





TRUST BOARD / SLT COVER SHEET

	<p>The cover sheet purpose is to provide the Trust Board/Committee with a clear summary of the paper being presented, how it impacts on the people we serve, key matters for attention and the ask of the Trust Board/Committee</p> <p>The Accountable Director must satisfy themselves that the cover sheet is accurate and fully reflects the paper. The expectation is that the Accountable Director has read and agreed the content of both the cover sheet and paper.</p>	
<p>Meeting and Date of meeting</p>	<p>Trust Board 26 March 2026</p>	
<p>Title of paper</p>	<p>Executive Director of Social Work Report</p>	
<p>Accountable Director</p>	<p>Name</p>	<p><i>Colm McCafferty</i></p>
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<p>This paper sits within the Trust Board role of:</p>	<p>Accountability</p>	
<p>This paper is presented for:</p>	<p>Assurance <i>(Notes on completion at end of document)</i></p>	
<p>Links to Trust Strategic Priorities</p> 	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Collaborative Working</p>
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Learning Organisation</p>
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Safety, Quality & Experience</p>
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Community First</p>
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<p>Whole-Life Approach</p>

1. Reason for Presentation of Paper / Report

The paper provides an overview of issues relating to the delivery of statutory functions across all Directorates.

This reporting cycle has a specific focus on the Trust's responsibility as a corporate parent in respect of Looked after Children.

2. Detailed summary of paper contents:

This report provides an update on the Executive Director for Social Work's areas of responsibility. The paper provides an overview of issues relating to the social work and social care workforce, including challenges in relation to delivery of statutory functions. This includes an update on the current position in respect of Social Work staffing which has remained on the Corporate Risk register due to long standing vacancies and challenges to recruit due to regional shortages of qualified social work staff.

This reporting cycle has a primary focus on the responsibilities of the Trust as a corporate parent in relation to children in care and care leavers, with a particular focus on:

- Responsibilities as a corporate parent.
- Fostering and residential care.
- Education, training, and employment.
- Housing stability and accommodation pathways.
- Short breaks for Children with Disability.
- Northern Ireland Framework for Integrated Therapeutic Care (NIFITC).

It aims to highlight where corporate ownership, cross-directorate leadership, and strategic action are required to meet statutory duties and improve outcomes for our children and young people.

3. Areas of improvement/achievement:

Statutory Functions and workforce

- The appointment of a dedicated Social Work Recruitment, Retention and Wellbeing Coordinator demonstrates proactive strategic investment in workforce sustainability.
- Significant progress has been achieved in reducing unallocated cases within Family Intervention Teams, with no unallocated Child Protection cases.
- The skills-mix pilot in Adult Community Services has delivered positive outcomes, reducing unallocated cases from 53% to 5% and achieving 82% compliance with annual reviews.

Corporate Parenting

- The Trust is committed to fulfilling our responsibilities as a corporate parent through whole system commitment to our children in care.
- The introduction of the Fostering Friendly Policy reinforces organisational support

for foster carers.

- Successful Delivery of Employability Pathways for Young People through the JobStart programme.
- Collaborative cross Directorate working has led to the development of accommodation options for young people and successful employment opportunities.

4. Areas of concern/risk/challenge:

- The Trust’s ability to consistently fulfil all statutory duties continues to be impacted upon by Social Work staffing challenges across both children’s and adult services.
- Demand for foster placements, supported lodgings, and residential care continues to outstrip capacity. These pressures directly affect children’s stability and wellbeing.
- The Southern Trust has the lowest number of regionally commissioned supported accommodation beds. Any reduction in provider capacity, due to funding pressures, creates a significant risk of young people presenting as homeless at age 18. Trust Transition properties have mitigated some risk, but demand exceeds supply.
- Residential staff face escalating challenges related to young people’s behaviours linked to trauma including aggression and emotional dysregulation. Key risks include staff injury, sickness absence and greater reliance on high staffing ratios. These factors create operational instability and financial pressure.
- Sustained organisational focus and collective leadership will be required to address current needs and to ensure that children and families receive the high quality support they deserve.

