



BIRMINGHAM
**Safeguarding
Children**
PARTNERSHIP

Independent Chair's Accountability Report 2022-23



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1. Introduction to my 7th Accountability Report

- 1.1 This is my 7th Accountability Report as Independent Chair. You might reasonably ask whether I can still be independent after seven years. Well, independence is a frame of mind; and I still have that. That does not stop me from being absolutely committed to our shared purpose of ensuring and assuring improvement in how children, young people and families in Birmingham are supported to be safe and to flourish. This long-term ambition to continuously improve our safeguarding arrangements was never going to be a quick fix, so staying around has allowed me to gauge progress in a very real sense. Furthermore, there are not so many of the senior leaders whom I convene, who were here in their roles seven years ago. Hence, I have been able to see, experience and evidence progress, and hopefully to provide some continuity. The description of my role is attached as Appendix 1.
- 1.2 I'm delighted to say that the progress I am witness to has recently been reinforced by the [Inspection of Birmingham City Council Local Authority Children's Services](#) (ILACS) by Ofsted. This wide-ranging Inspection took place between 20th February and 3rd March 2023 and was published on 18th April 2023. For the first time their unequivocal conclusions were:
- The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families - GOOD
 - The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection - GOOD
 - The experiences and progress of children in care - GOOD
 - The experiences and progress of care leavers - GOOD
 - Overall effectiveness - GOOD
- 1.3 Ofsted evidence that "much progress has been made" since the last inspection in 2018. These judgements formed by listening to children and young people, practitioners and partner professionals and scrutinising records, provide valuable assurance to the public.
- 1.4 The lead provider of these services, Birmingham Children's Trust, can be justly proud of their positive impact, and the Local Authority and Partners can take their share of responsibility for the effectiveness of the improvement journey so far. Clearly there is no room for complacency; complacency is the enemy of excellence. Instead, I see ambition to continue to improve, to support families in communities, and to learn from this inspection.
- 1.5 Satisfyingly, two key areas highlighted for further partnership progress are already priorities in our forthcoming [Business Improvement Plan 2023-25](#). They are
"Ensuring effective implementation of the Childhood Neglect Strategy (2022-26)"
and
"Assuring a coordinated and coherent inter-agency response to children impacted by domestic abuse and violence in families".

- 1.6 Lots of key strengths are highlighted: Children’s Advice and Support Service (CASS); Emergency Duty Team (EDT); Good Child Protection Assessments with a clear analysis of risks; timely allocation of Social Workers; appropriate thresholds for proceeding to Initial Child Protection Conferences; strong relationships between social workers and children; an effective specialist team for children at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation - EmpowerU. I could go on. Instead, I commend the [report](#) to you and congratulate all involved for the progress so far, knowing that it will be built on.
- 1.7 For the rest of my Accountability Report, I will reflect on key aspects of the Independent Chair’s role; undertake a high-level reflection on the past year from the perspective of Safeguarding; review progress against our priorities and offer a few concluding remarks about the next steps on our improvement journey.

2. Convening, Assurance and Accountability

- 2.1 My role is fulfilled on behalf of Accountable Safeguarding Partners: Chief Constable of West Midlands Police; Chief Executive of Birmingham City Council (BCC); Chief Executive and Accountable Officer for the NHS Birmingham & Solihull Integrated Care Board and Chief Executive of Birmingham Children’s Trust.
- 2.2 They, or their delegated Safeguarding Leads, sit on the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership Executive Board and share responsibility for our Safeguarding Children governance and accountability arrangements.
- 2.3 I would like to thank Andy Couldrick (Chief Executive, Birmingham Children’s Trust); Sue Harrison (Director of Children’s Services, Birmingham City Council); Richard North (Chief Superintendent, West Midlands Police); Lisa Stalley-Green (Deputy CEO and Chief Nursing Officer, NHS Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board) for being the locally accountable leaders, for being the Safeguarding Leaders Group. Last year I described some senior churn in all the key organisations apart from the Birmingham Children’s Trust. This year the senior leaders are an established team and their presence and commitment is valued and valuable.
- 2.4 I convene and chair the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership (The Safeguarding Partnership) on behalf of these partners and I support and challenge without fear or favour in the best interests of children and young people. I seek to assure the effective running of The Safeguarding Partnership through direct observation, analysis of data, and quality feedback. I endeavour to be visible and accessible, encouraging openness, learning, mature relationships, and a commitment to improve partnership engagement and performance.
- 2.5 Now that we have moved out of the acute Covid pandemic, we are acclimatising to a new normal which involves a mix of face to face and virtual meetings. We are now holding Executive Board meetings, Safeguarding Leaders Assemblies and the annual Practitioner Conference face to face and some Sub-Groups too. However, we have found that quarterly Practitioner Forum sessions and some Sub-Group meetings work

