

Birmingham Children's Services - Overview of progress

1. Summary

Since the 2014 Ofsted inspection we have delivered the first 2 years of our improvement plan, as part of the response to Government Directions and with the oversight of Lord Warner, the appointed Children's Commissioner. The primary focus in year 1 was on establishing stability in the service, the creation of MASH, a highly visible single point of entry and multi-agency information sharing to ensure children's needs are met, and establishing a credible budget and stabilising the workforce. All of these were achieved.

We now have a new 'Early Help and Children's Social Care improvement plan 2015-17' with a stronger focus on improving social work practice and reducing delays. We are almost fully staffed, although still relying on agency staff for a quarter of posts and we have more manageable caseloads (average 15 children). We have agreed partner thresholds – Right Service, Right Time (RSRT) and an early help strategy is in place, with a strong targeted early help offer. We have also established a system-wide Early Help and Safeguarding Partnership to shape our service responses and our offer across agencies and settings.

There is clear vision and purpose and direction for the service and more stable leadership with improved political ownership of the improvement journey. However, there is still a long way to go to ensure children and families receive a responsive and effective service that engages with them to enable positive change.

In August 2015 we launched 'our operating model for children's services' setting out how we would move to a consistent shape so that the needs of children and families are met by the team with the right expertise for their circumstances. We finally moved into that model in February 2016. Alongside the model we have developed guidance which sets out the remit of each team and how work flows between teams when needed without delay. The shape of the service is now clear, coherent and consistent with each team knowledgeable about their role in the whole system.

2. Social Work Practice

Assessment & Intervention teams (ASTI) are now established in each of the three Areas and these, alongside a focus on being clear about the purpose of our intervention, and a better use of our early help family support service, have enabled us to reduce average caseloads to 16. This is giving social workers more time to work with families.

We launched 'Our Support for children and families' guidance for January 2016 clarifying the role of each team and making sure work transfers easily and without delay when it needs to. Learning from the first round of Essex diagnostic self-assessments has informed this and helped develop clarity and consistency around the operation of ASTI teams.

These changes support a focus on direct work with families to improve outcomes for children. This is a big cultural change for the service which staff have generally welcomed, but which will take much more time to achieve fully. We now have a Chief Social Work Officer and three Principal Social Work Officers to support practice development across our 800 strong qualified workforce.

We have refreshed our strengthening families approach to child protection case conferences from October and have had very positive feedback about listening to children and families, informing meaningful plans that are addressing the real issues identified. This has resulted in a reduction of children on child protection plans as more children are supported through child in need plans.

Similarly, our practice focus on challenge before children come into care and moving children in care more quickly to permanent arrangements, such as adoption, has resulted in a reduction in numbers of children in care since April 2015 (although our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children have increased).

We are working well with the local family justice board, our own legal service and CAFCASS collaboratively to improve court timescales and the quality of evidence in applications to the court and we have developed a new special guardianship policy in line with recent DfE consultation.

Practice is still variable and we have a long way to go, but gradually we are sorting out problems, addressing deficits and improving practice, and the full implementation of the operational model will give social workers a much clearer framework, expectations and capacity to continue improvement.

There is agreement to replace the CareFirst data and case management system with a more modern and fit for purpose system that will be much easier for social workers to use and thus free them to spend more time in direct work with children and families. Much work has been completed in recent months to simplify processes and forms on CareFirst for social workers, but it still remains a very cumbersome system using up lots of staff time.

3. Workforce

We now have a workforce strategy to stabilise staffing and give social workers the skills, confidence and the right tools to deliver social work that will make a real difference to children's lives. Recruitment of newly qualified social workers, social workers, team managers and foster carers is improving. We have a contract in place to procure agency staff through a single master agency (HCL), and this will over time reduce cost and improve quality.

The service is almost fully staffed and we have 40 additional posts from April 2016 to support improvements in fostering and adoption, leaving care, children in care and quality assurance (QA). Our HR data is still not sophisticated enough, and we have about 23% agency staff (West Midlands average 18% - but Birmingham May 2015 figure, 30%). The service is calmer and more stable, but we still struggle to recruit experienced social workers and team managers. We need to develop and agree an improved pay and rewards policy for qualified social workers.