5. Impact on Statutory Duties: Provide details on the impact of the following and how.

<i>Financial Impact</i>	<i>Safety and Quality Impact</i>
Yes, there are Financial Impacts	Yes, there are Quality, Safety or Experience Impacts

6. Risk Assessment (Risk level and state if a risk assessment be completed)

N/A

7. Other Business Intelligence/data (If appropriate)

8. Impact: Provide details on the impact of the following and how. If this is N/A you should explain why this is an appropriate response.

Corporate Risk Register	The following risk is currently on the Corporate Risk Register. Risk of potential harm to children due to Social Work vacancies impacting on the delivery of core Social Work Assessment and Services for children and families. Impact on unallocated cases for Looked After Children as a result of workforce pressures within Corporate Parenting.
Board Assurance Framework	Yes. Statutory Functions and associated challenges as previously reported.
Equality and Human Rights	Yes. Access to services.

Trust Board Role Fulfilment

Strategy	<i>Papers in this category should address forward-looking priorities, long-term objectives, or service transformation. These are typically focused on shaping the future of the organisation and will often involve decisions on direction, investment, or innovation.</i>
Culture	<i>These papers aim to influence or reflect the values, behaviours, and staff or patient experiences within HSC. They may relate to leadership development, equality, diversity and inclusion, staff engagement, or initiatives intended to reinforce our organisational ethos.</i>
Accountability	<i>Papers falling into this area relate to governance, assurance, performance monitoring, compliance, and risk. They provide evidence that responsibilities are being fulfilled, standards are being met, and corrective actions are being taken where necessary.</i>

Reasons for Paper Presentation

Approval	<i>Used when an item requires a formal agreement or endorsement by the meeting / committee members. Examples are approving minutes, budgets, proposals or policies.</i>
Assurance	<i>Used when an item can be measured against a certain criteria / standard. Examples are a project is on course with delivery or financial targets are being met.</i>

Information	<i>Used when an item is presented for the purpose of updating or informing the attendees without requiring a decision or action, such as reports, updates, or announcements.</i>
Discussion	<i>Used when an item is listed primarily for open discussion, brainstorming or gathering input from the members without requiring an immediate decision.</i>

Executive Director of Social Work Report for Trust Board

1. Introduction

This report is an update on the Executive Director for Social Work’s areas of responsibility. The paper provides an overview of issues relating to the social work and social care workforce, including challenges in relation to delivery of statutory functions. This includes an update on the current position in respect of Social Work staffing which has remained on the Corporate Risk register due to long standing vacancies and challenges to recruit due to regional shortages of qualified social work staff.

This reporting cycle has a primary focus on the role and responsibilities of the corporate parent in relation to children in care and care leavers, with a particular focus on:

- Responsibilities as a corporate parenting.
- Increasing demand and pressure on fostering placements, residential placements and supported lodgings
- Education, training, and employment
- Housing stability and accommodation pathways
- Short breaks for Children with Disability
- Northern Ireland Framework for Integrated Care (NIFITC)

It aims to highlight where corporate ownership, cross-directorate leadership, and strategic action are required to meet statutory duties and improve outcomes.

2. Workforce

The Trust remains committed to building a strong, sustainable and motivated social work workforce through continued focus on attraction, recruitment and retention. Additional funding from the Office of Social Services, Department of Health, has enabled the appointment of a dedicated Social Work Recruitment, Retention and Wellbeing Coordinator. This appointment will ensure a sustained focus on the attraction, recruitment and retention of the social work workforce. Links are being developed with Human Resources to ensure consistency with the People Framework.

Whilst the Department of Health had increased the number of places available on the Degree in Social Work over the past two years, further increase to baseline commissioning are not anticipated due to ongoing financial pressures. The Trust is awaiting confirmation of commissioned student numbers for the 2026 intake at

Queens University Belfast, Ulster University, and the Open University. This presents a continued workforce supply risk which will require active management.

