

Child Protection Conference Service Annual Report 2023-2024

July 2024



Foreword

At the heart of the work of Birmingham Children's Trust is a commitment to working in partnership with families and other agencies to enable vulnerable children to remain living with their families where this is safe to do so. Listening to their wishes and feelings, understanding the trauma that families face and acting in their best interests through relationship-based practice is central to our work.

These principles strongly underpin the work of the Child Protection service and how we seek to conduct child protection conferences. Involving families throughout the conference process and seeking their feedback as to their experience enables us to continually improve the way we conduct child protection conferences, which are by their nature difficult and emotive experiences for children and families to engage with.

We have made some significant improvements to how we deliver Child Protection Conferences during the last 12 months, and we can now begin to see some evidence of the impact of these on children and their families. We are keen to build on these developments through the Trust's 2025 programme and through emerging learning from the national Pathfinders. We are committed to working within the wider safeguarding system to prevent children from needing to come to a child protection conference through earlier help and support as well as ensuring that safety planning is timely and effective and leads to better outcomes for the child and their family.



Graham Tilby - Assistant Director, Safeguarding & Partnership

Section 1 – Child Protection Service

We are a city-wide service with one Head of Service and two Assistant Head of Service and twelve and half full time, permanent equivalent Principal Officer (PO) Child Protection positions. The Team has remained stable during the period.

To ensure we have sufficient staffing capacity to meet demand, we have continued to employ two full time interim Principal Officers above our normal establishment. We have recently been given agreement to increase our permanent establishment to 13.5 FTE.

Our ability to organise and facilitate child protection conferences in timescales is inextricably linked to the amount of notice we receive that a conference is required and the number of requests per month. The limited availability of conference slots can be adversely impacted by staff sickness or availability.

We hold monthly study sessions for half a day for the Child Protection and LADO service and a full study day once a quarter. These sessions are an opportunity to promote learning and continual development of our practice.

Section 2 - Engaging children, parents, and professionals in Child Protection Conferences

It is not always suitable for children to attend a child protection conference, but we do keep them at the centre of our discussions and ensure that their views and lived experiences are shared. More children participate virtually with support from a trusted adult, for example a teacher, than attend in person. We are contributing with our Rights and Participation Team to the development of a group for children who have experience of being subject to child protection or child need plan.

We invite parents to provide feedback to either the Principal Officer or via the survey after the conference.

Feedback from parents remains positive about how the meetings are facilitated and the support offered to them by the Principal Officer. The surveys capture feedback from parents/carers and professional partners that attend the child protection conference meetings, focusing on their experiences of attending these conferences as an opportunity to have their concerns heard, and to contribute to our quality assurance of child protection conferences.

Parents and professionals are emailed with a link to the online survey. Between April 2023-24, 21 parents/carers and 442 professionals have completed surveys. We have more limited success with parents' engagement in completing surveys in part due to the nature of child protection conferences.

We must be cautious when analysing feedback when the sample size is so small. The feedback from parents has been similar from last year in general where

"The chair built a positive relationship up with mum which made the meeting significantly more positive than previous meetings. It felt strength based and was a really positive ICPC."

most families report they are given the opportunity to ask questions and share their views, are treated with respect and understood what is being discussed. There have been slightly more parents complaining about not having seen conference reports before the day of the conference. However, we have recognised that we need to offer different ways of seeking parental feedback. We are also taking the opportunity to meet with parents to have conversations about their experience of child protection planning to get enhanced feedback.

We are in the early stages of establishing our family advisory board (FAB) for BCT, as we aspire to build on the partnership with families and being a better children led organisation. Enabling families' voices and lived experience to inform positive change and provide more opportunities for co-production.

We receive more feedback from professionals and overall, the feedback remains positive about the Principal Officers and there appears to be a high degree of confidence with the process and that concerns are taken seriously. It tells us that almost all Conferences are managed well in terms of the timings of the meeting

with everybody given the opportunity to speak.

Almost all felt that meetings maintained a focus on the needs, safety and concerns for the child and majority felt that the child(ren)'s voice was heard at the meeting. Post-meeting, almost all understood the outcomes of the meeting, the plan going forward, and what actions they needed to take to help support the family.

- Chairs managed the timings of the meeting well (94%)
- Everyone had the chance to speak (98%) and partners felt they had the opportunity to share their views (100%) and that their concerns were taken seriously (98%)
- All partners agreed that the meeting focused on the needs, safety, and concern for the children (100%) and most partners felt that the child(ren)'s voices were heard during the meeting (88%).

