



BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S TRUST

Update Report: Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1 September 2021

1. Introduction

This report updates the committee on progress and key issues in Birmingham Children's Trust.

The Chair requested that the following issues were addressed:

- The Youth Justice Plan
- Children in Care
- Independent Advocacy
- Missing children

2. Covid and Demand

The Children's Trust maintained services, including visits to homes, throughout the pandemic. We led significant partnership work involving NHS, Police, third sector, to ensure a collaborative approach was taken to addressing and supporting the needs of the city's most vulnerable children during periods of lockdown.

Sickness rates in the Trust peaked at around 35 social workers at one time, and arrangements were put in place to ensure our vulnerable children were supported while social workers were recuperating.

In the period April-July 2021 as schools and society reopened the Trust saw unprecedented levels of demand in terms of additional contacts, referrals and requests for support, which led to a position where we were working with 1200 cases more than the average – a rise of 15%. This created huge pressure on staff and managers. With schools breaking up, we saw demand decrease to more usual levels. Activity in September when schools return will give a clear indication of whether we were dealing with a post-lockdown 'bulge' or a more significant and consistent trajectory.

3. Performance

Performance remains strong across the indicators that sit within the Trust's contract. The only indicator where we are slightly 'off track' is in relation to agency social workers. We are slightly above the upper tolerance, at 16%. This compares very favourably with regional and national averages (some of our neighbouring authorities have an agency SW rate of above 50%). The timeliness of our work is good (assessments, initial child protection conferences, reviews for children in care). While the pandemic had a significant impact on our care leavers, performance in this area remains good (the vast majority in suitable accommodation; and an increase in the number in education, training or employment)

The Performance report for Julne 2021 is appended.

4. Early Help

The Council is investing in Early Help, and has commissioned the Trust to deploy some 80 Early Help workers across the city working in 10 localities. Their role is to build local partnership collaboration with schools, health providers, local police and the network of voluntary and community organisations to support children and families at an earlier stage in the emergence of additional needs or risks. Initial evaluation is positive, and we are engaging with BCC to try to secure funding for more than one year at a time, enabling us to build a sustainable and effective service that will divert children and families from needing a higher-tariff, higher-cost intervention.

There are some great opportunities to integrate services, from this footprint, with Health and with SEND over the next 12 months, to build a strong multi-disciplinary service promoting resilience and early help for children and families.

5. Children in Care

Birmingham Children's Trust has around 2000 children and young people in its care. Of these 62% are in foster carer (half Trust carers, half independent fostering agencies); 10% placed with relatives; 9% in residential care and the remainder in a variety of placement types (with parents, in custody, in supported living arrangements, placed with adopters).

Around 100 children are adopted each year. Increasingly they are placed with adopters recruited and prepared by the Trust rather than other adoption agencies.

Every child in care has their care plan independently reviewed at least every six months. 95% of our reviews were within timescales. 76% of children who have been in care for more than 2 ½ years have been in the same placement for 2 years, and

only 2% of children in our care experience 3 or more placements in a year. This represents strong performance. The Trust has improved its planning for permanence for children in our care.

Prior to the pandemic the Trust was growing its foster carer numbers. A number of carers decided to retire over the last year, so while we continue to recruit new carers we are losing some valued and experienced carers.

Our children in care have a strong voice through their Children in Care Council, influencing and shaping decisions in the Trust, taking over the Corporate Parenting Board, and developing new initiatives for children and for social workers. Our Care Leavers Forum is similarly influential and well-engaged.

The Trust is still in touch with most care leavers, and actively supports them into training or work, or to stay in education. Many more of the Trust's care leavers are in higher education than is the case elsewhere. Housing pathways for care leavers are improving through our work with the Council and with St Basils, the housing charity with whom we work closely. Some excellent work has been undertaken to support care leavers in their parenting, and to support young people's choices in circumstances where they have been unable to care for their children.

Overall, our offer to children in care and care leavers is stronger than it was at the Trust's inception, and continues to strengthen.

In recent weeks we have had a 'spike' in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. This has been driven by a number of young people wrongly assessed, at port of entry, as adults, who are in fact young people in need of care/support/accommodation from the Trust.

In addition we are gearing up to receive significant numbers of young people following the rapid turn of events in Afghanistan.

