



Report for Education and Children's Social Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee

9 December 2020

1. Introduction

This report updates the Committee on the progress of the Children's Trust since previous reports to O&S. It also summarises the work of the Trust during the pandemic.

Three documents are appended to provide further detail:

- The Trust's most recent performance report to the Council for October 2020.
- The report following Ofsted's February 2020 focused visit to examine the Trust's contact, referral and assessment arrangements: the report was published in March.
- The Trust Business Plan for 2020/21.

2. Trust Activity and Performance

Throughout the last six months (and indeed the life of the contract so far) the Trust has maintained strong performance against the contract performance indicators: the majority have been on or better than target throughout that time. In October 8 were on or better than target and the remainder were all within the agreed tolerance. This level of performance has been maintained throughout the period of the pandemic and both periods of lockdown.

The ethnicity of the children with whom the Trust works is as follows:

Ethnicity %	Children in Need	Child Protection Plans	Children in Care	2011 Census
White	40	48	52	42
Asian	24	17	11	34
Black	14	9	12	12
Mixed Heritage	15	18	23	10

When the pandemic hit, and lockdown ensued in March, social workers continued to visit families in their homes, as well as deploying technology to maintain contact. This was largely effective, and important, as a large number of partner agencies stopped all face-to-face contact with families in their homes. As higher-level restrictions are reintroduced it will be important that the work and the responsibility for maintaining contact with the most vulnerable children is shared by all partners. The Trust has led work with partner agencies to ensure that face-to-face contact with our most vulnerable families is maintained.

60% of the Trust workforce are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. As with all organisations, our attention in this area has been galvanised through the summer and we are putting much stronger arrangements in place to improve our performance as an employer and as a service delivery organisation to a richly diverse community.

For a period of time our short breaks residential care offer ceased. One of the units was temporarily converted, successfully, to provide crisis care for young people. Short breaks have now resumed and will continue to be offered during this period of restrictions.

When schools closed, like every children's social care system nationally, the Trust saw a sharp decline in contacts and referrals from other agencies. Once schools reopened activity levels quickly returned to pre-pandemic levels and are on a rising trajectory.

In March work started to create an entirely new early help offer based on 10 localities across the city, providing direct support and supplies to families, as well as grant funding to local community organisations and a new online mental and emotional health support offer. The Trust was prominent in building and supporting the new offer, with the Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC), and this now offers a sustainable footprint for the delivery of a more significant early help offer, supported by the Partnership and funded by the City Council. The Trust will be a key delivery partner of this service which, over time, will also allow us to intensify our support offer to families facing more significant difficulties. Closer working with schools was an important part of the offer, and we have seen some outstanding examples of support by schools to their most vulnerable children.

During the first lockdown the support provided to 7000 families through this Early Help offer undoubtedly impacted positively on those families and their children and suppressed demand for services from the Trust. Maintaining this offer through this second period of restrictions will be critical.

There is an emerging picture from research conducted into this Early Help service, of emotional neglect having a significant impact on children, often associated with family breakdown. It is also well understood that rates of domestic abuse rose steeply during the initial lockdown period.

This research also illustrates the effectiveness of the Early Help offer that was rolled out, and points to the importance of an inclusive, local approach that builds on the strengths of community and community organisations across the city, built on co-production rather than command and control. The Early Help arrangements were a good example of partnership work between the Trust, the Council and local voluntary organisations, coordinated well by BVSC. A strong platform for potential future local service delivery has been established.

While schools remain open during the second period of restrictions, this will provide a vital resource for the city's most vulnerable children, few of whom attended school during the first wave of the pandemic. Most schools maintained contact effectively and supportively with their vulnerable children while they were closed.

The Trust has continued to develop its services with a principle aim of supporting more children and young people to stay safely and successfully within their families:

- We have expanded our Family Group Conference service (enabling families to make decisions and plans for their children's safety): from 50 FGCs a year 12 months ago, we now have capacity for 350.
- Families Together Plus: services supporting children on the 'edge of care' to stay with their families.