- All partners understood the outcome of the meeting (100%), and almost all understood the plan going forward (95%) and the action to be taken (92%).
- Most professionals understood all three (outcome, plan, action – 92%); actions to be taken remains the least well understood.

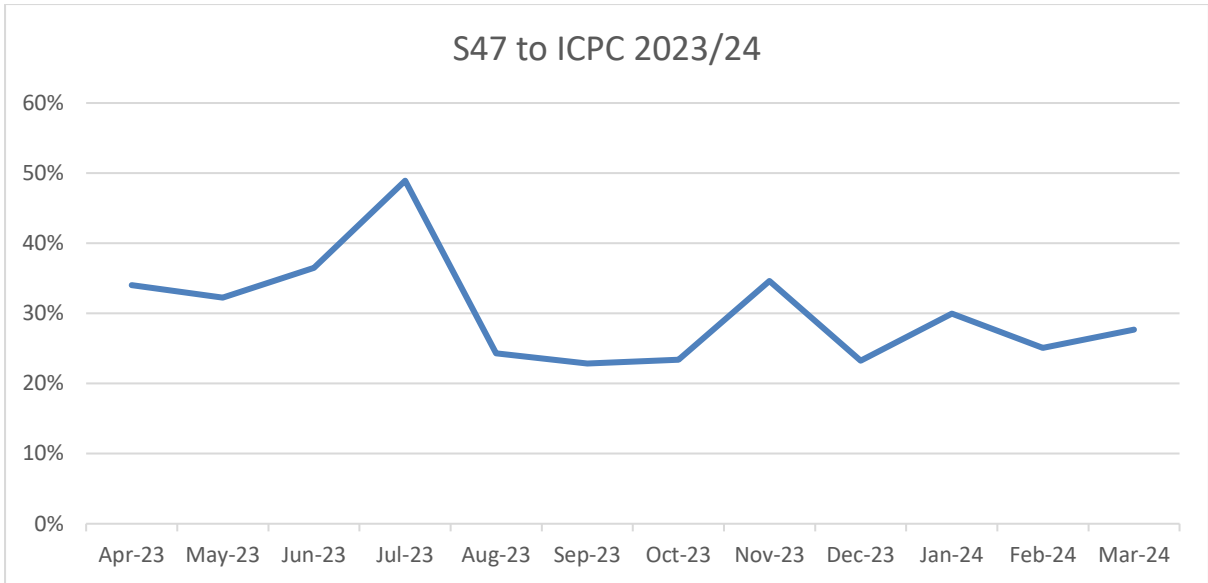
"The Chair was professional, thorough but structured and timely – very respectful of mother's additional needs. Excellent Chair."

We have established a multi- agency forum for the child protection pathway that provides another avenue for feedback from professionals. In addition, this forum has contributed to practice observations and auditing around child protection conferences.

Section 3 – Child Protection Conferences

Diagram 1 below illustrates that the demand for Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) was particularly high during quarter 1 and part of quarter 2. In practical terms this meant that we were holding 20-30 extra ICPCs per month than the previous year. For quarter 3 and 4, we returned to an

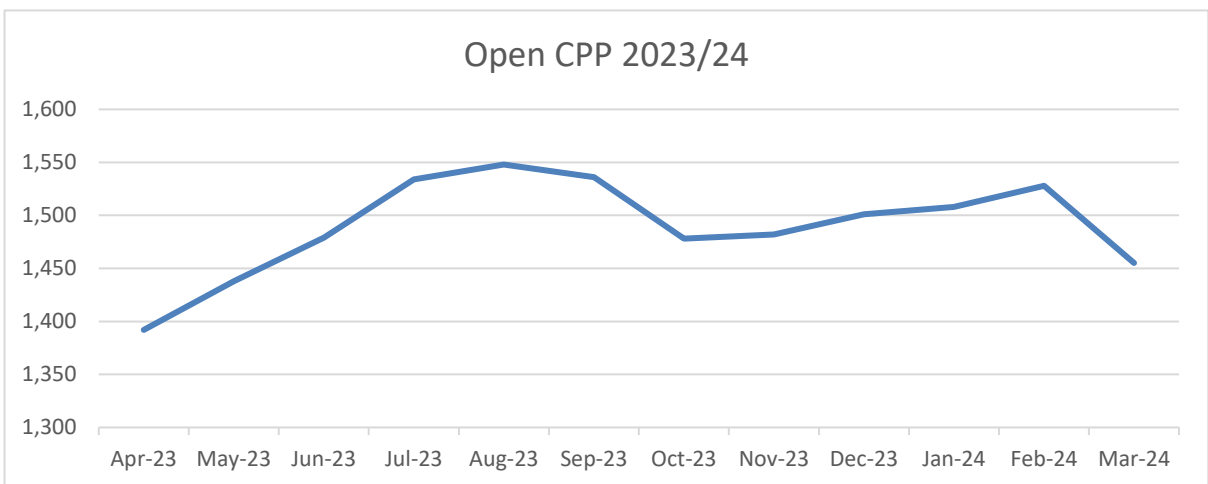
average of 113 ICPCs taking place per month. Despite this, there has been an overall downward trend in the conversion of S47 investigations to ICPC since April 2023.