better virtually. Many 1:1 and small meetings work well virtually. Hybrid meetings are the most challenging, largely because the technical kit is seldom up to the challenge. That said, our March 2023 Executive Board meeting was held at Birmingham Children's Trust Lifford House, where a state-of-the-art Child Protection Conferencing Suite is a huge asset for respectfully engaging with families and children.

- 2.6 I attend at least one of each of the [Sub-Groups](#) during the year as an essential way of achieving assurance on the living of our values, sharing of common purpose and active pursuit of our priorities. Increasingly, I am impressed by the maturity of these vital elements in our arrangements - the co-chairing; respectful open challenging discussions and the delivery of quality products. These products include: conferences and courses from Learning & Development; insightful audits and reviews from Quality, Impact and Outcomes; and thoughtful, valuable reviews and Learning Lessons Briefing Notes from Serious Cases telling powerful stories and describing action orientated improvements.
- 2.7 The Safeguarding Leaders and I meet regularly, virtually, to plan agendas, problem solve and chart progress. Through so doing, we build and sustain the strong fundamental relationships that are at the heart of our Safeguarding arrangements.
- 2.8 Cllr Karen McCarthy took over responsibility for Children and Families in the Council Cabinet and has been a regular observer at the Executive Board, member at the Safeguarding Leaders Assembly and a present and involved councillor on behalf of children and families. Last year I reported that Councillor John Cotton who chairs the Community Safety Partnership has supported us in contributing to Home Office consultation on Offensive Weapons Homicide Reviews (OWHR) and asking for the age limit to be reduced so that young people's cases can be brought into the new arrangements. I am afraid that we have not been successful so far, despite growing support for this position from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (National Panel) and evidence to support our position. I have written to the Minister Claire Coutinho, Chair of the new Child Protection Ministerial Group to seek cross-departmental support for the removal of the age criteria from the OWHR guidance. We await a response.
- 2.9 This year's two Safeguarding Leaders Assemblies were held in April and November. April's Safeguarding Leaders' Assembly benefitted from the Council Chief Executive Deborah Cadman OBE and her Director of Partnerships Richard Brooks, presenting on ambitious plans for children by the Council and a commitment to develop a City Observatory whose data would be available to assist all organisations in planning, delivery and evaluation of the impact of services. Birmingham's ambition to become a UNICEF accredited "Child Friendly City" is really exciting focusing on support, empowerment and prevention, principles that both The Safeguarding Partnership and the Birmingham Children & Young People's Partnership advocate.
- 2.10 November's Safeguarding Leaders' Assembly valued hearing in person from Kerry Littleford who was once in the care of Birmingham. She gave testimony to the lived experience of childhood neglect and is an inspiration as she forges a career in Public

Health. Her insights into the empathy and efficacy (or otherwise) of professionals was powerful. The year's theme of recognising and tackling neglect was given added impact by the publication of learning from one of our serious cases referred to in paragraph number 4.2.2. At the Safeguarding Leaders' Assembly we shared that learning and played the [film](#) made to explain the best treatment and management of childhood asthma.