The Trust provides an arms-length advocacy service for children and young people: both those in care and others, for example young people seeking to get their views independently represented in a child protection conference. Young people accessing the service are positive about the advocacy they receive.

The annual report of this service is appended to this report.

6. Missing Children

Performance in relation to children missing from care and home is routinely monitored and reported on.

- Four years ago there were more children missing from care, but over the last 3 years we have seen a significant change to there being more children

missing from home. This is likely to be due to exploitation – children going missing due to county lines in particular. Since the pandemic we have seen dips in the missing episodes and missing children at key lockdown points - April 2020 and January 2021. This is explained by the restrictions themselves, but also is a reflection of parents/carers being uncomfortable with reporting children as missing because of the lock down. Missing episodes have been climbing since the beginning of 2021 and are now similar to pre-pandemic missing rates.

- The missing episode rates for children at home have increased by 25% over the period July 2020 to March 2021. This reflects specific children going missing more often and we believe this is related to exploitation and changes in drug dealing. The local missing episodes are therefore more regular but young people tend to be missing for shorter periods.
- The number missing from Birmingham Trust foster carers is very low – there have been 8 children missing during the last 6 months.

The service advocates on behalf of the missing children to ensure their voices are heard and that any intelligence gained during the interviews is shared with the police (this may be about people of interest, locations, places and businesses). In addition, where children have been missing from care the service gains the children's views and at times information is fed back to commissioning services and the fostering team.

The service is piloting some work with an identified group of parents whose children are involved in county lines and are often missing from home together. This will look at increasing knowledge and awareness around county lines and actions to take when their children go missing together, with parents acting as safeguarding partners, and the importance of accepting return home interviews (RHIs) because of the information that can be gained and support that can be offered.

In comparison to the period average of July 2020 to March 2021, the RHI offered rate for Q1 of 2021 has increased from 98% to 99%. April, May and June 2021 all recorded a 99% offer rate on RHIs. Over the same period the RHI acceptance rate has decreased from 56% and Q1 of 2021 recorded 54% acceptance of RHI. The reason for refusal is overwhelmingly by the young person: in Q1 of 2021 48% of all refusals came from the young person. A further 47% of all were refused by a parent. The RHI success rate has remained fairly constant over the last 3 years and reflects the national rate.

The service does not see the RHI as a one-off piece of intervention and where needed and where appropriate safety plans and 1-1 short term intervention work to support the child to identify risk and to reduce missing episodes is put in place. Dedicated support workers have built trusting relationships with children who go missing and often the children will contact the missing support workers for support.

The service has worked hard to ensure consistency for the children to ensure that they get the same worker. The missing support workers have responded to requests for support by children outside of office hours on some occasions. They have also supported children to access medical care and interviews undertaken by trained Police and social workers seeking to capture a child's evidence of a potential crime (eg. a victim of exploitation abuse etc.).

The service currently has two missing support workers who can work flexibly out of office hours and weekends if required. In addition, St Giles have allocated a missing support worker with lived experience to enhance the offer to children missing and provide bespoke training to staff. This role is funded for nine months on a pilot.

7. Fostering

In August Ofsted inspected the Trust's fostering service. This gets inspected as an independent fostering agency because of the Trust's status. The outcome is not yet publicly available: the report will be published in the next 2-3 weeks.

8. Stronger Families

The Children's Trust has clustered services into a programme called Stronger Families. These are built around the premise that children should be supported to safely live with their families: outcomes are often better and so is value for money for the 'public pound'. Through increasing significantly the number of Family Group Conferences we offer (up from around 40 per year to over 350 per year), we are placing families at the heart of decision-making for their children. Our Families Together Plus offer (for young people at the edge of care, supporting families differently in the child protection system etc.) we are seeing real impacts and improving outcomes.

We are looking to significantly increase the number of children in our care who are living with a family member, and to ensure that families can be better supported to resume care of their children, enabling them to leave the care system. All of these services are inherently focused on children, on strengths, and on the power of relationships to safeguard children and to support families.

9. Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)

There is a national requirement for local authority and Trust adoption services to conjoin into larger RAAs. Because of Birmingham's size we were unable to find a willing local RAA partner. Therefore we set out to forge a different partnership route to a RAA: by working with a Voluntary Adoption Agency. This will be a unique

collaborative model and should bring all the benefits (and more) of the more traditional RAA model. We are in the final stages of the procurement process, and believe we have a strong partner with whom we can move forward to build an outstanding adoption offer for the city's children.

