

A potted history of Birmingham City Council Children's Homes

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Victorian Birmingham

It is the Victorian era which arguably saw the birth of specific local authority residential care provision for children. In response to the desire to need to take children out of the workhouses, the three Unions of Birmingham (Kings Norton, Birmingham and Aston) built cottage homes – self-contained ‘villages’ in which two or three hundred orphaned or destitute children could be housed. Each set of cottage homes had number of large houses with 20 to 40 children living in each (generally, the homes were mixed or boys only), run by a foster mother who lived on site with the children. Each set of cottage homes was overseen by a superintendent and matron. Girls received training in domestic service, boys were taught skills such as farming and carpentry. Children left the homes when they were 14. Some children were emigrated abroad – to Canada and Australia - through agencies such as Middlemore Emigration Homes.

1910 - 1930s

Hostels were developed for older children who had left the homes and needed somewhere to live while finding their feet. Service Girls Homes took in older girls, and Vauxhall House took in the older boys. The children would go to work or apprenticeships and live at the hostel. Both would generally leave when they had found work which was live-in or perhaps joined the armed services. In 1930, the cottage homes became the responsibility of the City Council.

The cottage homes at Marston Green closed in 1933 but those at Shenley Fields and Erdington continued to be a significant feature of Birmingham child care for several decades.

The 1940s

The war saw a growth in nursery provision (day-time, 24 hours, short-stay and residential). Initially, they catered largely for mothers who were going to work. However, the residential nurseries remained in use long after the ending of the war. Some, such as Hawthorne House, did not close until the 1980s.

During the war itself, some children were evacuated from the cottage homes to areas which were thought to be safer for them. Some very young children were evacuated to North Wales where residential nurseries were established for them, largely in Dolgellau.

It was not just new residential nurseries that were being opened, however. By 1949, there were 20 children's homes run by the Council in Birmingham including Middlemore House which was being leased from Middlemore Emigration Homes on a year by year basis in order to reduce the overcrowding which existed in the cottage homes. 100 children could be accommodated in Middlemore House. The lease ran from 1949 to mid-1955 at a cost of some £2,500 a year.¹ At this time the City Council was also running remand homes such as Athelstan, Forhill and the Limes.

Erdington Cottage Homes had accommodation for up to 318 children in 1948 and Shenley Fields had 217 (although on 19th August 1948, there were actually 235 children in residence including several who were only there for the summer holidays)².

In evidence was a bias toward boys in residential care. In Erdington Cottage Homes, for example, 8 of the 17 individual units or cottages were exclusively for boys, the remainder accommodated both boys and girls together.³

The Children Act 1948

The 1948 act came about both because of the outrage generated by a 13 year old boy who was killed by his foster parents and because evacuation during the war had led to a more widespread understanding of the plight of some children in terms of the care they received and their health. The 1948 Act required local authorities to set up children's committees to look after the interests of children in their care.⁴

One of the changes that the 1948 Act brought about was the ending of child migration which had been carried out by several organisations in the city including Middlemore Emigration Homes, Father Hudson's, the Catholic Emigration Society, National Children's Homes and Dr Barnardo's. The last child migrated from Middlemore Homes was in 1952⁵. The ending of migration put pressure on Birmingham Corporation and non-Corporation homes to accommodate children who would previously have been sent abroad.

¹ Middlemore Homes Annual Reports

² Children's (Homes sub) Committee minutes 14th October 1948.

³ Report of the Chief Education Officer appended to the minutes of the Children's (Homes sub) Committee dated 14th October 1948

⁴ Coffin G (1993) Changing Child care – the Children Act 1989 and the management of change

⁵ Middlemore Homes Annual Reports

The 1950s

The cottage homes had been developed so that children lived in relatively small units of 12 to 20 children with a housemother. In the early 1950s, however, it was felt that children could benefit from living in smaller, more autonomous family units and so family homes (initially called ‘scattered homes’ or ‘family group homes’ were developed generally with a live-in couple as houseparents who were likely to have their own children as well. Eight children in all could live in each house. Two of these opened in 1951 and a further nine were running by mid-1953 with another one planned.⁶

Additionally, in the early 1950s, there were two hostels for working children. These were for children who were older than school age and were still in care. Children in these were generally aged 15 to 18. These were the Riversdale on the Bristol Road for girls (opened 1920 and closed at the end of June 1952) and Vauxhall House at 205 Vauxhall Road (known as the Working Boys’ Hostel until 1949). When it opened in 1914, the latter accommodated 43 boys but this was later reduced to 35⁷.

For the youngest children there were nine residential nurseries in the 1950s including Field House, Flint Green Pype Hayes and Wassell Grove, Stourbridge⁸. Each of these had opened as residential nurseries in the late 1940s or early 1950s. Some had begun life as war-time nurseries – short-stay or non-residential nurseries – to enable mothers to go out to work.

The 1960s

While there may have been fluctuations, the number of children in residential care was very similar in the early 1950s to the level twelve years later. In 1952, the Children’s Committee reported 796 children in their residential homes, in 1964, they reported a figure of 835.