- 2.11 Birmingham continues to play a key convening role in the regional arrangements supporting Children's safeguarding. The West Midlands Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements' (MASA) Network is co-chaired by Simon Cross our Business Manager with Liz Murphy Independent Scrutineer (Sandwell). The group oversees the maintenance of online multi-agency safeguarding procedures, regularly shares learning from case reviews, and this year held a successful in-person development session with the National Panel in December 2022, facilitated by the respected Dez Holmes, Director of Research in Practice (RiP). The session committed the Group to building on its learning culture by sharing "promising practice" and holding regular development sessions, including key contributions for the National Panel. It committed itself to further work to make progress in the area of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.
- 2.12 The positive contribution of the National Panel to regional and local leadership and practice has been a notable positive feature of the last few years. The constructive, thoughtful style and production of analytical themed reports is adding real value. And in individual cases the panel offers helpful feedback.
- 2.13 As a founding member of the Birmingham Children and Young People's Partnership with its ambition for all Birmingham's Children to thrive, I look forward to the publication of the Children's Plan and the investment in universal services as well as targeted support to the neediest parts of the city. On behalf of that Partnership, I am the nominated representative on the Birmingham City Partnership Board. Its most recent two meetings focussed on Diversity and Inclusion and then Housing, and both received presentations on the City Observatory revealing its potential as the repository for data which can be interrogated by partners to support developments and enhance understanding.

3. Review of the Year 2022-23

- 3.1 I don't remember a busier year.
- 3.2 There have been ten Rapid Reviews of serious cases and incidents which have required assiduous review and analysis of learning to meet the challenging 15 working day timetable expected of us. We have cascaded the learning from Rapid Reviews and published one [Serious Case Review](#), which I describe further below at paragraph number 4.2.2. Of those ten Rapid Reviews, four are now the subject of a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review and one Mental Health Homicide Review.

- 3.3 The variety of cases in terms of ages of children and types of situations, suggest more relevance to the pressures from the Covid and cost of living crises than systemic partnership issues. The reviews have highlighted important learning on Childhood Neglect, non-accidental injuries to very young infants and serious youth violence. Our launch of the [“Never, Ever Shake a Baby”](#) campaign was timely and is regularly shared on social media and has been adopted by other safeguarding partnerships across the West Midlands region.
- 3.4 The workforce pressures have been evident. At the annual [Practitioner’s Conference](#) in September 2022 many attendees were able to share their experience of the pressures of working in this area of public service. They cited the aftermath of Covid; increasing poverty and the cost-of-living crisis for staff as well as the families they support; straightened resources; staff turnover and burnout. It seems that increasing polarisation of attitudes and a loss of value for public services also are playing their part in the pressures on staff at all levels.
- 3.5 I cannot underestimate the impact of the [National Panel Report into the deaths of Arthur and Star](#) in the Spring of 2022. We took the opportunity to assess ourselves against its findings as we had following the Ofsted Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) in neighbouring Solihull. I recognise that a significant number of safeguarding leaders in our area had very direct experience of the impact of Arthur’s death. Our practitioners too endured challenging times with the media spotlight on the area bringing some hostility and unwelcome attention. That said, the National Panel’s care and constructive approach to sharing learning and supporting practice was valuable. A practice webinar was well attended.
- 3.6 This year saw the step change in progress towards delivery of a meaningful local interagency Early Help Family Support Offer, supported by development of a well consulted upon, researched and resourced Children’s Plan which will be launched shortly. The Safeguarding Partnership warmly recognises the work of colleagues in the Early Help and Partnership Operations groups. We know that early recognition and support can prevent the escalation of problems and harm.
- 3.7 Increasingly, we are noticing two themes which require more attention from The Safeguarding Partnership and will be at the heart of our next improvement plan.
- 3.8 The first is the need for more recognition of race, racism, and the notion of “adultification” as it affects some black and brown young people. Despite the excellent work to develop the Empower U Hub and to recognise exploitation and harm outside the home, we self critically consider that we have given insufficient attention to the cultural competence of practitioners in all settings. This is evident from several of our Rapid Reviews and Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews.
- 3.9 The second issue is at least partly attributable to the impact of the Covid pandemic. Since then, there has been an increase in the number of children who are out of sight of services and of support. Whether this is because of an increase in Elective Home

Education, school absence and exclusions; pressures on housing and/or a reduction in the ease of accessibility to universal services, it is a very concerning development.