To mitigate this risk, the Trust will continue to invest in additional social work training places via the Open University route, supporting career progression opportunities for the social care workforce. There are currently 23 social care workers undertaking this pathway, with four expected to qualify in October 2026, representing 3 from Adult Community Services, 5 from Mental Health and Disability Services, and 15 from Children, Young People & Women's Services.

The Trust is participating in a regional retention project aimed at strengthening the evidence base in relation to social worker retention. Within the Southern Trust the focus will be on the promotion of specialist career pathways across Directorates. By increasing visibility of specialist social work roles, the initiative aims to enhance career progression pathways, improve retention and reinforce the value of the social work role across multidisciplinary teams. A regional showcase is scheduled for September 2026 to support dissemination and organisational learning.

3. Statutory Functions (SF)

The Trust's annual Statutory Functions (SF) report provides a review of the discharge of the statutory functions and highlights areas where compliance has not been achieved. There are many consistent themes and challenges impacting on the delivery of Statutory Functions across the region. In summary, these are primarily associated with workforce vacancies and absence rates, which therefore impact on compliance in terms of unallocated cases, annual reviews and other areas of service delivery.

Children and Young People Services

- Despite improvements, maintaining a full complement of staff in the context of social work vacancies, maternity/sick leave across the Service, retention and recruitment of social work staff across Gateway, Family Intervention Teams and Children in Care Teams remains a challenge with significant vacancies currently.
- There are continued high levels of Child Protection and LAC activity including significant complexity within cases.
- Staffing levels directly impact on the level of unallocated cases. SPPG have acknowledged the positive steps SHSCT has made in reducing unallocated cases within Family Intervention Teams. There are no unallocated Child Protection cases. A recent BSO Internal Audit noted impact of staffing on timescales within Child Protection workplans, whilst a robust action plan is in place, social work vacancies will impact on this also.
- At 31 January 2026 there were 26 Children in Care (overall LAC population of approximately 700 children and young people) who do not have a named

social worker due to staffing challenges. A robust governance structure is in place with social work oversight and direct contact with the children and their carers. This includes an escalation process where the circumstances are assessed as requiring allocation to a named social worker.

- While the number of unallocated cases within Children with Disability Teams remains high, it has stabilised primarily due to the introduction of skills mix. As staff become established in teams it is expected that this will result in reduced unallocated cases in Children with Disability teams.
- Substantive work is being progressed to introduce a new service delivery model 'Together for Families', which will provide family support services across the continuum of need. Trust staff are working with Department of Health and SPPG to progress implementation by Autumn 2026. This is substantive investment across HSCTs and Voluntary and Community Sector.

Adult Community Services (ACS)

- ACS continue to be challenged with high numbers of unallocated cases and outstanding Annual Reviews for service users.
- ACS is actively engaged in implementing a skills mix model, whereby social care practitioners can undertake care management reviews, in accordance with Department of Health guidance (March 2025). A governance framework has been developed to support this work. It is anticipated that the development of skills mix will impact positively on current levels of unallocated cases and compliance with annual reviews.
- The skills mix approach began an initial pilot in Lurgan Integrated Care Team. In January 2026, 82% compliance with annual reviews was achieved. The number of unallocated cases has significantly reduced from 53% to 5% with 41 cases currently awaiting allocation.
- This model will be rolled out to all other Integrated Care Teams over the coming months. Teams are currently going through a process of caseload cleansing as part of the implementation phase.
- There are ongoing challenges retrieving accurate and quality data from EPIC. ICT colleagues, Community Information Teams, EPIC and Regional Colleagues are working together for system resolution.

Physical Disability and Sensory Impairment

- There are currently 44 service users within the Physical Disability service with outstanding packages of care. This is a slight increase on the same period last year. It is hoped that work underway under the 'Timely Care' Strategy will maximise domiciliary care capacity.