The increase demand for ICPC earlier this year correlated with higher number of children subject to child protection plans. In August 2023 we reached a high of 1548 children subject to child protection plans. The number of children on child protection plans has stabilised. This is

due to the reduction in demand for ICPC and a period where the rate of children de-listed from child protection plans was like the number made subject to a plan.

This year has seen an increase in the CPP per 10K to 52% up from 46% in 2022/2023; this was comparable to the West Midlands average of 45% per 10K.



Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) timeliness

On average 82% of ICPC's were held within timescales, which is the same as 2022/23 and remains below our target of 85%. Our performance has been marginally better than the West Midlands average of 80% for 2022/2023.

The main reason for ICPC not taking place in time relates to late notifications and on some occasion parents' availability and quoracy. We do not need many ICPC to be held out of time to impact the overall

percentage held in time, especially if these relate to large family groups.

About 90% of children discussed at an ICPC will be made subject to a child protection plan. Therefore, to lower the number of children on plans, we must focus on the decisions made before requesting an ICPC and consider how we can support children and families outside of the child protection pathway.

Review Child Protection Conference (RCPC) timeliness

The main reason RCPC are not held within timescales is when we have an increase demand for ICPC, and we must re-arrange RCPC to accommodate ICPC.

The other reasons relate to accommodating parents' availability, for instance when parents have a hospital appointment for them or the children. We

would prefer to re-arrange the meeting in these circumstances to ensure their participation.

We have seen an improvement of 2% to an average of 84% which is comparable to our statistical West Midlands neighbours but marginally below our target of 85%.



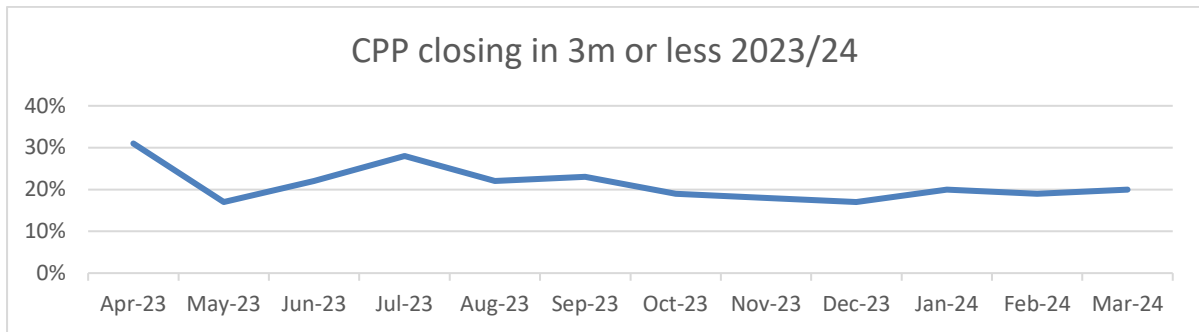
Child Protection Plans (CPP) closing within 3 months or less

The majority of CPP that close within 3 months relate to children who are now being cared for out of the family home when they become children in care. However, we still get some children's plans that end early for one of two main reasons; the first relates to more information has been gathered that enables the risk

assessment to be updated showing that the children can be appropriately supported on a child in need plan. There are times at ICPC when there are gaps in the assessment due us being unable to properly engage the parents. This illustrates that sometimes it may be better to delay coming to ICPC until we have been

able to have a more holistic assessment. The second relates to the circumstances

changing like the family moving to another area.



