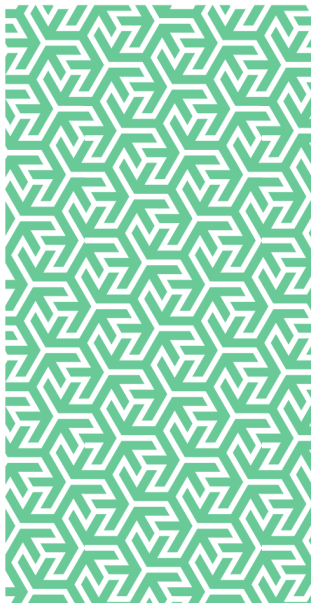




## **Risk control**

### Children's Trusts



In partnership with



# Children's Trusts

## Introduction

In circumstances where Ofsted<sup>1</sup> and other reports indicate that a Local Authority's Children's Social Care Services are performing inadequately over a period of time, the Secretary of State for Education may issue a Statutory Direction requiring the Local Authority to transfer the service to an independent body. The type of independent body established to provide the services can take a variety of formats. However, regardless of the exact legal basis on which the independent body is based, it is important to note that the statutory duty to provide the service and associated non-delegable duty of care remains with the Council at all times.

Although liability claims against Children's Services are relatively uncommon, they can by their very nature be sensitive and high profile, take many years to materialise following the incident, and result in an exposure costing several millions of pounds. It is for this reason that even where all services are effectively transferred to an independent body with its own insurance arrangements, both the Local Authority and their insurance provider continue to maintain a close working interest and involvement in the risk exposure and the conduct of any associated claims.

## Statutory Direction

Under Section 497A (4B) of the Education Act 1996, the Secretary of State can issue a Statutory Direction<sup>2</sup> on a Local Authority where inadequate judgements in Ofsted assessments show significant weaknesses. The Statutory Direction requires the Local Authority to take steps to improve the quality of service. In certain circumstances the Statutory Direction will require the Council to work alongside a commissioner appointed by the Government. Where required, a memorandum of understanding is established between the appointed Children's Services Commissioner and the Local Authority detailing the formation of a Trust and its method of operation. The direction remains in force until such times as it is revoked by the Secretary of State.

## Ofsted

It is important to remember that the Ofsted inspection usually only identifies the symptoms of the issues affecting the service. It is necessary to fully understand all the issues before beginning to address them. Any decisions made

must be the correct ones and bring about sustainable improvement.

## Common Issues

There are a number of common issues<sup>3</sup> that exist in Local Authorities that are found to be judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted. Many Local Authorities will see a high turnover of staff and a negative impact on staff morale. High caseloads are a significant factor because of the number of vacancies, which in turn maintains a direct impact on the ability to deliver good practice. Usually there is a need to use significant numbers of agency Social Workers which are expensive and often bring instability to the workforce and make it more difficult to deliver improved services as a result of the churn of frontline staff and managers. Following the judgement the situation may potentially worsen before it begins to improve. It should also be anticipated that an increase in the number of referrals may happen and will need to be managed effectively.

## Doncaster MBC

The first children's Trust in the UK was established in Doncaster in October 2014 following a Statutory Direction issued by the Secretary of State. The Direction stated a need for a Trust to be formed and operate for a minimum of 5 years. The Trust's primary focus was upon improving standards and quality of care and support; and offering strong early intervention and help. It had responsibility for a number of services including fostering, adoption, intensive family support and youth offending. The Trust was established as a limited company and maintained its own insurance arrangements, Chief Executive, and team of social care professionals.

Following Doncaster, other Local Authorities received Statutory Directions to form Trusts including Slough, Birmingham, and Sandwell. Birmingham City Council took the decision to form their Trust as a wholly owned community interest company after receiving inadequate ratings from Ofsted for six consecutive years.

After almost 5 years, Doncaster gained greater oversight and control of its Children's Trust as it was suffering from financial instability. The service eventually returned to the Council in the form of an Arm's Length Management Organisation<sup>4</sup>. On 1<sup>st</sup> September 2022, all services formally returned to the Local Authority.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/improvement-notices#open-directions>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/what-happens-if-your-childrens-services-are-judged-inadequate-ofsted>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/03/20/childrens-services-Trust-doncaster-to-revert-to-public-ownership/>

## Making a Difference

In December 2015, the Government announced plans for landmark reforms designed to address the issue of failing Children's Services in England. The reforms were based on a belief that to improve these services, they should be detached from their Local Authority parent<sup>5</sup>.

Establishing a Trust is a complex process that can take many months to form after the decision has been taken to move the service away from direct Local Authority control. The establishment of any new organisation is expensive and time consuming and a Children's Trust is no different.

Whilst negotiations are taking place, Children's Services Departments will be continuing to work to improve the service they are delivering and implement any Ofsted recommendations.

However, the introduction of a new structure and operating model can lead to the fragmentation of services for children and families which can lead to other problems and weaknesses that need to be addressed.

Change and visible improvement can be slow to materialise and, if not managed well, can impact on local democracy and the role of Elected Members.

The positive impacts of services being transferred to Trusts have been widely reported, with improvements realised such as in the case of Doncaster who received a 'good' grade from Ofsted in 2018.

## Signatures of Risk

A few 'signatures of risk' originally published by the national Children's Improvement Board are still widely used in the sector. These can include:

- Turnover and change in senior leadership
- Service reorganisations combined with challenging budget reductions
- Lack of political focus on safeguarding and care
- Assuming performance standards are secure in an environment of service maintenance rather than development
- Limited self-awareness and no external challenge
- Inconsistent observation of practice
- Professional weakness in supervision and audit
- Lack of a learning organisational culture
- Weak commitment from partners
- Lack of focus on the child's journey or voice of the child

- Poor workforce development and / or capacity
- Failing to listen to or accept front line feedback
- Not developing a culture of anticipation and early warning of issues

These signatures of risk may indicate that there is a potential problem in a Children's Services Department which needs more investigation and scrutiny to establish what needs to be done.

## The Risk Manager

The Risk Manager has a key role to play during the establishment of Trusts and the transference of services. It is essential that all parties understand and acknowledge where the statutory duty for the services remains. Working together, the development of protocols is helpful in ensuring clarity of understanding on the division of responsibilities.

Agreed governance arrangements will support a smooth transition of service provision and enable the commissioning organisation to hold the Trust to account for the delivery of Children's Services.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/12/14/david-cameron-announce-landmark-reforms-tackle-inadequate-childrens-services/>

## Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

## Get in touch

For more information, please contact your broker, RMP risk control consultant or account director.

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