Mental Health Services

- Work is ongoing in relation to reducing waiting lists for new assessments, further improvement is contingent on recruiting to vacant posts. The Directorate continue to monitor waiting times and have developed a text reminder service to reduce non-attendance at appointments.
- The issue of delayed access to acute mental health beds is a complex and persistent challenge across the region. Bed managers in Bluestone have implemented systems to ensure all available resources are used as an alternative to admission or to support discharge. Acute and Unscheduled Care meet daily to ensure timely discharge of patients and supports to prevent admissions.
- The Out of Hours Approved Social work services (Belfast Trust are commissioned to deliver the service) continues to experience challenges because of absence rates, vacancies and ability to manage protracted waits (admission to inpatient hospital care) in respect of detained patients. This impacts directly on Southern Trust daytime services who receive regular handovers from out of hours service.

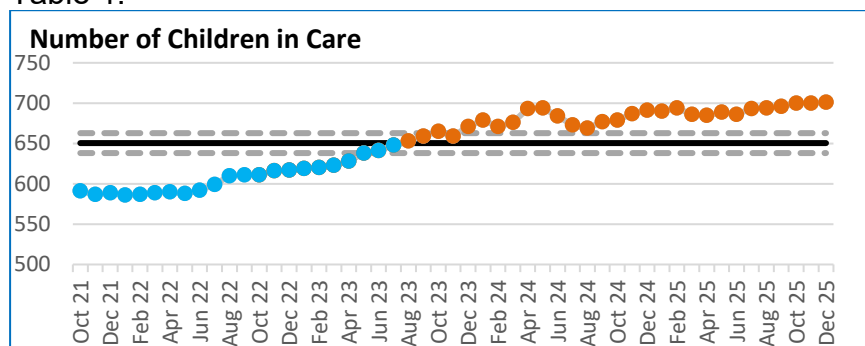
Learning Disability Services (LDS)

- LDS are challenged to meet requirements in relation to completion of annual reviews and allocation of cases. Work has commenced on the introduction of enhanced responsibilities for Social Work Assistant roles. It is anticipated that the introduction of the skills mixed approach will have a positive impact on compliance.
- The service is developing an action plan to support the provision of short breaks for service users with complex health care and behavioural needs.
- Challenges exist in relation to resources available to support children transitioning to Adult Services. A Transitional Care for Young People forum has been established to improve transition and is chaired by the Executive Director of Social Work.

4. SOUTHERN TRUST AS CORPORATE PARENTS

The Southern Trust had responsibility for 701 children in care at the end of December 2025, with 55% of children in care aged 11 years and under. The number of children in care has consistently remained above 650 since June 2023, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1:



Children entering care at a younger age are statistically more likely to remain in care for longer periods. This increases cumulative demand on placement capacity and availability, as well as social work capacity over many years, not just in the short term.

Younger children are at critical stages of emotional, cognitive and attachment development. Placement instability or poorly matched placements at this age can have long lasting impacts on emotional and mental health, behaviour and educational outcomes. It is essential that the Trust is committed to investment, innovation, and recognition of foster carers (who care for approximately 80% of the Looked After Children population) as a critical part of the workforce.

The number of children and young people requiring placements across fostering, supported lodgings and residential care exceeds current availability, creating ongoing pressure on placement sufficiency and increasing the risk of delayed or sub-optimal placement matching. This also leads to children and young people being placed further from their home communities and schools increasing travel and transport demands and creating additional challenges for maintaining family contact.

There has been an increase in the number of children in care with complex health care needs, including a small number of children with cancer diagnoses. These children require specialist and increasingly long-term support. The Trust have a responsibility as corporate parent to ensure these children, and their carers, have access to timely care so that their health needs do not become a barrier to placement stability or positive outcomes.

Responsibilities as a Corporate Parent

As corporate parents, the Trust and its senior leadership team, including Trust Board, carry collective responsibility for ensuring that children in care and care leavers receive the same level of care, ambition, and opportunity that any good parent would provide for their own child.

This responsibility extends beyond the Children, Young People and Women's Services directorate and requires coordinated action across the organisation to ensure that corporate parenting responsibilities are embedded across all directorates.