Long listings

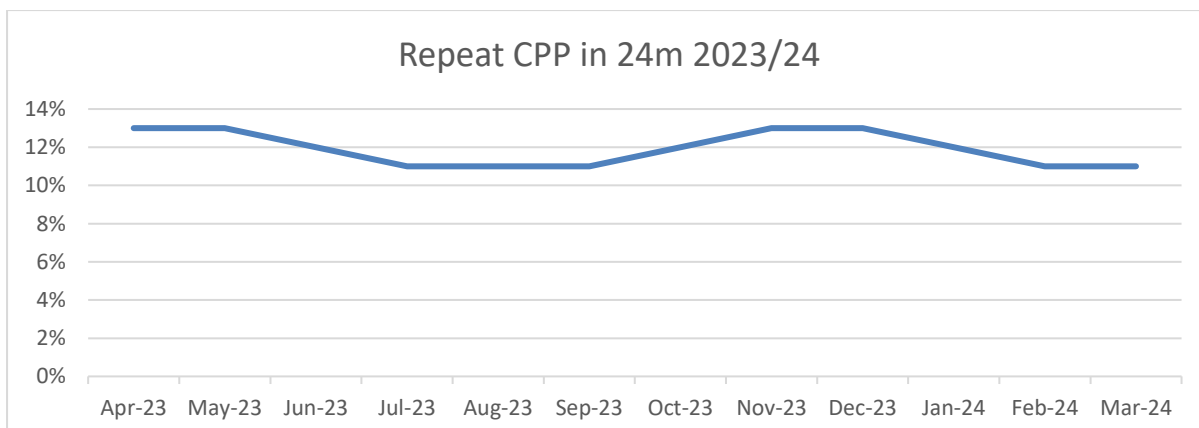
We closely monitor children who have been subject to child protection plan for 2 years plus and using our long listing review process. The long listing process does not review children who are subject to pre-proceedings. The percentage of children subject to a child protection plan for over two years has remained below 2%. The low proportion of plans over 2 years has been positively impacted by targeted collaborative work between the Child Protection & Review Service and Safeguarding Service and has resulted in some children's plans being 'stepped-down' to a child in need arrangement or 'stepped-up' via a Legal Planning Meeting to pre-proceedings within the Family Court.

Repeat Child Protection Plans

The percentage of repeat child protection plans with 24 months has consistently been around 12%. North West and Central and South both average around 13% repeat child protection plans most months. It is worth noting that, however, that from

quarter 2, East has consistently had a less than 10% repeat child protection plans.

In light of the noticeable difference, it would be useful to explore the reasons behind this to see if there is any learning that can be applied to the other areas.



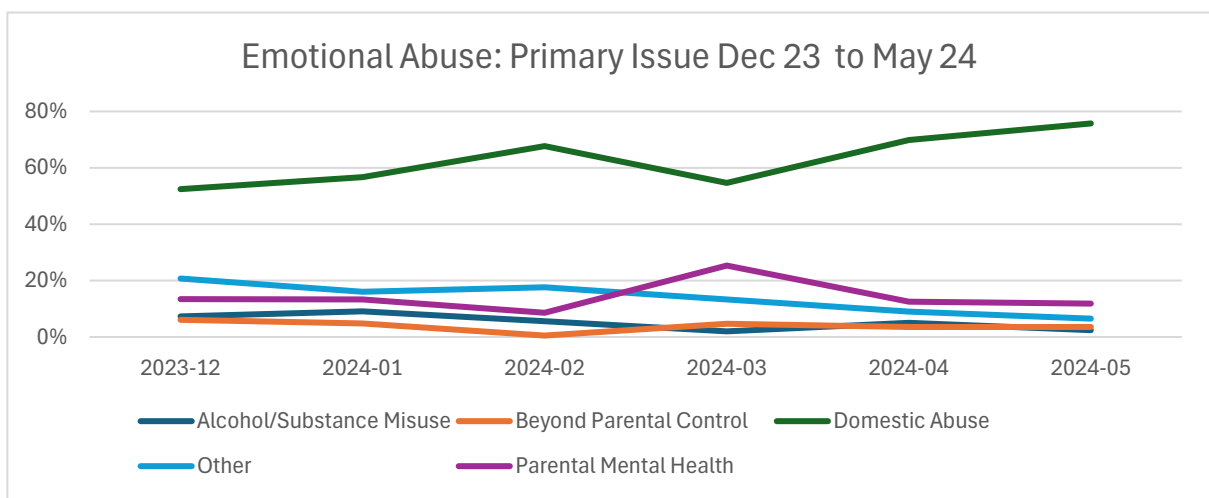
Emotional abuse

We marginally have a higher percentage of children subject to the category of emotional abuse than our statistical neighbours and slightly less than in respect to the category of neglect. 51% of children subject to child protection plans are under the category of emotional abuse.

Consequently, since November 2023 we have been capturing a description for the category of emotional abuse. The primary issue selected shows that domestic abuse

is the main reason factor for children being subject to a child protection plan. The second most common reason relates to parental mental health.