4. Review of partnership priorities

4.0.1 I've been pleased that the four safeguarding priorities in our Business Improvement Plan 2021-23 have continued to focus on partnership endeavour. I can offer assurance that progress has been made and I will offer a number of examples to evidence this, expecting that the triennial review will give more detail and data.

4.1 Strong Leadership & Strong Partnership demonstrating effective accountability

4.1.1 The Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership's agenda for effective fulfilment of its role and relentless improvement is captured in the Business Improvement Plan 2021-23. Ownership and accountability comes from the Executive Board and delivery is the responsibility of Sub-Groups, Task and Finish groups and projects. Oversight of implementation is undertaken by the Business Support team, its Programme Managers and its leader, Simon Cross, Business Manager. I must recognise the volume and quality of work they undertake. The capacity of the team has been strained during this year due to the volume of work and some vacancies. That Rapid Reviews were all undertaken on time and to a high standard, with monitored action plans is to their credit. That all the Sub-Groups are purposeful, with co-chairs well supported is essential.

4.1.2 Two key initiatives in the current plans are the ['Working Together to Build Strong Family Foundations' \(Neglect Strategy 2022-2026\)](#) which is well referenced elsewhere in this report, and the appointment of a Faith Project Co-ordinator; Junaid Akhtar. This second development was in part a result of National Reviews into safeguarding involving organised religion and our recognition of gaps in support for these bodies locally. It was also an acknowledgement of Birmingham's "super- diversity". The [project](#) is well underway and the Partnership will invest in a second year of the Faith Project Co-ordinator to progress the establishment of an effective network of Designated Safeguarding Leads and the support to them through advice and guidance.

4.1.3 This year we introduced a regular Safeguarding Leaders Group. This is a virtual meeting of the four core accountable safeguarding leaders with me. It reviews progress, problem solves, and plans agendas. It is proving a valuable addition to our calendars and ways of working.

4.1.4 I was contacted by Jenny Turnross, Director of Practice from the Birmingham Children's Trust following the terrible drowning incident in December 2022, at the pond on the border of Solihull and Birmingham. Three of the four young boys who drowned came from Birmingham originally. Jenny noticed and was concerned at the

profound impact of the incident, not just on the local community but also frontline practitioners and Senior Managers involved in responding to the tragedy. As a result, we convened an extra-ordinary Executive Board meeting. Its purpose was to acknowledge and debrief the incident and to ensure that we had done all that was necessary to offer support at every level. The escalation of this issue demonstrated a healthy partnership and recognised the cumulative impact of the times through which people have practised and led. The resulting communication from the partnership to staff received some warm appreciation.

- 4.1.5 As well as meeting with Partnership leaders, I regularly meet with the Chief Executives of the Council, the NHS Birmingham & Solihull Integrated Care Board and the Chair of the Children's Trust. I meet with Chief Superintendent and the Detective Chief Superintendent responsible for Birmingham and for the Public protection Unit and I look forward to meeting the new Chief Constable, Craig Guildford.
- 4.1.6 Annually, I attend Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and this year had an informal meeting with the incoming Chair too.
- 4.1.7 Recently, I attended the Health Safeguarding Forum and was very assured by its attendance, spirit, knowledge and commitment and by the leadership from the Chief Nurse and Deputy Chief Executive Office of NHS Birmingham & Solihull Integrated Care Board who chairs this important monthly meeting.

4.2 Continuously Improve Child Safeguarding Practice across the system and in all agencies

- 4.2.1 The feedback from the National Panel on the timeliness, cogency and effectiveness of our decisions on Rapid Reviews provides evidence to support our continuous improvement in practice.
- 4.2.2 A distressing and impactful review was published on 1st September 2022. We entitled the Learning Lessons Briefing Note "[*I take care of myself whilst mum is asleep*](#)" quoting from the 7-year-old who died from an asthma attack in 2017. His mother was convicted of his neglect. This review led to one of our clinical health leads making a valuable [film](#) outlining the learning on best management of asthma, which is accessible to all and has been commended by the National Panel. There was profound learning for all agencies not least of all, the importance of hearing and acting on the lived experience of children. Once again, I am reminded of my takeaway from the Victoria Climbié review: "Never Assume".
- 4.2.3 Our Quality, Impact and Outcomes (QIO) Sub-Group does valuable work on behalf of the partnership and when I attended its meeting in December for scrutiny and assurance purposes, I was impressed by the robustness with which it was examining Elective Home Education (EHE). It was highlighting the excellent developments in the "team around the school" but recognising that some children are invisible and missing out. And numbers of those in EHE are rising with staffing numbers and practice not keeping pace with developments. It was encouraging that a speedy Peer Review is

