

Northern Health and Social Care Trust Board Meeting in Public - Cover Sheet

Subject:	Statutory Function – Interim Corporate Parenting Submission		Date of Meeting: 27.11.25	
Prepared By:	Lee Wilson, Assistant Director Social Work Governance, Workforce Development and Training			
Approved By:	Maura Dargan, Executive Director of Social Work & Divisional Director of Children and Young People.			
Presented By:	Maura Dargan, Executive Director of Social Work & Divisional Director of Children and Young People.			
Purpose				
1. Update on Statutory Function Compliance (CYP only) 2. Approval of Interim Corporate Parenting Submission (April – September 25)			Approval	X (Retrospective)
			Assurance	
			Update	
			Noting	
Strategic Objectives				
Build Northern Partnerships and Integrate Care	Continue to improve Outcomes & Experience	Deliver value by optimising Resources	Nurture our People, Enable our Talent & Build Our Teams	Improve population Health & address health & social care inequalities
	✓			✓
Risk – please note if links to any principal, corporate or divisional risk				
Children's Services Placement Pressures Social Work Workforce Pressures (CYP)				
Committees/groups where this item has been presented before				
Social Care Governance Steering Group Trust SMT Standard and Compliance Committee Risk and Assurance Group				
Acronyms				
SF – Statutory Functions SPPG – Strategic Planning and Performance Group SIF – Support and Intervention Framework LAC – Looked After Children FSIS – Family Support and Intervention Service CWD – Children with a Disability NQSW – Newly Qualified Social Worker RQIA – Regional Quality Improvement Agency CYP – Children and Young People ICP – Interim Corporate Parenting CPR – Child Protection Register				
Executive Summary				
Reports on the Trust's Annual and Interim Statutory Function compliance, including six-monthly Corporate Parenting Reports, are presented to the Trust Board twice yearly. Within the Northern Trust, established governance mechanisms ensure that professional leadership, control, and oversight of statutory and regulatory compliance are reviewed regularly. The Trust's Social Care Governance Steering Group, convened eight months each year, provides focused oversight of				

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statutory function delivery, identifying areas for development, improvement, and risk management.

In line with the Trust's Statutory Functions (DSF) process, the Data 10 narrative and Children's DSF spreadsheets for the reporting period 1st April 2025 to 30th September 2025 are submitted to the Trust Board for oversight and retrospective approval.

Core themes arising from the Trust's Interim Corporate Parenting Report (1st April 2025 to 30th September 2025) are as follows:

Inappropriate Placements (on NHSCT Principal Risk Register)

Ongoing and escalating pressures within the Looked After Children (LAC) system, particularly regarding placement availability, have resulted in the continued use of inappropriate placements.

To address these systemic challenges, the Children and Young People's (CYP) Placement Oversight Board has developed and implemented a comprehensive action plan to reduce reliance on unsuitable placements. This plan has been formally shared with both the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) for assurance and alignment. Although escalation through the SPPG Support and Intervention Framework (SIF) initially resulted in a declined submission (on the grounds that no actionable measures were identified for either SPPG or the Trust) senior leadership continued to challenge this position which has resulted in the establishment of a regional "watching brief" log, ensuring this issue is recognised as a regional challenge rather than specific to NHSCT. SPPG have also agreed to prepare a submission for the Permanent Secretary, highlighting potential reputational and regulatory risks associated with RQIA enforcement notices.

Significant progress has been achieved through the advancement of the innovative "No Wrong Door" model (an integrated care approach designed to provide young people with complex needs access to stable, therapeutic placements). Early outcomes are positive, supported by strong engagement from Heads of Service and Senior Social Work Managers across the CYP Division.

Workforce Challenges (on NHSCT Corporate Risk Register)

Children's Services continue to experience substantial workforce pressures, impacting the Trust's capacity to fulfil statutory duties, particularly within Family Support and Children with a Disability Services. Recruitment remains difficult, with many well-staffed teams comprising a disproportionately high number of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs). To mitigate these pressures, the Trust has introduced a range of workforce strategies, including new recruitment pathways, enhanced skill mix, increased administrative support, and structured mentoring and coaching networks for frontline social workers.

Despite these efforts, workforce constraints continue to affect unallocated cases and statutory compliance. While the Health Sector Talent Portal has successfully enabled the fast-tracking of final-year social work students (resulting in the appointment of 51 NQSWs this year) vacancies within CYP services are expected to worsen until June 2026. By October–November, supply of new social workers is projected to reach zero.

An alternative recruitment initiative, trialled for the second time in two years, offered contracts to all NQSWs expressing interest in NHSCT employment. Some were placed in "at risk" posts pending permanent vacancies. The new Social Work Mentoring and Coaching Programme has been fully implemented, with initial evaluations indicating improved retention among AYE social

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workers. In January 2026, the Trust will host 87 student social work placements, the highest in the region, with the intention of fast-tracking as many as possible into permanent roles.

Short Breaks for Children with a Disability

The dataset for short breaks continues to indicate significant pressure. Since July 2024, the two designated short-break units have been challenged to fully deliver services due to critical staffing shortages. On several occasions, these units have been repurposed to accommodate children with complex needs who require residential care, reducing the availability of bed-based short breaks for parents and caregivers. This issue is managed through a Support and Intervention Framework (SIF) with SPPG oversight.

Unallocated Cases

The Interim Corporate Parenting Report highlights significant improvements in unallocated cases within the LAC service. However, Gateway, Family Support, and Children with a Disability Teams continue to face challenges, with 191 unallocated cases (*waiting longer than 20 days*) across these services, an increase of 29 cases since the March 2025 submission.

This increase directly reflects ongoing workforce shortages. Improvement plans are in place across the CYP Division to address unallocated activity. However, with no additional supply of Band 5 AYE social workers expected before June 2026, vacant posts may remain unfilled, potentially reversing recent improvements.

Kinship Placements

The Interim Corporate Parenting Report records a positive increase in kinship placements, reflecting current legislation, policy, and research evidence supporting children remaining within family networks. This shift has reshaped foster care, as kinship carers often require more intensive or specialised support. The Trust continues to monitor and address these challenges through its Statutory Functions action plan, with controls and mitigations reviewed quarterly in partnership with SPPG.

Child Protection Register

In March 2025, the SPPG noted that the Trust had 28 children and young people who had remained on the Child Protection Register (CPR) for more than three years. This figure represented 40.58% of all children regionally who had been on the register for this duration. Consequently, SPPG initiated an action for the Trust to analyse this regional outlier.

In response, the Trust submitted a detailed report to SPPG outlining the factors contributing to the prolonged registration of these 28 children. The paper, provided prior to this year's submission, clarified that the cohort comprised 10 families, with the higher number of children attributed to two large sibling groups.

The review identified several reasons for the extended registration periods, primarily the complexity and escalation of risk, further pregnancies, ongoing court proceedings, and family changes. All factors largely beyond the control of the social work teams involved. The analysis also highlighted instances where siblings within the same family were subject to different planning processes (e.g., Child Protection and Looked After procedures), which interacted and occasionally caused delays.

No concerns were identified regarding threshold decisions or the appropriateness of Child Protection registration. The duration of registration in every case was deemed both justified and proportionate.

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Interface with the Children's Strategic Reform Board

The Children's Strategic Reform Board, established by the Department of Health, aims to address systemic challenges in children's services through collaborative and innovative partnership working with Trusts and key stakeholders. Several workstreams under the Reform Board directly align with the issues highlighted in this briefing and will inform future strategy and reform within the Northern Trust.