Key principles of effective corporate parenting include:

- Acting in the best interests of children in care and care leavers.
- Promoting stability, aspiration, and long-term outcomes.
- Ensuring services do not unintentionally disadvantage care-experienced young people.
- Using corporate influence to remove structural barriers.

Our Pledge

During 2017 a group of young people engaged with members of the Trust Board to develop 'Our Pledge'. The aim of this pledge was to engage with young people who avail of Children and Young People's services and to use their expertise and experience to inform service development. The 2 main areas identified for improvement at that time were:

1. Development of Trust accommodation options for care experienced young people to provide them with a safe, secure and stable base once they turn 18 years, as many have to move on from their foster placement or residential care placement. NIHE accommodation options were not readily available to young people leaving care at that point in time and this remains a current issue within the Southern Trust area.
2. The ability of the Trust to provide young people with work experience and placement opportunities to support education, training and employability pathways. Despite much focus on the development of education support for children in care, they continue to experience poorer outcomes in education and employment compared to their peers. It is critical that the Trust, as corporate parent, champion educational stability and maintain high expectations for our children and young people.

- Transition accommodation for care leavers

The Southern Trust currently have access to only 11 Jointly Commissioned (Supporting People and HSCNI) Supported Accommodation placements for care experienced young people, the smallest number in the region. These are provided by MACS in Newry and Belfast Central Mission in Dungannon. Both providers, alongside other providers across the region, have highlighted to Trusts, SPPG and Supporting People that the current models will not be able to be delivered within the existing funding. If there was a reduction in this provision, this would have a significant impact upon move on options for young people transitioning from care within the Southern Trust area and would mean more young people presenting as homeless upon their 18th birthday.

Since 2017 the Trust has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to providing a Trust wide response to meeting the needs of care experienced young people and care leavers with the development and further enhancement of 'Trust Transition' properties. Presently the Trust provide accommodation for up to 10 young people

within 6 Trust Transition properties. Young people residing within these properties are supported by the 14 Plus service and the Community Living Support team who offer flexible, in reach support in the evenings and at weekends. This provision could not have been achieved if it were not for the support from colleagues within the Estates Department in particular, who have been key in identifying potential properties and have worked collaboratively with the 14Plus service to secure capital funding to allow the properties to be refurbished so that they can provide safe, stable, warm and homely accommodation for our young people. The Southern Trust are the only entity in the region who have successfully developed this initiative, which is funded from internal Trust resources. While this has been a very welcome initiative, it does require further expansion given the increased demand for accommodation options for care leavers. The service continues to receive excellent support from Estates colleagues.

- Employment

In response to the need to further develop and support education, training and employability pathways, the Trust provide paid workplace opportunities via the Department for Communities JobStart programme, which was launched for a third term in October 2025.

The Southern Trust has committed to offering a pathway for young people transitioning from the Labour Market Partnership (LMP) Programme to paid employment under JobStart. Currently 3 young people have transitioned from the LMP Programme to paid employment under JobStart, with a further 6 scheduled to enter Trust departments in the near future. These opportunities are in Estates, Pharmacy, Day Procedure and Day Care facilities, including roles in admin, daycare assistant, maintenance, assistant technical officers. To date 23 young people have completed the JobStart programme, with 11 securing posts within Trust services, 7 securing alternative employment, 3 retuning to education/training and 2 seeking employment. There are a further 6 new entrants to the 25/26 JobStart Programme, with a further 4 scheduled to enter the programme on or before 31st March 26.

The motivation and commitment from Trust recruiting managers to this scheme has been critical to its success and the young people have benefitted, not only from paid employment, but also from the mentoring, support and understanding they have received from peers and managers. As a corporate parent, the Trust is uniquely positioned to continue to use its role as an employer to improve employability pathways. This has been an excellent initiative which embodies the Corporate Parent ethos.

- Further Education and University

Of the 181 care experienced young people aged 18 plus known to the 14 Plus service, 78 are engaged in further education and an additional 35 are engaged in higher level education, including degree level courses eg. Dentistry, Engineering and Social Work.

