCF’s fostering agency, which is regulated as an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) due to SCF’s status as an arm’s length company wholly owned by Slough Borough Council. The service was rated ‘Good’ overall, with inspectors highlighting foster carers’ commitment to children’s personal and academic growth and the strong relationships across staff and partner agencies. Equality, diversity and participation were recognised as key strengths. Ofsted acknowledged improvements since the previous inspection in 2021 and noted that leadership continues to drive high standards. Several recommendations were made, which SCF is addressing as part of its continuous improvement efforts.</p> <p>Breakaway Inspection – March 2025</p> <p>Breakaway, SCF’s short breaks home for children with disabilities, achieved its first ever ‘Outstanding’ rating from Ofsted following its inspection in March 2025. The service was previously rated ‘Good’ in February 2024. Inspectors commended Breakaway for providing exemplary care tailored to each child’s complex needs and for fostering a nurturing, inclusive, and engaging environment. Children were observed enjoying enriching activities, and staff were praised for their dedication, creativity, and strong communication with families. Ofsted highlighted the service’s commitment to celebrating children’s identities and achievements, and no recommendations or requirements were made in the final report</p>

18	Proposed Changes to Agreement
18.1	<p>A significant change to the agreement at the end of 2024/25 was the repayment of the loan of £5m.</p> <p>Cashflow forecasts suggest that SCF have sufficient cash balances that mean the loan is no longer required. In place of the loan, a revolving credit facility of £1m has been put in place which the company can call upon during the remainder of the life of the contract.</p> <p>Looking ahead the current contract between the company and Slough Borough Council is due to end by August 2026, subject to statutory direction not being in place in August 2025. The contract sets out several steps to take in the run up to the contract ending. The Council supported by SCF has commissioned a review by Mutual Ventures to help determine the most appropriate governance model for the future. Any such decisions made are likely to lead to changes to the Agreement.</p>
19	Other – Summary of Complaints
19.1	<p>In 2023–24, Slough Children First received a total of 21 statutory complaints. All were addressed through our local resolution processes, and none required escalation to Stage 3, demonstrating a strong commitment to listening, learning, and resolving concerns effectively.</p> <p>A total of 38 corporate complaints were received, of which four progressed to Stage 2. All were managed and resolved at that stage, with none needing to proceed to Stage 3, reflecting our proactive and transparent approach to addressing issues raised by service users and families.</p> <p>Crucially, no complaints were escalated to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) during the year. This outcome consistent with the previous year highlights the success of our restorative and solution-focused response to complaints, ensuring that matters are resolved appropriately and satisfactorily within the organisation.</p>
20	Good Practice
	<p>Example of good practice 1 (YPA – Aaron)</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;">   </div> <h2 style="text-align: center; color: green;">This is me</h2> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case x is 20 years old, • Case x has a full time job, he is in stable accommodation, he is financially secure and saving to pass his driving test. He is happy with where he is in life. • Case x feels that he has achieved a lot in the last few years, and values the support that he has had from Aaron. • Case x became known to services when he was 7, due to worries around neglect and exposure to domestic abuse • Case x lived between refuges with his mum and has also experienced placement moves through foster care, this meant that he experienced a lot of instability in care when he was a child • Case x reported that relationships with social workers were difficult due to a high turnover. He had been keen to understand how long Aaron will be around for. • Case x used to spend long periods time alone, he reported that he was really lonely. Aaron would take him away from placement to have conversations, away from what he felt was quite negative input. • Frequency of visits were high initially, this supported the building of a trusting relationship • Open conversations were held around Case x's future plans, guidance and support was offered around these decisions • There was a lot of immediate work undertaken, housing register, money, aspirational conversations with Case x <p>The connection was made through Aaron's identification of the detrimental relationship between Case x and his carer at the time. Aaron through outside of the box, drew on shared experiences and brought the connection to Case x in a creative way.</p> <div style="background-color: #4CAF50; color: white; text-align: center; padding: 5px; margin-top: 20px;">Happy, Safe & Loved, Thriving</div>

Feedback within our service

To who it may concern I just wanted to share my experience with your PA Aaron Burley. When Arron first came into my life I was a confused teenager that had a lot of change and hardships in life **I never felt like I belonged**. I felt like an outsider everywhere I went and Arron changed that for me. He took me under his wing and showed me how it feels to have someone that you can **rely on and trust**. Arron and I have a sibling like relationship we laugh together and on one occasion **I cried to him. For the first time in my life I felt like someone cared about me**. He saved my life in many ways with his generosity and kindness.