We have strengthened our Assessed and Supported Year in Employment offer and we also recruited over 25 students this summer (as we did in summer 2015) who had been on placement with us. We have established a bespoke 'systemic supervision' course for team managers with the Institute of Family Therapy, which a second cohort of managers begins in June 2016. We were the largest local authority to pilot the new accreditation process in January with 120+ staff participating. We have a stable head of service and senior manager group with only one interim, and we have addressed several issues of middle/senior managers not able to perform.

We have a clear and workable supervision policy, and the Council has adopted a more outcome focused appraisal system. As we build on stability, a culture of learning and a slowly improving reputation, we expect our ability to recruit and retain will improve. Turnover has fallen from 21% to 16% in last year and agency staff from over 30% to 23%.

The above activity continues to be supported by the HR Business Partner for the Directorate for People and a Children's Services dedicated HR team which has a changed cultural focus and an ambition to operate at pace. Managers are now much better supported with HR issues and to manage performance.

4. Financial Planning

The Council has made children's services its top priority and has invested much-needed money into the service - making a further £21.5m available for 2015/16 (on top of an extra £9.6m in 2014/15).

The City Council has to find very significant savings (over £200m) over 4 years, but it has maintained its commitment to funding improvement in children's services with increased investment in the next two years. As part of the Future Council programme, in the 'Preventing Family Breakdown' stream, Children's Services will deliver £10m savings gross over 4 years, through having fewer young people in care, and more children in local foster placements overall, and through reductions in agency staff usage and a vacancy factor. The savings targets are realistic and achievable and in line with the improvement plan.

5. Partnership

We have established a new partnership framework this year by setting up the Children's Strategic Leaders Forum, chaired jointly by the Council's Chief Executive and the Chief Constable, and the Early Help and Safeguarding Partnership, also chaired jointly by the Council and West Midlands Police. The latter is establishing agreed multi-agency systems and processes across the whole children's system in Birmingham. We now have the fora in place where debate and discussion about what we are collectively trying to achieve and the best way of doing it together can take place – learning from the Leeds 'plan on a page' approach. We are continuing to explore new models for the local/regional safeguarding children board in light of Alan Wood's national LSCB review.

We have a strong youth offending service which has developed effective partnership working that engages vulnerable young people and their families which children's social work can learn from.

6. Quality assurance

The CSWO will lead on developing effective social work practice and help us build effective QA systems that produce learning to inform improvement at area, team and individual levels. We have a new QA framework and have launched a new case audit system. We also have a programme of monthly service area focused performance meetings to improve how we work together (this is in addition to arrangements in each Area). We have been subject to three peer challenges in last three months from other LAs – one about our leaving care services, one on Fostering and Adoption and one about our case audit system.

7. Children in care

Children in care are receiving more timely reviews and better care planning, and there have been improvements to the fostering and adoption service. However, children in care planning and care leaver pathway plans remain an area of weakness that requires more attention – eg. we have 126 children on placement orders waiting to be matched with an adoptive family (down from 150 in April).

We have also brought into place improved corporate parenting and children in care council arrangements. We are developing ways to more actively listen and learn from the children and families we work with to improve services for them.

Our Independent Reviewing Officer Service (IRO) was managed by CAFCASS from November 2014 and a better performing service returned to Council management in October 2015. We are now tracking children in care more systematically to reduce delays in their care journey and IRO are providing more constructive challenge and support to social workers.

We have high numbers of older teenagers entering care and we recognise that we need to offer such young people and their families a service focused on mediation and support and learning ways of

managing difficult behaviour and emotional regulation. We established a short-term intensive 'Edge of Care' service from October 2015. We have also applied to the DfE Innovation fund to establish a new service to work intensively with very vulnerable teenagers (CSE, radicalisation, self-harm) and their families.]