10. Exploitation

The Trust has built a strong practice model for responding to exploitation: the EmpowerU Hub. This is a multi-disciplinary service with social work, police, health, education and voluntary sector representation. The focus is on responding to concerns about individual young people at risk, disruption of gang, organised crime and county lines activity, and providing additional capacity and expertise to staff across the Trust and the city working with vulnerable young people.

We are seeing numbers of young people about whom there are concerns rise year on year, as we would expect given a legacy of under-identification, and as our collective intelligence grows. The increases are mainly in relation to criminal rather than sexual exploitation, although we know these are not mutually exclusive.

11. Youth Offending Service (YOS)

The YOS has undergone some significant staff changes in recent months and is subject to an active programme of improvement following a challenging inspection from HMIP in 2020.

The annual Youth Justice Plan is going to the September Cabinet and to Full Council. A copy can be shared with O&S, and published, immediately it is approved. The plan is an annual update. Two of the key measures of challenge and impact are as follows:

- First-time entrants into the Youth Justice system: Birmingham performs less well than statistical and national neighbours (this is a measure of how young people are supported to stay crime-free by universal services).
- Repeat offending: Birmingham performs better than statistical neighbours on this measure, which is a reflection of the efficacy of intervention when a young person offends for the first time.

12. SEND

Social Care plays a key part in the delivery of SEND services, which are well known to be performing poorly in the city. While the report of the revisit makes little reference to social care, we recognise our role in both improving our service offer for children with disabilities, and their families, and in supporting a better functioning

SEND service. It is also the case that an improved SEND service will assist many children and families with whom the Trust are working.

13. Recruitment and Retention

This has been a major area of focus for the Trust. As referenced earlier in this report, our performance, comparatively, is good. However, the risk of widening pay gaps with other authorities and the increasing 'mobility' of the children's social care workforce means we have to retain our focus on making our offer the strongest it can be.

The Trust has established a Recruitment and Retention Commission to focus on this. The primary areas of focus include:

- Attraction: marketing, social media presence, reputation etc.
- Recruitment: making the process work swiftly and efficiently, 'candidate management' etc.
- Retention: within the constraints of equal pay, making our offer 'the best it can be', development and progression, manageable workloads etc.

Progress is being made in all areas but the need to maintain this is unrelenting.

14. Risks and Challenges faced by the Trust

The key risks and challenges faced by the Children's Trust are as follows:

- If the significant rise in demand that we experienced earlier in the year recurs the Trust's resources will be exceptionally stretched.
- We are seeing much greater complexity of need and risk, and a simultaneous shrinkage in children's mental health support.
- Both of these have impact on the Trust budget and our ability to 'live within our means' in terms of the contract sum.
- As we recover and 'bounce back' from the pandemic, we will be refining our operating model, with a different balance of agile working. As the City Council plans to dispose of buildings out of which the Trust operates, we need to ensure we have the right office footprint.
- Recruitment and retention remain an ongoing challenge. Pay inequities are widening between Birmingham and other authorities, and concern about equal pay appears to continue to prevent a solution being found.
- Placement sufficiency is a national, regional and local challenge. We are developing a number of innovative approaches, but there is wide recognition that the 'market of care for children is broken'.
- Within the next 6-9 months we anticipate a full Ofsted inspection which will lead to a new graded judgement of Birmingham's children's social care

services, as delivered by the Trust. Our recovery from the disruption of the pandemic, our focus on impacts and outcomes, and the consistency of the practice offer across the Trust will be key determinants of the outcome of this inspection.

15. Conclusion

I am confident that continuous improvement remains a feature of the Trust's development. Our practice is improving and our service offer to children and families has certainly broadened and deepened since the Trust was created in 2018. We have worked hard, and successfully, to build strong collaboration with all of our partners, statutory and third sector, and we are building our profile as a provider of strong services for the city's most vulnerable children, young people and families. The Ofsted inspection, due imminently, will provide the strongest benchmark measure of the Trust's progress.

Appendices:

- Monthly Trust Contract KPI Report for June 2021
- Annual Report: Rights and Participation Service

Andy Couldrick
Chief Executive
Birmingham Children's Trust
August 2021