Residential nurseries

By the start of 1967, six following residential nurseries were still in use:

- Field House, Clent (40 children)
- Wychbury House, Stourbridge (22 children)
- Oaklands, Droitwich (40 children)
- Hawthorne House, Handsworth (40 children)
- Flint Green, Acocks Green (25 children)
- Pype Hayes Hall – all ages (35 children)

⁶ The first four years – the report of the children’s officer of the city of Birmingham for the period from February 1949 to January 1953 p123-124

⁷ Ibid p127-129

⁸ Ibid p99-111

It would appear that this residential nursery accommodation was not added to until 1973 although Oaklands was rebuilt (on its own site) in the meantime.

Children's Homes

In terms of children's homes in the 1960s, Shenley Fields and Erdington Cottage Homes were both still functioning as children's homes. However, in 1966, the decision was taken to change the structure so that each was no longer a single large structure overseen by a superintendent and a matron but instead each was a collection of individual and autonomous children's homes. Shenley Fields Cottage homes became known as The Drive and Erdington Cottage Homes as The Gardens.

There were, however, also a number of other children's homes opened in the 1960s significantly increasing the numbers of available beds for children in care. These included: 124 Church Lane, The Briars and Nicholls Street.

It was 1967 that saw the biggest increase in children's home numbers however, with five new homes added in existing buildings - City Road, Brooklands, Middleton Hall Road, Mulberry House, Sutton Road and five new 'family group homes' - Reynoldstown Road, St Athan Croft, and Valencia Croft, Bicknell Croft and Manningford Road.

Family group homes

By the mid 1960s there were 27 of the small family homes which had been developed in the city since 1951. Each was based on a housing estate with the intention of each looking like just another house. In the late 1960s, some of these family homes were knocked though into the house next door to make of each a single home for 12 children.

Reception centres

A shortage of reception centre beds in the late 1960s led to efforts to increase capacity. Existing reception (providing observation and assessment) at the The Trees, Shenley Drive, was supplemented by Oakhill, The Uplands and Athelstan House (previously a remand home).

Working children's homes

The 1960s saw a significant increase in hostels for working children. In the 1950s, there had been the Vauxhall Hostel for boys and Riversdale for girls. In 1952, Milton Grange was added as a boys' hostel.

In the 1960s, these had been replaced by Duchess Road (two houses for boys which was knocked into a single unit in 1965 and ultimately closed shortly after in the late 1960s), and two small units for girls (Chattock Close and Hillmount Close) which were replaced by Milton Grange in 1966. Additionally in 1967, Sheridan Walk and Hyperion Road

were added for girls and Allens Croft and Highters Heath Lane were added for boys in 1969.

By the late 1960s, the number of children in care had significantly increased from the end of the 1940s – from approximately 1,552 in 1949⁹ to 2,435 in 1968¹⁰.

The 1970s

The structure of Birmingham City Council changed in 1970 with the introduction of Social Services to take over the work of the Children's Committee as well as the health and welfare committees. This move followed on from the recommendations of the Seebohm Report which indicated that families should be treated as individual units rather than having their particular requirements dealt with separately by different committees. In turn, this led to the 1969 Social Services Act.

The early 1970s saw decisions to build new children's homes – and to build homes which were significantly larger than the family homes preferred in the 1950s. As the Children's Department stated at the time, 'for many children a less personal atmosphere may well be appropriate and be more readily provided in larger home ... and allow for greater staff privacy than is either possible or perhaps desirable in the smaller homes.'¹¹ Initially, it was decided to build six 18-bed homes. These were finished in 1972 and 1973 – including Highgate Close, Ipswich Walk and Triumph Walk. Three further 18-bed homes were completed in 1974 – including Ipstone Avenue, Lea Hall Road and Selly Park Children's Homes were added the following year. All but two of these larger purpose-built homes were still in use in 1990.

There were other children's homes added to the capacity which were not purpose built. These included Fairfield and 112 Church Lane.

Some commentators put the increased number of children in residential care as being in part a reaction to high profile cases of abuse in the parental home. There was a reluctance to allow children back home.¹²

Two residential nurseries were added in 1973 – Beechcroft and Chaddesley.

Remand homes in the 1970s

In 1973, the element of the Children and Young Person's Act 1969 came into effect which changed the status of remand homes and approved schools. They lost their hitherto special status and became community homes, like other children's homes. Those which had their own education provision, were known as community homes with education.

⁹ The First Four years: The report of the Children's Officer of the City of Birmingham for the period from February 1949 to January 1953, p66

¹⁰ Children's Committee Report 4th February 1969

¹¹ Report on the Work of the Children's Department of the City of Birmingham, March 1967

¹² Coffin G (1993) Changing Child care – the Children Act 1989 and the management of change

At this time Forhill House was still functioning as a remand home – for boys, as was Field House – for girls. However a fire in the latter establishment in October 1975 killed a girl and it was subsequently closed for a period of time.

St John's, Erdington, opened in 1976, later adding a secure unit. Tennial also added a secure unit in the 1970s.

