

Commissioner's Report to the Secretary of State

(1) Introduction

As Commissioner for Children's Social Care in Doncaster since August 2013, I have been accountable to the Secretary of State for the successful establishment of a Trust to take over the delivery of children's social care services in Doncaster, and have also provided appropriate oversight of on-going measures to improve children's social care in Doncaster.

I am pleased to report that we are on track for the Doncaster Children's Services Trust to be fully operational from the 30th September. This report updates you both on the establishment of the Trust, and on service improvement. The report also outlines my views on the role of Commissioner, and makes a recommendation about the end of my post.

When appointed as Commissioner, I was asked to draw on my experiences to offer views on improvement to children's social care services more broadly, and on solutions to failure in particular. I have therefore included my reflections on the strategic significance of the Doncaster Children's Services Trust, and some of the lessons learned, in this context.

(2) Establishing the Trust

The Doncaster Children's Services Trust will be the first of its kind in the country– an independent not-for-profit company, wholly focused on driving improvements in children's social care.

As the set-up phase comes to a close, it is vital that the experience and lessons learned from establishing the Doncaster Children's Services Trust are built into the Department's memory in order to inform any future projects. The Department has commissioned an independent evaluation of the Trust set-up. This will report in 2015 and Deloitte will produce a lessons learned report this autumn. As Commissioner, I would identify the following features as important in ensuring the successful establishment of an independent Trust:

- *Clear focus on independence and autonomy* – Establishing the Trust has been a joint endeavour with Doncaster MBC. It has been important to be flexible in the approach to discussion with the council, whilst maintaining a clear focus on the key objective of ensuring independence and autonomy for the Trust.
- *Separation of Trust establishment and ongoing improvement* – All parties have been clear that the urgent work required to stabilise and improve services for

vulnerable children and families in Doncaster needed to proceed in tandem with the establishment of the Trust. Establishing the Trust has taken around one year, and during that time the council has made progress in service improvement, as detailed in this report. Establishing the Trust did not distract from service improvement.

- *Strong project architecture and management* – With several parties playing a role in establishing the Trust, strong project architecture and project management have ensured a coordinated approach, with appropriate vehicles for taking timely decisions and managing risk, with the Commissioner intervening to resolve any significant points of contention.
- *Guidance and direction of consultants* – The Department appointed Deloitte to provide consultancy services to enable the establishment of the Trust. This has ensured appropriate due diligence, and strong project management. Where necessary, I have offered guidance and direction to the consultancy team, to ensure alignment with the agreed timescales and objectives for the Trust.
- *Early appointment of Chair and CE* – Both the appointment of the Chair and of the Chief Executive were key points in the process of establishing the Trust, increasing momentum and direction. The Chair was in place by February 2014, and he played a strong role in shaping the structure of the Trust, in discussions with Doncaster Council and DfE.

The overall cost of establishing the Trust is around £6.5 million, including set-up costs incurred by the council, the Trust in shadow form, and the Department through payments to suppliers. This is a considerable cost, but I judge it to be reasonable for this complex and innovative solution. I have ensured that officials have interrogated these costs thoroughly, with value for money a key consideration.

The Trust must now begin the process of rapidly improving the delivery of social care. In doing that it will need to know it has the ongoing encouragement of the Department. The six-monthly report from the Chair of the Trust to the Secretary of State will be a very important component of ensuring the Trust is accountable to the public. But, the Trust must maximise the benefit to be derived from its independence and autonomy if it is to be successful.

There is also the prospect of further council services that relate to children being incorporated into the Doncaster Children's Services Trust. This was part of Doncaster Council's proposal to the Department in August 2013, and was one of the reasons that the previous Secretary of State chose to adopt a model where the council retained its statutory functions. I am therefore pleased to note the commitment to review whether and which services should transfer after the Trust has been operational for a year.

(3) Improvement

My previous reports have presented a picture of continuing progress, while identifying what needs to improve further. That is as true today as it was in October 2013 when Doncaster's cabinet agreed the improvement plan to take forward a wide strategic agenda to deliver quality services alongside significant work to establish a Trust as a model for future delivery. The Council's ambitions have focused on improving services and achieving the best for children and families. They have remained alert to ensuring that services keep children safe and on continuous scrutiny of social care but have also agreed a strategy for reformed ways of working and delivering better outcomes for children.