For example during the first couple of months of him being my PA I didn't feel myself I was pretty depressed and never felt like getting out of my bed. Out of the kindness of his own heart he paid for my haircut so I could feel like myself again and **he told me you got to look the part to feel the part**. I have never taken anything he has done for me for granted he has changed my life and many other children coming out of care lives by being there for them during their darkest hour. From knowing Arron for about a year and a half now I know he doesn't do his job for praise or any accolades but I think he deserves recognition for changing my life. **I wouldn't be the man I am without him**.

Arron recently told me he is proud of me and that meant the world to me. **All I wanted to do was make him proud for believing in me when no did**.

I was looking for someone such as Aaron to say those words to me because it means that him believing in me was not for nothing. Arron is once in a lifetime person for me so I just wanted the care leavers team to know how he has treated me.

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Example of good practice 2:

RK

- On 13/2/2018, RK came into emergency foster care under section 20 when his father was arrested by the police for allegations of domestic related assault of RK's mother.
- RK, aged 10 years, was placed with his foster carers, BA and GA, where he remains to this day. When he arrived, RK was frightened and hid under the kitchen table.
- The male carer gained RK's trust by climbing under the table with him and talked about football. This was the start of a special bond as the carer supported Tottenham and RK supports Arsenal. Immediately, RK felt at home and became part of the family, calling the carers' son his brother.
- A care order was granted on 13/12/2018 and RK was permanently matched with BA on 23/2/2021.

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Interventions and positive outcomes

- RK (17) is safer, better off, happier, and progressing in his long-term foster placement with BA; he has never had a placement move (NMS10).
- RK has been with BA for 8 years and is happy, safe & loved and thriving.
- RK obtained excellent grades for his GCSEs (NMS 8).
- RK is currently doing a BTEC Extended Diploma in Business and wants to go to university or obtain an apprenticeship (NMS8).
- RK presents as respectful, enjoys good relationships within the family and demonstrates independence in his daily living (NMS 3 & 12).
- The health checks (dentist, optician, and CLA health assessment) indicate RK's good health and development (NMS6).

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RK's wishes and feelings and the views of those significant to them (NMS1)

Summary of RK's feedback:

- There is nothing RK is worried about, and things are generally 'great.'
- Post 18, staying with BA is the 'most definite option' where RK wants to be on a staying put arrangement.
- RK is happy he is doing the course he wanted, and he wants to pursue higher education towards a career in construction or property development (NMS8).
- RK refers to the carer's children as his brothers and sisters and he has been inspired by them in choosing his education and career options (NMS8).
- BA has supported RK's family time with his mother and half siblings. BA supported RK at his mother's funeral and was exceptional in giving him emotional support following her death (NMS 9).
- RK is happy that he can lead an active lifestyle attending the gym twice a week and football each week (NMS6,7).
- RK has a very close and loving bond with BA and his wider fostering family and their network of friends enjoying family holidays, weddings and other celebrations (NMS 2,3).
- BA supports his cultural identity through cooking together Caribbean foods, ensuring he has suitable skincare and hair products, a doll made by his mother and attending Notting Hill carnival (NMS2).
- RK feels proud of having a car gifted by BA, learning to drive, being supported in managing relationships and having a part-time job (NMS12).

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How outcomes are achieved – voice heard



- Placed and matched RK long-term in a placement that meets his needs in line with his wishes and feelings (NMS 11 and 15)
- Consistently gathering RK's views during visits through direct work and observations (NMS1)
- Foster with Slough provides support to enable the foster carer to promote RK's care plan and advocate for his needs.
- Foster with Slough provides ongoing and relevant training, support, supervision and review meetings for BA. She is also part of the Mockingbird hub (NMS20)
- BA has provided support to RK in developing a good value base and an understanding healthy relationships especially with women (NMS3)
- BA accepted RK as her own child, giving RK a sense of belonging and a secure base. BA has supported RK through two close bereavements building his resilience and overcoming trauma and loss.

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