

Birmingham City Council

Education and Children's Social Care

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 5 April 2023



Subject: Children's Trust update

Report of: Andy Couldrick, Chief Executive, Birmingham Children's Trust

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1 Purpose

- 1.1 To update the Committee on progress with the Trust priorities 2022/23 and share draft 2023/24 strategic priorities.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members note the report and agree any comments/recommendations.

3 Any Finance Implications

- 3.1 See section 3 of the update appended to this report.

4 Any Legal Implications

- 4.1 Birmingham Children's Trust was established in 2017 as a wholly owned company of Birmingham City Council following formal intervention by the Department of Education. The Trust delivers statutory Children's Social Care services on behalf of the Council through a commissioning arrangement and formally commenced operations in April 2018.

5 Any Equalities Implications

- 5.1 The Trust works with and supports vulnerable children, young people and families. The update describes this work across a wide range of Trust services.

6 Appendices

- 6.1 Appendix 1 – Children's Trust update on 2022-23 and draft 2023-24 priorities.



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1. Introduction

This report:

- provides a general update on progress and activities against the priorities set out in the Trust's Business Plan 2022-23.
- shares with the Committee, the Trust's draft strategic priorities for 2023/24.

2. General Update on Progress and Activities within the Business Plan

We continue to manage unprecedented levels of demand in all areas of our work. Caseloads in some parts of the service are higher than we would wish, and we have sought to support Practice by moving resources to establish new and different services.

Care numbers have risen, but in line with our projections. However, care costs have risen more steeply, a consequence of a broken market, insufficiency, the impact of regulation and, critically, a sharp rise in the degree of complexity of need we are dealing with.

The numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in Birmingham have also impacted upon the numbers, as they become children in care, and then care leavers. In 2022/23 the Trust has been carrying a significant financial pressure of c£5m exclusively as a consequence of our legal duties to these young people. A relatively recent feature, driving up numbers, is the placement by the Home Office of children into adult hotels in the city. These young people have been initially mis-assessed as adults at port of entry, and are then assessed and cared for as children by the Trust.

Recruitment and retention remains a challenge. We are simply unable to compete with the rates paid by social work agencies and, as authorities get into trouble, increasingly they reach for whole teams of agency workers to pick up work: the hourly rates paid are high. While the region works to address this, a national solution is needed. The Government, in its response to the Care Review, has produced some bold proposals to tackle this issue.

Despite the challenges we face, performance has remained strong, quality of practice has improved, the range of services we offer has grown, and we remain optimistic about our work, our partnerships and our impact on children, young people and families.

Contract Review

In March 2023 Cabinet agreed a new 10 year contract term. This reflects the confidence that has built in the Trust over its first five years of life, as well as the depth of relationship with the Council, both elected members and officers.

Performance and Inspection Outcomes

In 2022/23, the Trust has performed well in relation to the contractual performance indicators.

Areas of particularly strong performance in the year have included placement stability for children in care; care leavers living in suitable accommodation; timely reviews for children in care and initial child protection conferences.

Challenges have included:

- timescales for adoption: the indicator measures over a three-year period. Evidence supports that current performance is good and the performance indicator will improve over the course of the coming year as a result.
- agency social workers: this has remained persistently higher than we would want. While we perform better than regional and statistical neighbours, we continue to refine and improve our offer to make the Trust an attractive place to come, and to stay, to build a good social work career.

Inspection

While the outcome of the **ILACS** inspection that took place in March 2023 remains unpublished at this point, we can report that a number of strengths and improvements in the delivery of children's social care were identified, and our staff interviewed by inspectors routinely reported positively on their experience of working in the Trust, and how much improved a place to work it is now. One social worker who has worked in Birmingham for many years reported it 'felt safer' than it ever had before. The impact on children and families of our work was positive, and inspectors commented on the positive culture and practice model the Trust has established.

The inspection concurred with our self-evaluation, and reflects important progress after a decade of 'Inadequate' judgements up to 2018. That two of the last five years were spent in unprecedented circumstances of pandemic, lockdown and post-pandemic readjustment, these findings are all the more noteworthy.

Ofsted will make recommendations, for the Trust and the wider partnership, which will help services to further strengthen.

The report will be published on 18 April.

The **Adoption service** was inspected in December and was judged to continue to be Good with an Outstanding judgement for Leadership and Management.

Our **Fostering service** is Good.

Charles House residential home was inspected in April 2021 and judged 'requires improvement'. Ofsted's visit in December 2022 judged the home to be Good with Outstanding for leadership and management.

A **YOS** inspection commenced on 5 December and concluded on 16 December 2022. Ofsted have judged the service as 'requires improvement'. During the inspection, HMIP identified some areas of significant improvement. The inspectorate acknowledged the commitment of the Partnership Board and the substantial work that has been invested in developing and enhancing the Board.