constructively contributing to an agenda of service improvements. Exclusions and the impact of Homelessness on children have both been spotlighted by QIO and led to action which will be reviewed to ensure sufficient positive impact is made. In the case of exclusions, it has been agreed that consideration of a primary exclusion should be a red flag and lead to multi-agency action via Children’s Advice and Support Service (CASS). This is being enshrined into the revised “Right Help, Right Time” partnership practice guidance. There is not yet assurance that this intent is yet fully implemented; indeed concerns raised by QIO were escalated to March’s Executive Board meeting as a substantive item. The Strategic Director of Children & Families acknowledges and is taking action on this issue. She is clear that there should be rapid progress from the Autumn of 2023.

4.2.4 Quarterly Practitioner Forum sessions are a means of connecting with frontline colleagues. We provide a Safeguarding update and Question and Answer session at each one, with a themed presentation additionally. In June that [theme](#) was consultation on a new [Safeguarding Partnership website](#) led by Katherine Adams our Social Media and Communications officer.

4.2.5 In December the presentation was focussed on awareness raising about [Female Genital Mutilation \(FGM\)](#) and was given by DC Gillian Squires. Both sessions’ contents were summarised in a widely disseminated bulletin.

4.2.6 The latest Practitioner Forum was held on 22nd March 2023, entitled [“Safeguarding Children who are ‘Out of Sight’ is Everyone’s Business](#), focussing on children who are in Electively Home Educated. The Forum was well attended (58 participants) and benefited hugely from Razia Butt’s ‘Safeguarding Children who are ‘Out of Sight’ is Everyone’s Business’ presentation.

4.2.7 Annually, we hold a whole day in person conference and this year that took place in September and its title was “Working Together to Stop Child Neglect in Birmingham”. We launched the [Neglect Strategy 2022-26 and the Neglect Toolkit](#).

4.2.8 Investing in Practice through multi-disciplinary learning and development, conferences and forum meetings is regarded by the Partnership as vitally important and a valuable connection.

4.3 Developing an effective multi-agency response to Child and Adolescent Neglect

4.3.1 The Partnership Neglect Strategy was launched at the [Practitioner Conference](#) in September 2022 as mentioned above. The Partnership has funded a dedicated Neglect Lead Manager to lead on the Neglect Strategy development, training and implementation. The powerful presentations at the conference from an academic Professor Jan Howarth and a Public Health professional with lived experience, Kerry Littleford, served to underline the vital importance of this work. A [Neglect Toolkit](#) designed to assist practitioners, incorporating the NSPCC “Graded Care Profile 2 (GCP2) assessment tool was also launched as part of the strategy. There has been

some push back from practitioners who are concerned about their time capacity to undertake this work. It is hoped practitioners will welcome the Neglect Toolkit and see it as an aid and not a burden, then practice will continue to be developed and lead to increasingly positive outcomes for children. We cannot ignore that our Reviews of serious cases have shone a light on learning around childhood neglect.

4.3.2 Recently West Midlands Police have introduced the AWARE app (Appearance, Words, Activity, Relationships & dynamics, Environment) to support police to understand the lived experience of children and young people that they interact with. This new initiative has been universally welcomed; it is hoped that this good practice could be adapted for much wider use by partner organisations.

4.4 Evaluating and addressing the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on safeguarding children.

4.4.1 Our increasing recognition of the phenomenon of “unseen” children has been informed from the emerging learning from one particular review which is still in progress. Audit activity undertaken by QIO has also shone a light on vulnerable children Electively Home Educated and children at risk of exclusions. This coming year will see us taking further action on this issue as a core priority within our new [Business Improvement Plan 2023-25](#).