- Lifelong Links: support for older young people in care to reconnect with family and important connections in their lives to support the transition into independence.
- Safer Families: a partnership with a voluntary organisation providing intensive family support.

In December we will have re-established three key services in Lancaster Circus: bringing Trust and partner staff back together safely, to operate the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, the EmpowerU Hub (tackling exploitation and missing children) and the new Preparing for Adulthood service, supporting young people into adulthood and independence.

3. Children in Care and Corporate Parenting

During the pandemic the Trust's foster carers showed great commitment to our children in their care. Placement stability for children in care is stronger than has ever been the case, with fewer children having to change placement. Since schools reopened 98% of our children in care have resumed their learning at school.

Social workers supported their children in care well during lockdown, using both face-to-face contact and technology-enabled meetings and visits. For many young people these virtual contacts worked well.

We had to pause face-to-face contact between children in care and families during the first lockdown period, but we have since started to open buildings to enable contact to take place.

One of the City Council's, Trust's, and partners' most important responsibilities is to act well as Corporate Parent to our children in care and care leavers. Ensuring young people benefit from good care, good education, support to stay fit and well, opportunities to develop independence skills and live safely as independent young adults, in good accommodation, are responsibilities we share.

We have a clear understanding, from our young people about what is important to them (through our work with our Children in Care Council and Care Leavers' Forum) and my strong belief is that the responsibility should extend beyond the Council and the Trust to all of our statutory partners. Our Pledge to children in care and care leavers, overseen by the Corporate Parenting Board, and signed by the Council, the Trust, West Midlands Police and the CCG, commits us to enabling all young people to say:

- I am fully aware of this City Pledge.
- I am settled where I live, and I feel safe and well cared for.
- I enjoy school and I am being supported to fulfil my learning potential.
- I go to college or university or I am in work learning the skills I need for the future.
- I have opportunities to develop my talents, have fun and enjoy my free time.
- I know who I am, where I am from and I am in touch with the people in my life with whom I will have lifelong links, relationships and support: they might be family, or friends.
- I am healthy, I feel good about myself and I get the help and support that I need.
- I have a good and stable relationship with professionals who support me.
- I know what the next year will bring, where I am going to live and who in my life will support me into the future.
- I have someone independent in my life to support me should I wish.
- I am given opportunities to have my say and shape the services I receive.

Over the last few months, despite the pandemic, great strides have been made in creating a new Vulnerable Adults and Transitions service, between Adult Social Care and the Children's Trust. This new service will greatly enhance our work in supporting vulnerable young people, including care leavers and those with special educational needs, into adulthood and independence.

There is more that we can and should collectively do, to honour our commitment to children in care and care leavers. This should include:

- Ensuring children in care and care leavers are identified as a priority for receiving services.
- Encouraging staff in our agencies to commit to offer mentoring support to young people as they move toward and into independence.
- Offering opportunity through work experience, internships, apprenticeships (the Trust is currently working with 7 young people leaving care as apprentices: the experience has been transformational for them and for us).
- Active engagement in, and support of, the work of the Corporate Parenting Board.

A piece of work has been initiated with the Council to support improvement in the Council's offer as corporate parents.

4. Trust Financial Position

The Trust has worked hard during 2020/21 to bring down its overspend which was forecast earlier in the year to be close to £7m. It has most recently been reported as c.£1m. In addition, the Trust has incurred £1.6m of Covid-specific costs to date, which are eligible for the Government Covid grant.

The Trust has reached an agreed position with the Council for 2021/22 and beyond (we are hoping for an agreed 3-year position) that reflects the growth in demand that is coming into view now in the Trust, and is also a national phenomenon (referral and care numbers rising). This will be subject to the Council agreeing its budget in the New Year.

5. Key Risks

The key risks faced by the Trust presently are as follows:

- Failure to agree a sustainable financial settlement with BCC.
- The impact of further demand growth as we emerge from this phase of the pandemic.
- Maintaining an adequate social work workforce while we are constrained by the Council's Equal Pay concerns and in a competitive regional market for social workers.

Andy Couldrick, Chief Executive

Birmingham Children's Trust

December 2020