1978 saw the opening of a youth treatment centre – Glenthorne in Erdington. This provided high security facilities for young people convicted of serious crimes. As one of only two such facilities in the country Glenthorne took in children from outside Birmingham.

The 1980s

1979 saw what is cited by Social Services as the point at which Birmingham peaked in terms of the numbers of children's homes (106)¹³, and the overall number of children in care (nearly 3,766¹⁴). However, a count of children's homes indicates that there were approximately 110 children's as early as 1975 but that closures took place in subsequent years.

In 1979, Birmingham Social Services made a decision to close a number of children's homes (around 17) which led to a series of strikes amongst social services. The closure plan was halted and a review process established. After the review (carried out by the Child Care review Group), Birmingham Social Services took the decision, in 1980, to close a large proportion of children's homes (citing a reduction in the numbers of beds being used) and change the emphasis from residential care to community-based care - fostering. There was a particular focus on reducing residential care for children under five which led to the closure of all residential nurseries.

The 1980s saw a decline in the number of children's homes from 106 in 1979 to 32 in 1990¹⁵. The 1980s were also a period of publicity, and protests, about the closures and Council cuts in a range of other services and in grants to voluntary care facilities.

Nationally, there was also a decline in the number of children in care homes. In England, there were 29,300 children in care in 1979 and 11,000 in 1989.¹⁶ The 1980s also saw a decline in the overall population of children.

¹³ Coffin G (1993) *Changing Child care – the Children Act 1989 and the management of change* and Adrienne Jones in her Report to the Social Services Committee dated 12th October 1988. While the figure of 106 is cited by both writers as the peak, this project's data is suggesting that the peak may have occurred in the mid 1970s when records intimate that 115 children's homes were functioning. However, as neither source cited gives a definition of 'children's homes' it could be that we are each counting the same units, but in a different way.

¹⁴ Birmingham Post 8th January 1980

¹⁵ Birmingham Post 23rd February 1990.

¹⁶ Coffin G (1993) *Changing Child care – the Children Act 1989 and the management of change*

By 1992, there were 344 children in residential care in Council-run homes in Birmingham¹⁷ in comparison with the 893 in Corporation homes in 1949¹⁸. The numbers ‘looked after’ overall in the city were not so very different however, from 1,562 in 1950 to 1,774 in 1991¹⁹.

In 1985, the Council agreed to ban corporal punishment in children’s homes, a decision following the ban to be enforced in schools. 1984 saw the final closure of Erdington Cottage Homes after agreement to reduce its use had taken place as early as 1966. Shenley Fields closed in approximately 1987.

The 1980s was also marked by the continuing professionalisation of residential care staff. Whereas houseparents had initially lived in the children’s homes working many hours each week and were often called ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ by the children, in the 1970s and 1980s more and more residential care staff were taking relevant formal qualifications to help them in their work. ‘Houseparents’ were replaced by ‘officers in charge’ supported by child care officers and staff no longer lived in.

By the end of the 1980s, children’s homes were very different to the homes of 10 years earlier with “a higher proportion of difficult and demanding teenagers”.²⁰

Changes in the early 1990s

The Children Bill was published in 1988 and received Royal Assent on November 16 1989. The Children’s Act 1989, however, was not implemented fully until the early 1990s. The Act was concerned with clarifying and simplifying legislation relating to childcare; with addressing the stigma of being ‘in care’; and with reducing the loss of contact experienced by families once their children were taken into care.

In 1990, staff consumption of alcohol on the premises was banned. In a further change, 1990 saw measures (coming into effect in 1991) to inspect council-run homes regularly. While there was a legal requirement to inspect those homes which were not Council-run, it was not until the NHS and Community Care Bill that Councils had a legal duty to inspect their own homes.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a period of damning press revelations about poor standards, abuse and absconding in Birmingham’s homes, particularly (although not exclusively) in the secure units – St John’s and Tennal.

¹⁷ Children’s Services Plan – forward to the Millennium. BCC Social Services. September 1997

¹⁸ The first 4 years – the report of the children’s officer of the City of Birmingham for the period from February 1949 to January 1953 L41.31

¹⁹ Coffin G (1993) Changing childcare – the children Act 1989 and the management of change. Pub. National Children’s Bureau L41.31

²⁰ Adrienne Jones in her Report to the Social Services Committee in her capacity as Director of Social Services - dated 12th October 1988

The current picture

In 2009 Birmingham had a higher number of looked after children than any other local authority in England²¹. It has the highest number of children in residential care (270). Because there is a large proportion of children within Birmingham's population, there are some local authorities which have a lower rate of looked after children than Birmingham but not many. Birmingham still has one of the highest levels of looked after children and children in residential care. And it is growing. In 2005, for every 10,000 children in Birmingham, 76 were looked after. In 2009, 83 are looked after in every 10,000. While some local authorities are also seeing an increase, others are not. Overall, the proportion of children who are looked after in England has remained the same since 2005.

Birmingham Children's Homes Project
December 2009

²¹ All data in this paragraph derive from the Department for Children, Schools and Families research and statistics gateway, released November 2009.