4.4.2 Covid impacted on our ways of working, as my description of our organisational arrangements now will attest. We developed new skills during Covid. We learnt how to Chair onscreen; and how to have virtual “water cooler” moments to informally network and catchup. We learnt that some people (young people and professionals) find it easier to engage and contribute virtually and we capitalise on this learning, to strike the right balance between face-to-face sessions and effective virtual partnership collaboration.

4.4.3 Finally, as exemplified by our extra-ordinary Executive Board meeting in December, we recognised the cumulative impact of trauma and Covid on professionals and their leaders. And I’m proud that we were able to convene the whole Executive Board at very little notice, to share concerns and agree a number of key messages of support to the whole of the children’s workforce, which is shown in Appendix 2.

5 Conclusions

5.1 When reviewing my notes throughout the year, the most frequently appearing words were “Learning, Neglect, Leadership and Partnership”. The other thing that struck me were the number of powerful, sad stories that have been the material behind those key words.

5.2 What we have much less sense of are the countless stories that we do not hear, the wonderful stories that lead to change and improvement. The stories that highlight skilled committed practitioners whose dedication supports individual babies, children,

young people and their families. It's not that we don't want to highlight promising or even great practice. We do; yet somehow it seems easier to learn from things that go wrong. That said, I am convinced that we have a learning culture and that we look within and up and out to practice and research for pointers to further improvement, for pointers to excellence.

- 5.3 That's where Inspection can be so valuable. I have always tried to view it as free consultancy and live feedback. So that's why the ILACS inspection is so encouraging. It tells us that Birmingham has GOOD services for Children Young people and families with every indication that there are prospects for further improvement. And after seven years, I for one am absolutely delighted. WELL DONE!

6. Appendices

Appendix 1: Role of Independent Chair

Appendix 2: Message from Childrens Safeguarding Leaders, December 2022



Role of BSCP Independent Chair – Leadership of Assurance, Learning, Partnering

Key Functions:

- a) Independent convener of all those charged with the wellbeing, including safeguarding, of children and young people in Birmingham;
- b) A champion for children and best practice;
- c) Independent Chair of the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership Executive Board and Safeguarding Leaders' Assembly;
- d) Supporting and challenging the Birmingham leadership in their quest to achieve a sustainably safe city for children and young people, in the context of family, community and wellbeing;
- e) Modelling openness, challenge, support, mutual respect, professionalism and learning for application by leaders in Birmingham;
- f) Ensuring political and managerial leaders are demonstrably accountable for the resourcing and strategic priority given to the safeguarding and wellbeing of children and young people;
- g) Ensuring the Safeguarding Partners' leadership role is understood, valued, respected and fulfilled;
- h) Demonstrating a robust approach to evaluation, practice audit & research whose dissemination will support valuable learning for multi-agency leaders, managers and practitioners in their critical roles;
- i) Through robust independent support and challenge, contribute to developing confidence of citizens and the state in the city of Birmingham.

From: Penny Thompson
Sent: Monday, December 19, 2022 4:37 PM
Subject: Message from Childrens' Safeguarding Leaders
Importance: High

Dear colleagues, can you please share the below message with employees – thank you.

Dear Colleagues

The frozen lake tragedy has touched all of us profoundly. Additionally, there are a number of serious incidents and cases which all of you are working on.

The Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership Executive held an extraordinary meeting on Friday 16th December 2022, to check-in and immediately review how managers and staff are being supported. We all acknowledged that the response of emergency services and safeguarding colleagues has been exemplary.

We recognise that the impact on all of us has been significant and we want to acknowledge this and encourage everyone to reach out and share. There is no shame in recognising our distress; indeed it is essential for our wellbeing and resilience.

Finally, can we thank you for your professional and caring public service and wish you a happy festive season, hoping that we all get the opportunity for some rest and relaxation.

Best wishes

Penny Thompson CBE Independent Chair Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership	Andy Couldrick Chief Executive Birmingham Childrens Trust	Sue Harrison Director of Children's Services Birmingham City Council	Richard North Chief Superintendent West Midlands Police	Lisa Stalley Green Deputy CEO and Chief Nurse Integrated Care Board Birmingham and Solihull NHS
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