



Title of Paper:

**Directed Statutory Functions: Interim Corporate Parenting Report
Q1 & Q2 2024/25**

| <u>For Decision</u> | <u>For Discussion</u> | <u>For Noting</u> |
|---|---|---|
| Requires majority decision prior to implementation or action. | Requires consideration and debate. | Contains information Members should be made aware. |

1.0 Background

The Interim Corporate Parenting Report provides an overarching assurance framework for the discharge of Directed Statutory Social Care functions in relation to Corporate Parenting covering the period 1 April to 30 September 2024.

2.0 Key Issues

The following issues relate to the Trust’s inability to meet its statutory function (Article 17 (a) assessment of services and Article 18 (a) provision of services) as outlined in the Children (NI) Order 1995 during this reporting period. All issues contained in this report have been raised with the SPPG. These issues are summarised below:

Children in Need referrals: (10.1.4)

Due to workforce issues with Gateway’s administration teams there have been ongoing problems with the recording of child in need referrals on the SOS CARE system leading to the underreporting of referrals to the SPPG.

Unallocated cases:

At the end of this reporting period, 699 cases were unallocated in Children’s Services. The majority of these cases are situated within children with disability teams (538), with Safeguarding (112) and Gateway (49) services also being affected.

Children looked after by the Trust: (10.3.3)

753 children are looked after by the Trust in this reporting period, this is an increase of 65.

Separated or unaccompanied asylum seeking children:

Pressure continues in meeting the needs of separated or unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). The Trust is accommodating 63 such young people at report end, an increase of 17 since 1st April. There are significant pressures on the Trust to secure appropriate and timely accommodation to meet the needs of these young people.

Bespoke Placements:

The Trust supports 2 bespoke placements for care leavers, 3 placements for children in high cost children’s homes and 3 residential placements outside of NI. A further 3 children have been assessed as needing high cost / bespoke residential care

provision. These placements are necessary due to the complexity in assessed need and commissioning gaps in services.

Placement provision in foster care: (10.3.20)

There continue to be 140 young people cared for by the Trust in placements not approved within the statutory timescales.

An insufficient range of placement options resulted in 39 young people cared for by the Trust placed in inappropriate placements in relation to their assessed need in this reporting period.

Ongoing issues with the recruitment of foster carers has led to continued overreliance on independent providers (123) providing placements for children looked after by the Trust.

Children and Young People with a Disability: (10.3.5)

Short break provision has remained at a reduced level during this reporting period, providing 278 overnight stays for 143 young people.

Data:

Industrial action within Children's Services in this reporting period impacted on the Trust's ability to complete all statistical returns impacting on 10.1.11; 10.3.13; 10.3.15; 10.3.16; 10.3.17 and 10.3.29.

Belfast Trust have been unable to supply the information required for the Trust to report on 10.3.10 following the move to Encompass.

3.0 Resources Implications (inc Organisational, Financial, Human Resources)

Workforce: The Trust continued to face difficulties recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of qualified social workers. Three areas within Children's Services have social work vacancy rates of over 20%, these are safeguarding (20.6%); residential care (25.5%) and children with disability (47.4%).

Recruitment and retention of social workers is a regional issue and the Trust continues to engage with regional colleagues and the Department of Health (DoH) to deliver an annual recruitment plan to address this challenge.

Ongoing action short of strike (ASOS) and strike action affected the delivery of services during this reporting period.

Financial:

An increased number of young people in care including UASC, bespoke placements and reliance on independent sector placements continue to place considerable fiscal pressures on the Trust.

4.0 Impact on Safety, Quality and Experience (SQE)

The inability to recruit permanently to various roles and ongoing industrial action will continue to impact service provision.

5.0 Key Risks and Proposals to Mitigate

Children in Need referrals: (10.1.4)

A corrective action plan implemented and the issue remains on the Directorate Risk Register.

Unallocated cases:

Enhanced governance arrangements are in place for all unallocated cases across Children's Services ensuring an appropriate level of risk management.

Separated or unaccompanied asylum seeking children:

The Trust continues to explore all options to increase the availability of accommodation for this population and is engaged in regional and local work in relation to development of appropriate business cases. This includes the creation of a new team to meet the increase in needs and demands of this service user group.

Placement provision in foster care: (10.3.20)

Enhanced governance arrangements ensure oversight of unregulated placements and the Trust is compliant with reporting arrangements to the SPPG.

The Trust continues to review, track and monitor placements through the monthly resource panel and referral meetings to address demand and capacity issues. The report outlines the number of regional and Trust led initiatives and events held within the reporting period to support the recruitment of new foster carers.

Data:

SPPG has been made aware in advance of the directed statutory functions report being submitted by the Trust where ASOS has created issues with data submissions as detailed in the report.

DSF Action Plans:

The social work leads maintain regular contact with the SPPG and are progressing in all actions identified within the DSF Action Plans to mitigate against the identified areas of concern.

Lead Director: Lyn Preece, Director of Children's Services & Executive Director of Social Work

Date: 19 November 2024