The Council worked with an improvement partner, Impower, to explore options and models for the delivery of the service. With the establishment of the Trust and a focus on delivery, the partnership has now tapered off but Doncaster has continued to work closely with a range of experts and has welcomed the advice and support of improvement advisors from your Department, across Government and from the wider sector. I have been forthright in stressing the importance of delivering improvements alongside the challenges of due diligence required to establish the Trust. Services are, as a result, in a better place now than they were 12 months ago, i.e:

- aspirations for the services are agreed and clearer for partners including an early help offer;
- the council has a better grip and through monitoring there is greater assurance that children and families are getting the right support at the right time;
- shortfalls in practice are being identified and addressed, audit information shows there is still work to do;
- the workforce is more stable – less agency staff and continued steady recruitment of social workers; and
- efficiencies have been made including savings in placement and agency staffing costs.

The Council has provided regular reports to me, their Cabinet and to the DfE improvement adviser. Better performance information, which was previously poorly recorded and rarely analysed now provides an insight into the service. The DfE improvement adviser and I have also seen the activity first hand, we have listened to partner agencies in a variety of forums including a development day and meetings of the Doncaster Children Safeguarding Board, observed monthly staff meetings, taken part in the Council Social Care Performance Challenge sessions with team managers and through one to one discussions with senior managers and social work staff. The Council's own report 'A Year of Improvement : Making a positive difference

to the quality and effectiveness of Children's Services in Doncaster' August 2014 documents in detail the work they have been doing in the last period.

Colin Hilton, Chair of the Trust, wrote to you in July and he said, that "there is evidence of improvement in terms of developing frontline practice, quality assurance systems and case management. There is also improved stability in the workforce, a much clearer focus by the political and managerial leadership and an improvement in the use of professional supervision."

My own assessment mirrors theirs. The challenges for the Trust are no different to those that the Council have started to face and deal with. The pace in some areas has been slow but the improvement priorities are now clear and the Trust is working on its own improvement plan to increase the pace of improvement and to inform its business objectives. In addition, I would want to see:

- a greater focus on high quality social work through effective supervision, case work auditing and professional development alongside a renewed campaign to recruit skilled and experienced social workers
- work to use the voices of children and families to directly inform the improvement of services;
- a greater sense of shared ownership and action across the partnership to deliver early help;
- clearer commissioning to bring about greater efficiency and clarity about who can help and how;
- a fully functioning, effective and compliant Doncaster Safeguarding Children Board; and
- a clear set of performance indicators, that can be used to drive improvement, which reflect the characteristics of an 'outstanding' local authority, including timescales, volumes, and quality of practice.

(4) Role of Commissioner

As Commissioner, it has been crucial to report directly to the Secretary of State, in order to demonstrate the high priority placed on the establishment of the Trust, and giving me the authority to step in where needed. This has been acknowledged by the council and others involved in the set-up process, and has proved to be effective in practice.

In my role, I have been supported by the Department's project team, and have used our regular meetings and the resulting notes to develop a workplan and to keep on track of the key objectives in establishing the Trust. Having clear and up to date

information and advice from both the DfE project team and improvement adviser has enabled me to keep an informed watching brief, allowing me to step-in on issues where necessary, whilst avoiding my becoming overly involved in the day to day details.

A further important aspect of my role has been private discussion with the Chair of Trust and the Director for Children's Services where needed. This frank exchange has moved issues forward swiftly, and avoid the need for further escalation. This has helped to establish a shared understanding of issues and a commitment to improving children's services.

(5) Concluding Comments

The establishing of an autonomous, independent Trust is the correct response to the agency failure to improve children's social care in Doncaster. The constructive and focused approach of the local authority's Chief Executive and elected Mayor, from their response to the report presented to the Secretary of State by Professor Le Grand and myself, through to spirited while timely contract discussions bodes well for the strong sense of partnership between the local authority and the independent Trust which will be an essential underpinning for success. The Council is due much credit for its approach to ensuring the Trust is established as an independent, autonomous body while ensuring a clear role for the Council to ensure it is able to deliver its statutory duties.

I believe that the development of the DCST is a new innovative and vitally important departure in the delivery of effective services for children and families. It is a model which has the potential to be introduced in other areas and provides a real alternative to allowing failure to continue or for modest incremental progress to stagger on for years.

The work I was commissioned to do is completed with the formal launch of the Trust on 30th September 2014. I would like to thank you for extending this opportunity to me, and I have been proud to have been part of this new way forward.

Finally, can I say how well I have been supported by all of the officials involved in this project, especially the project team supporting me. Their determination to get this right, their enthusiasm for the development and their sheer hard work have been admirable and ensured the delivery of the Trust.

Yours sincerely

Alan Wood