



BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S TRUST

Cabinet Committee Group Company Governance – June 2022 Update

Update

2021 proved another tough year for the Children's Trust. The enduring impact of the pandemic, the rising and the complexity of need we are striving to meet have all been significant. We maintained face-to-face contact with children, young people and families throughout the year, and we maintained our leadership of 'system working' with partners in the Council, the Police, the NHS and the voluntary sector. We reopened and used buildings, enabling staff to get out of their homes, meet with leaders and colleagues, and we ensured that our new social workers and social care colleagues had plenty of opportunity for face-to-face contact to support their learning, development and experience. Our residential care offer continued throughout the year and, following Ofsted visits, our homes were judged to have maintained their effectiveness.

Despite the challenge we have maintained, again, strong performance in relation to the performance indicators captured in the contract, and across the broader sweep of children's performance indicators. External regulation and inspection confirm the progress we are making: in October 2021 Ofsted conducted a focused visit where they examined our offer to children in care. The letter following the visit was published in December and is a positive reflection of the Trust's work. We now anticipate a full inspection, leading to, we hope, an improved 'grade', within the next 12-18 months.

Our relationship with the Council remains strong. In the coming year negotiations will commence on the Trust's contract, the first 5-year term of which ends in 2023. We in the Trust are pleased with how the contract has operated to date. The strength of relationship with the City Council continues to be one of our key characteristics, and it does not go unnoticed in central government. We hope we can agree to continue our relationship, contractually, as owner and company, as commissioner and provider and as strategic partners working to improve outcomes for children in the city. And we look forward to the mutual benefits that come from stability of leadership across the Council, after a lengthy period of churn and change and short-term appointments in the Council.

Our team-mates across the Children's Trust have been fantastic in the last year: committed, creative, determined, in enduring conditions of the pandemic, to support and to safeguard the most vulnerable, and to provide good care, support and opportunities to the children and young people in our care, and to our care-leavers to name a few.

Our intention to use 2022/23 to consolidate some of the gains, in improvement, effectiveness and value for money, that we have made since our establishment. We have reshaped considerably the service offer and the partnership working across the city, notably:

- establishing our Stronger Families programme, aligning and investing in Trust and third sector services that support families to care for their children.
- developing the multi-agency EmpowerU Hub leading work on exploitation: supporting victims, tackling perpetrators, disrupting networks.

- initiating and developing the city's Early Help offer, again a multi-agency and multi-sector development supporting families earlier.
- working with Adult Services to develop the Preparation for Adulthood service, filling a gap in provision for young people becoming young adults and in need of advice and support.
- building and implementing our Practice Model for the Trust, built on the importance of relationship-based practice.
- introducing new multi-disciplinary capacity and support in our social work teams (domestic abuse, adult mental health) to enhance our skills and offer specialist support.
- reviewing and overhauling services to effect improvement: in the last year this includes our Disabled Children service and our Families Together service.
- building and leading partnership responses during the pandemic. We established, and still chair, the Partnership Operations Group, with 40 organisations represented, working together to support our most vulnerable children, young people and families.

Our priorities for 2022/23 therefore seek to build on these changes, embedding, strengthening and deepening our offer and our collaboration:

- we want to ensure that a child's 'journey' through our services is consistent, seamless, trauma informed and relationship-based. We want to ensure that the whole organisation is oriented and organised around this journey, so that everything we do promotes the best interest of, and outcomes for, children, young people and families.
- we want to ensure that our Stronger Families programme makes even greater impact and supports our ambition for more children and young people to have their care and support needs met by, and in, their families.
- we want to ensure our 'bounce back' from two years of operating in a pandemic builds on what we have learned and harnesses the best of our partnerships.
- we want to continue to build our placement sufficiency including developing our own, innovative and partnership-based, care offer, as well as generating more foster and adoption placements.
- we want to support the development and growth of Bfriends, our new charity, established to further enrich and enhance the offer to children in care and care leavers.
- we will, with the Council, continue to improve our offer and our actions as 'Corporate Parents'.
- we will maintain or focus on equalities and diversity, building an anti-racist organisation.
- we will maintain our focus on the challenges of recruitment and retention of social workers, developing and marketing offer regionally and beyond.

We continue to enjoy strong participation and engagement with our children in care and care leavers, and with our foster carers through our work with the Birmingham Foster Care Association, and look to widen participation further, with other groups.

2022 is an important year for the city and for the city's young people. The Commonwealth Games offer a 'once in a generation' opportunity to inspire, mobilise and engage children and young people in activity, sport, culture and community development. The Trust is determined to play a full role in supporting the city and the Council, and in so doing to ensure that the opportunities are available to the most vulnerable young people, those at greatest risk of exclusion and of missing out.