We have undertaken considerable training with the principal officers around domestic abuse and due to its prevalence in Birmingham; means we are not surprised that domestic abuse is such a recurring theme for many children subject to child protection plans.



Section 4 - Conference Facilities and management

We now have two modern conference venues in Aston (One Aston Road) and in Stirchley (Lifford House). Each venue has 6 meetings rooms that we can use for child protection conferences, all of which are equipped with advanced technology to enable professional level hybrid meetings.

Face to face meetings are now business as usual and these tend to lead to better sharing of information and developing of working relationships with children and families. This year, we have noticed an increase from schools requesting to attend virtually. We continue to enable some people to join virtually, in certain

circumstances such as clinicians. The Police tend to submit a report and attend virtually due to level of demand that ICPCs place on their service.

It is important to acknowledge the hard work of our colleagues from Property Facilities, Business Support, and IT in helping move to our new venue.



Partnership working

The Child Protection Partnership Group is a multi-agency forum that strives to work together to improve the child protection pathway, including child protection conferences. This group has helped

undertake multi agency observations of child protection conferences in January 2024. The group has also recently audited the quality of multi-agency reports to conferences.

Conference Screening

We undertake a pre-conference risk screening tool prior to each ICPC to help manage risks and to consider how all parties can participate in the meeting. We provide some scrutiny about threshold for child protection conferences, but we are not always able to complete the pre-conference risk screening tool early enough to divert from ICPC.

We are considering ways to strengthen pre-conference case discussions between the area social work teams and Principal Officer to explore different alternatives to support children and families without the need for a child protection plan.

Production of Minutes and Plans

We implemented a shorter and more concise summary format for child protection conference minutes from June 2024, with the intention of highlighting the key issues and what needs to happen next.

report for the meeting, but these reports are now referred to within the new minute format.

It has always been important for professionals to complete and submit a

We complete the outline child protection plan in the child protection conference and then this is developed further by the core group.

Quality assurance and escalation

There has been more emphasis on raising formal escalations particularly around safety plans and drift and delay. We have seen a steady increase in formal escalations. There were 53 escalations raised by Principal Officers between December 2023 and April 2024 this equated to 23 family groups; these were raised by 11 Principal Officers which is a good cross section of the team.

The most important part about escalation is the outcome for the child. Overall, we get positive resolutions for the escalations we raise in a timely manner, and this has contributed to improved safety planning for children. However, we have a small number of escalations that take too long to resolve to our satisfaction until stepped up to the relevant Assistant Director.

Principal Officers raised between 2 and 5 escalations each during this period. The main reasons for escalations were as follows: Immediate safety, absence of or delay in planning and quality of assessments. The escalations were equally distributed across practice areas.

The number of midpoint checks completed per month has increased and we are averaging over 100 per month, which we consider to be good performance. We will assure ourselves about the quality and impact of the midpoint checks.

Section 5 - Planned Developments for 2024-25

Our planned priorities for development include:

- We will build on our quality assurance process to give more overview of key achievements and challenges related to practice across the child protection system - **By September 2024.**
- Work with key Trust services and partners towards safely reducing the number of children subject to child protection plans – **December 2024**
- We will actively participate in the design of the child protection pathway as part of Trust 2025 - **By April 2025**
- Establish more options to seek feedback from children and parents about their experience of being supported via the child protection pathway to help us improve practice, including the continued developed of the family advisory group - **By September 2024**
- Organise the multi-agency practice observations and audits of child protection conferences – **November 2024**
- With the West Midlands Regional Safeguarding Network organise a conference with a focus on emerging good practice from Pathfinders – **November 2024**

Conclusion

We remain committed to developing and improving our service offer and to ensuring that it is fully underpinned by a strength-based approach. We have seen that the numbers of children becoming subject to child protection plans has stabilised during the last 12 months.

As a service, with our business support colleagues, we have adapted to the challenges well to maintain good performance and deliver an effective child protection conference system. However, we strive to build on our quality assurance process to give more overview of key practices challenges and achievements related to child protection. We also recognise that we need to strengthen how we obtain feedback from children and their families.

Whilst we are not formally part of the government's Pathfinder children's services, we are keen to learn about their findings and consider how we can apply

this within the context of the Trust 2025 transformation programme.

These developments provide us with some exciting opportunities to work with children and families differently in our effort for more families to be supported via early help and via child in need. We are expecting that over time, the number of children subject to child protection plans will be reduced safely.



Andrew Tombs

Head of Service for Child Protection & Review and LADO