Foster care

Foster placements (including Kinship Care) account for placement provision for approximately 85% of the total Child in Care population within the Southern Trust. Alongside the rest of the region, the Southern Trust has continued to rely on the recruitment of foster carers, both kinship and stranger carers, and supported lodgings hosts, to meet the placement needs of a very significant proportion of the overall children in care population. The Southern Trust continues to perform well in relation to foster care approvals. There were 32 non-kinship approvals during 2024/25, which was consistent with approval levels for 2023/24, and an increase from 28 in 2022/23. This is achieved as a result of a relentless focus on fostercare promotion and recruitment efforts by the Family Placement service. Its success is central to the Trust's lack of reliance on the independent sector for foster care placements which is a very considerable cost avoidance.

Kinship care arrangements seek to maintain children/young people within their extended family network and an environment which is familiar to them. The number of Children in Care in Kinship/ Family & Friends placements continues to increase, with 303 at 30 September 2025 (approximately 45% of the LAC population) compared with 255 at 30 September 2024.

Ongoing and effective recruitment initiatives have ensured that the Trust does not rely on independent sector foster care provision but rather seeks to grow Trust provision.

- Fostering Friendly Policy

In November 2025 the Southern Trust led on and implemented the Fostering Friendly Policy which underlines the Trust's commitment to creating a fostering friendly organisation, that offers practical support and flexible working arrangements which respond to the needs of staff who are in these caring roles. The policy is reflective of an organisation which recognises and values the contribution that foster carers and supported lodgings hosts make to the lives of children and young people in care.

CWD Short Breaks provision

Demand for family short breaks both fostering and residential support for children with disabilities continues to grow. While DoH Ministerial funding is enabling enhanced capacity, pressure remains across both residential and fostering services. Recruitment challenges, increasing case complexity, and the rising number of children requiring high-frequency short breaks are driving the need for additional care capacity, expanded outreach, and further investment in specialist foster care.

Short breaks provision for Children with Disabilities within the Southern Trust has been maintained and remains in a stable position. Regionally the Southern Trust have continued to perform well in relation to overnight short breaks. In 2024/25 the Southern Trust delivered 2024 short breaks to 52 children and young people with a disability. Short breaks fostering service continues to focus on innovative recruitment and retention initiatives. The service has been able to maintain this performance into

the current year. This is hugely important in providing families with much needed support and thus reduce the risk of family breakdown.

Residential care

Residential care for children who have experienced significant trauma, as well as for children with complex disabilities, presents a range of persistent and interrelated challenges that impact service delivery, workforce stability, and the lived experience of both children and staff.

- **Workforce Skills and Training Requirements**

Children with trauma histories or complex disabilities require care from staff who are trained in specialised approaches such as trauma-informed practice, attachment-based models, therapeutic crisis intervention, communication strategies for children with disabilities, and approaches to managing challenging behaviour. Maintaining a workforce with this skill set requires continuous investment in training, reflective practice, and clinical support. Staff turnover, periods of sickness, and recruitment challenges heighten the pressure on remaining staff and reduce the consistency of care, which is essential for stabilisation and therapeutic progress.

- **Staffing Levels and Workforce Resilience**

High staffing ratios are frequently necessary within residential care, such as 2:1 support or enhanced supervision levels. The staffing ratio is linked to the particular needs of the children, and increases when children present with aggression, significant dysregulation, mobility needs, or complex health conditions. These requirements place substantial pressure on rotas and limit overall placement capacity. Staff resilience is tested daily as they manage behaviours linked to trauma, emotional distress, communication difficulties, and sensory needs.

Alongside routine supervision and Occupational Health provision, staff benefit from both individual and group support, including incident debriefing delivered by the Scaffold Service. Staff make regular use of this support, and the Scaffold Service (Looked After and Adopted Child Therapeutic service) continues to respond flexibly to their needs.

- **Violence, Aggression, and Risk Management**

Children who have experienced developmental trauma or who have communication or sensory impairments can present with high levels of emotional dysregulation, resulting in verbal and physical aggression towards staff and peers. This not only creates safety challenges, however also contributes to staff anxiety, increased sickness absence, and the need for ongoing clinical debriefing and psychological support. Managing aggression safely requires skilled, confident staff and a therapeutic environment that can contain distress without escalating behaviour.