The Council intends to make 2023 its 'Year of the Child'. This would build on the Commonwealth Games legacy, and will undoubtedly promote the profile of children, and of vulnerable children, in the city. The initiative will be led by the Council but will seek commitment from partners across all sectors. The Trust will engage fully in the initiative and seek to ensure that the year is a springboard for retaining a focus on changing the city for the next generation.

There is growing evidence of the positive impact of the new Early Help service, commissioned by the Council and delivered by the Trust. An independently chaired Partnership Group oversees the developing multi-partner offer. Schools are increasingly engaged and participating, and Early Help Assessments and interventions are increasing.

Performance

The Trust has performed well, in 2021/22, 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.

Performance has been below target in the indicator measuring the number of agency social workers: this reflects a combination of the impact of the pandemic on sickness levels, compounding the ongoing recruitment and retention challenges. The average time between the Trust receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and deciding on a match has been slightly outside tolerance range – and while better than the average for statistical neighbours, performance is poorer than the national average. An ambitious target of 85 adoptions in the year was set for 2021/22. There were 73 adoptions in the year. This is due to the impact of the pandemic and delays in court for a number of children meaning that adoption orders that could have been granted in 2021/22 will now be granted in 2022/23. We are confident that the new Regional Adoption Agency will assist us in improving our performance.

Our collective Corporate Parenting offer continues to strengthen, albeit not without challenges. The Board is stronger and is holding the Trust and other partners to account for our collective Corporate Parenting offer. At the instigation of the Cabinet Member, the Trust has developed a proposal for a Reverse Mentoring scheme for Cabinet and CLT members. This will be brought forward imminently.

Other developments

We have completed the procurement process for our unique Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) and believe we have a strong partner with whom to develop an innovative and successful RAA. A joint Trust/BCC launch announcement was issued on 18 January.

Our Fostering service was inspected in August and judged to be Good (previously rated 'Requires Improvement').

As described above the Ofsted focused visit in October validated our view that practice is improving and we are on a trajectory to good.

The Trust continues to play a key role in many of the city's partnerships including the Safeguarding Children Partnership, the Community Safety Partnership and the Children's Partnership. We instigated the Partnership Operational Group that has galvanised the city's

Covid response and we have supported the partnership planning for the post-pandemic recovery period.

The Trust continues to chair the Partnership Operational Group where work continues to build a stronger prevention offer. The investment, through the Birmingham Children's Partnership, in Early Help, alongside the Trust's comprehensive Stronger Families programme, are crucial limbs of a strategy to maintain a care population lower than statistical neighbours and core cities, keeping more children in their families through effective early help and family support. This is good for children and families and a good use of scarce resources.

The Trust has opened key buildings and is enabling staff to return to the office for 2-3 days per week, to support face-to-face contact with colleagues, team meetings and supervision. We are looking for new sites from which to operate as the Council proceeds to dispose of the buildings the Trust uses (notably Lancaster Circus and New Aston House).

We are currently mapping short-term and longer-term accommodation needs. The principles of family friendly spaces within local communities underpin this planning. We anticipate needing to rent privately rather than from the Council's stock.

Serious youth violence is an important and pressing concern for the city. The Trust is working with the Community Safety Partnership, the Violence Reduction Unit and West Midlands Police, to develop an effective strategic and operational response.

The Trust has reviewed its services for disabled children, through the Children First project, in order to modernise and improve our offer and the effectiveness of our responses, as well as positioning us well to support improvements in the area of SEND.

The Trust's overall financial position for 2021/22 remained unchanged for the last quarter with an overspend of £1.8m. The Council has confirmed, subject to a value for money statement, to make a one-off contract variation of £1.8m in order to clear the Trust's deficit for 2021/22.

The overspend represents less than 1% against budget. However, placement costs remain a significant concern with the forecast overspend of £9.7m against the net budget for 2021/22 (£8.5m gross). This still represents the single biggest pressure for the Trust to manage into 2022/23 and as reported previously will require management action around review and negotiation of partner contributions as well as both demand and supply side mechanisms to mitigate the rising cost of care.

Covid costs for 2021/22 were confirmed at £1.6m and were largely due to continued sickness levels into January and February 2022, and the impact this had on caseloads in both Practice and Legal. The Council has reimbursed the Trust for the Covid costs but has indicated that there is no Covid funding in 2022/23.

Risks and challenges

We know the coming year will bring challenges:

- demand for our services has returned to pre-pandemic levels and we know that there is much need in our communities.
- finding a good care placement for every child who needs one remains a challenge.
- the complexity of need we are encountering, including the compounding factor of the pandemic, is an emerging challenge.

- our resources, and those of partners, are, and will be, stretched.
- recruitment and retention is no easier with a regional and national shortage of social workers and a shortening 'shelf-life' for practitioners.
- we will feel the impact of the National Review into the circumstances of the death of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes in neighbouring Solihull.

We are well-placed to rise to these challenges and maintain the trajectory of improvement we have set hitherto.

Andy Couldrick
Chief Executive
Birmingham Children's Trust
June 2022