We need to improve our services for care leavers, with better pathway planning that supports more young people in education and employment and reduces the percentage of care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). A peer review by North Somerset has assisted here and we have invested in additional support to help care leavers into employment

We have a substantial programme of improvement in Fostering and Adoption which has resulted in the bringing in-house of foster carer, adopter and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) assessments, establishing stronger post-adoption and post-SGO support teams and a substantial recruitment of foster carers and adoptive families to improve quality and reduce our reliance on expensive external agencies. We have also had a recent peer review from Lincolnshire which has helped develop a new set of improvements in this area.

140 children were placed for adoption in 2015/16, compared to 120 in 2014/15, and 95 the year before.

8. Leadership and Management

We have a senior management team in place made up entirely of permanent appointments - ending the cycle of leadership change and failure to drive effective practice change which has characterised Birmingham's recent history. Senior managers are being held to account for their leadership and performance and action is being taken when deficits are apparent.

There is strong political commitment to improving outcomes for children in Birmingham and supporting children's services with resources and the tools to deliver these outcomes. Collectively the Leader, Cabinet Member, Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services maintain regular oversight of the improvement plan.

Partnership working around children's services had been poor for some considerable time. The new Children's Strategic Leaders Forum signals strategic and high level attention to improving children's outcomes. The forum is able to consider children's issues within the wider context of families' experiences and the opportunities and challenges presented by the city. It takes an overview of the systems working to support children and families in the city so that they are all aligned and working together to deliver that intention. The forum challenges gaps in coordination and delivery and ensure that the vision for services is stretching and ambitious.

The Early Help and Safeguarding Partnership oversees the delivery of the Early Help strategy and the shape of multiagency working to meet the needs of children and their families from universal to specialist, including locality working in hubs and areas and central processes such as the MASH. The co-chairs and members are visible champions of a "whole system" approach. This partnership will also develop models for more local partnership working in each of the City's three Areas. The work of the partnership in its first year was presented to all partners at a recent conference (June 2016), where a number of system and process changes were endorsed to improve access to help for children and families.

9. Commissioning

We have established a 'Commissioning Centre for Excellence' across the Directorate for People and embarked on a programme of review of externally commissioned services, with a greater focus on

targeted services, impact and value for money. This involves developing new more integrated contracts as existing arrangements come to an end.

We have agreed a contract with the Priory Group for the externalisation of 5 children's homes.

10. Improvement Support

The DfE have appointed Essex CC Children's Services as our improvement partner. Essex have delivered a programme of diagnostic peer/self-assessments in front-line teams followed by practice learning seminars. In the autumn the focus was on MASH and ASTI teams. Before Easter diagnostics were completed with Safeguarding teams, and at present children in care teams are undertaking these. The diagnostic is in effect a supported self-assessment of practice carried out with the team manager and their team. It is a learning exercise. The three main areas to come out of the work so far for improvement are: recording not showing the work carried out; insufficient management oversight on the record; not enough direct work with family focused on outcomes for the child. The safeguarding teams in each area were graded at 'Requires Improvement'.

11. Engaging with the reform agenda

In January 2016 Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State at DfE, launched 'Children's Social Care Reform – A Vision for Change'. This set out a national agenda to improve social work practice and leadership, and social work education. The paper announced a second round of Innovation Fund opportunities and an expansion of the Frontline social work qualification programme (similar to Teach First). At a meeting with Nicky Morgan on 20 January 2016, the Council's commitment to this reform agenda was made explicit. We have therefore been exploring the following:

- Innovation Fund expression of interest for funding a new approach to work with high risk vulnerable young people, with Morning Lane Associates. Proposal is for £3.4m over two years with the Council redeploying £500k of own its resources each year.
- Expression of interest to Frontline to support 6 social work student units (24 students) in Birmingham from summer 2017 – and we received confirmation on 3 June that this was successful.
- working with PAUSE, a current innovation fund project to establish a service for young women who have had children removed in care proceedings.
- regional adoption discussions with Herefordshire and others.
- early thinking about potential future organisational models.