All incidents of violence and aggression are followed up with a full debrief with staff. Emotional support is offered to the injured staff member by management, either in person or via telephone, depending on the circumstances. An immediate referral will be made to Occupational Health where the incident relates to work-related violence (in line with policy). Incidents are reviewed at the staff team meeting and will also be reviewed at the Reflective Governance Forum for residential for any learning to be identified.

The Trust remains committed to ensuring that all staff within residential are appropriately trained, with a significant focus on Trauma Informed Practice. Therapeutic Crisis Intervention and Safety Intervention training are delivered to staff, with regular updating of same. Currently the overall occupancy within 3 of the mainstream homes and the CWD home has been capped at 4 (5 placements available) due to the specific complexities of young people within the group. This will remain under review.

- **Maintaining a Safe, Homely Residential Environment**

One of the core purposes of residential care is to provide children with a stable, nurturing environment. However, the level of behaviour linked to trauma, complex emotional needs, or disability can lead to damage to the home environment, destruction of property, and requiring frequent repairs and maintenance. This can undermine the homeliness of the setting, create disruption for other children, and increase operational costs.

Balancing safety, comfort, and therapeutic design features is an ongoing challenge, however is critical in allowing the Trust to deliver therapeutic care. It is acknowledged that staff within Estates department have a significant interface with residential services requiring enhanced understanding of presenting challenges for both young people and the staff team. In response to this, some Estates staff have availed of training in relation to trauma informed care which continues to be promoted.

- **Complexity of Needs and Placement Stability**

Children placed in residential care often have highly complex profiles, including mental health needs, neurodevelopmental conditions, challenging behaviour, multiple experiences of rejection and loss, communication differences, or medical needs requiring coordinated interventions. Many children and young people living in residential care will have experienced multiple foster placements which have not been able to manage their needs. Residential care offers these children and young people placement stability, however this is not without challenges. In response to the presenting needs and episodes of crisis, there is often a need to increase staffing, clinical intervention, or unplanned placement adjustments. The cumulative impact of these pressures can reduce capacity across the wider system and increase waiting lists.

Northern Ireland Framework for Integrated Care (NIFITC)

Within Children, Young People and Women's services there has been a continued focus on implementing and embedding the Northern Ireland Framework for Integrated Care to ensure that the needs of children in care, care experienced young people and care leavers are consistently understood and met at every point of contact. There has been much progress made by the 5 mainstream children's residential units, with 95% of staff having completed core curriculum training. Further staff within 14 Plus have also been trained, with plans to roll this out to staff and carers within the Intensive Support Fostering Scheme.

Full implementation and embedding of NIFITC requires a whole organisation commitment to trauma informed and relationship-based practice, with shared responsibility across children and adult services, acute and community. By aligning workforce development, service improvement and development to the NIFITC framework the Trust can strengthen continuity of care, improve transitions to adulthood and ensure that children in care and care experienced young people receive timely, therapeutic and co-ordinated support that promotes stability, wellbeing and long term positive outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This report to Trust Board provides assurance in relation to the commitment of the Social Work profession across all Directorates to fulfil their statutory duties. The pressures outlined reflect both the increasing complexity of need across our population and the persistent workforce and system challenges that continue to impact the delivery of statutory functions. Despite these difficulties, the Southern Trust remains firmly committed to strengthening our social work and social care workforce.

The Trust is committed to fulfilling our responsibilities as a corporate parent. This can only be achieved through whole system commitment to our children in care. Continued cross-directorate collaboration, strategic investment, and a whole-system approach, underpinned by the principles of the Northern Ireland Framework for Integrated Care, will be essential to improving outcomes, ensuring safe and effective service delivery, and meeting our statutory duties. Sustained organisational focus and collective leadership will be required to address current needs and to ensure that children and families receive the high quality support they deserve.