Inspectors identified a number of areas where more work is required, all of which were already understood by the service and featured in our service development plan. We are determined to continue to transform and modernise the service as we wish to deliver the very best services to our children, families, victims, and communities.

3. Finance Summary

Children's social care, nationally, is under acute financial pressure. Social Care Grant for 2023/24 was £1.3bn nationally, with a further £1.7bn planned for 2024/25. In response to the demand pressures the Council approved an increase in the 2023/24 budget of £24m (excluding inflation). It will be for the Council to determine the split between Children's and Adults for next financial year.

The position of the Trust, while showing a significant deficit for 2022/23, is better than for the majority of children's services authorities. We began the year 2022/23 with a 'baked in' pressure of £21m (5%), and have seen an additional 5% pressure, caused by growth in volume and complexity of demand and placement market failure. We also have a record number of 155 unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people as at 1 March 2023 which has added further pressure on an already challenged system.

We have worked closely with the Council, and worked hard to mitigate the pressure in-year. 2023/24 will bring further pressures, the key drivers of which include:

- increasing demand for services.
- growing numbers in care.
- complexity of need and risk.
- absence of appropriate care placements.
- rising numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking young people.

A contract sum has been agreed for 2023/24: this is £272m which includes an allowance of 8.25% for inflation pressures to enable the Trust to increase foster care rates and other care related payments.

4. Risks or Areas of Concern

The Trust continues to be a key part of system leadership across the city, and will want to play a full role in the Year of Change for Children. There are some key partnership challenges that we need to address in the coming year. Successful progress will impact positively on demand for Trust services as well as promoting better outcomes through different and earlier response. Examples include:

- responding to the challenge of **domestic abuse and homelessness for women and children** – this drives a substantial amount of work in the Trust. The absence of any perpetrator programmes in the city is a particular concern, and one noted by Ofsted.
- **children's and parental mental ill health**: increasing amounts of Trust resources used as a consequence of delivery and definitional issues around mental health. A better joint, and joined-up, response is required. Birmingham's CAMH services have recently been inspected and judged 'Inadequate' by the CQC. This might offer an opportunity to collaborate over different and more integrated and collaborative service offer
- **contextual and transitional safeguarding**: increasing the strength of the partner response to safeguarding risks outside of the family and across the life course.
- **early intervention and prevention**: the work in the Council is progressing and there are real opportunities to build greater prevention into the role of universal services in the city.

We are well-placed to continue to rise to these challenges and maintain the trajectory of improvement we have set hitherto, maintaining effective collaboration with the Council and all of our partners. Ofsted's inspection report will give us further improvement priorities which we will take forward.

We will ourselves be responding to our recent inspections, of the Trust's social care service and of the Youth Offending Service, to continue to drive improvement.

5. Impact from the Cost of Living/Energy Crisis

The Trust continues to work with the Council and other partners to develop a coherent response to the cost of living crisis and the challenge of keeping warm this winter. We are concerned to ensure that family poverty is addressed and supported rather than referred to the Trust as a type of neglect. We are working with BVSC to ensure that the Household Support Fund is delivered quickly and efficiently to young people and families experiencing hardship. We have implemented hardship projects for care leavers, asylum seekers and children and families with no recourse to public funds as part of this. The announcement that the HSF will extend into 2023/24 is very much welcomed and allow the Trust to work with the Council to continue to support vulnerable children and families.

We will continue to offer innovative holiday schemes in some of our most challenged communities, using Holiday Activities with Food resources and working in partnership with the Council, StreetGames, our delivery partners, and local voluntary organisations. We will ensure we target those who are vulnerable or 'hard to reach', working with our third sector partners including Bfriends, our own established charity.

6. Draft strategic priorities 2023/24

In summary these are:

- responding to Ofsted's recommendations following the ILACS inspection.
- responding to HMIP's recommendations following the Youth Offending Service inspection.
- completing the work on the 'Child's Journey' programme, leading to a changed shape of organisation geared toward further improving our effectiveness and our efficiency, and enabling us to respond to the implementation of national changes following the Care Review.
- working within the key partnerships to drive system improvement and accountability.
- building our relationship as strategic partners with the Council, and demonstrating value for money to our commissioners.
- planning and managing some critical transitions in the Trust, in relation to changes in senior leadership and governance.
- maintaining a focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, as service provider and as employer.
- continuing to find new and better ways to recruit and retain social workers, residential and family support workers, and carers.
- the Trust, with the Council, will complete a review of the short breaks offer available to children with additional needs. There are two elements to this review: the 'universal offer', which the Council is leading, and the targeted offer the Trust provides to children and families with whom the Trust is working (under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989).

Andy Couldrick
Chief Executive - Birmingham Children's Trust
April 2023