

Nottingham City Council

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held at Ground Floor Committee Room - Loxley House, Station Street, Nottingham, NG2 3NG on 28 March 2024 from 9.32 am - 11.42 am

Membership

Present

Councillor Naim Salim (Chair)
Councillor Samuel Gardiner
Councillor Georgia Power
Councillor Ethan Radford
Councillor Michael Savage
Councillor Adele Williams

Absent

Councillor Fozia Mubashar
Councillor Maria Watson

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Cheryl Barnard - Portfolio Holder for Children Young People and Education
Karla Banfield - Head of Commissioning
Ailsa Barr - Director of Children's Integrated Services
Veronica Fairley - Supporting Families Co-ordinator
Roz Howie - Interim Director of Adult Health, Social Care and Commissioning
Kate Morris - Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer
Damon Stanton - Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer
Catherine Underwood - Corporate Director for People

30 Apologies for Absence

Councillor Fozia Mubashir - Personal
Councillor Maria Watson - Other Council Business.

31 Declarations of Interest

In the interests of transparency Councillor Georgia Power highlighted that she worked for the Children's Society. This did not preclude her from speaking on any item.

32 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2024 were confirmed as a true record and were signed by the Chair.

33 Children in Care Placement Sufficiency

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children Young People and Education introduced the report on Children in Care Placement Sufficiency. Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director of People Services, Ailsa Barr, Director for Integrated

Children's Services, Karla Banfield, Head of Commissioning, and Roz Howie Interim Director of Adult Social Care and Commissioning attended and gave a presentation highlighting the following points:

- a) Whilst all work possible is done to prevent children coming into care, the Council has a statutory duty to provide sufficient placements for those that do. The Council uses a mix of placement types, from in-house residential provision, all rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, fostering, short term respite care and supported accommodation, as well as external residential placements where necessary.
- b) The Council works with other regional local authorities and with the D2N2 partnership to provide best value placements that focus on the best outcomes for children and young people. The Sufficiency Strategy, originally drafted in 2023 is updated annually to address the changes in demand for placements and works to ensure that placements available for children and young people are right first time.
- c) Issues around placement sufficiency are not unique to Nottingham, it is an issue recognised nationally and the need for reform is highlighted in the findings for the Competition and Markets Authority Children's Social Care Market Study from 2022. This national completion for placements is exacerbated in Nottingham by the higher levels of deprivation seen in many parts of the city.
- d) The strategy was rewritten in 2023 updating it as the market emerged from the pandemic and the periods of lockdown and is being updated annually, taking into account market changes, partnership working, regional networks and the Voice of the Child. This is the first time that Care Leavers have been specifically included within the strategy. Colleagues within Commissioning are working closely with Children's Services, creating an action plan and updating the strategy to best fit the current market and demand.
- e) Since the last strategy was published there has been further work around market development in Nottingham, with additional fostering placements and residential placements and specific work with health partners around placement for children with complex needs. Work with the D2N2 partnership has ensured that both Councils are able to maximise benefits of the established commissioning framework.
- f) There are a number of challenges that the strategy aims to mitigate. There are still gaps in provision, particularly for children and young people with complex needs. A number of pilots are being run and the outcomes assessed before bringing them into fulltime use. Commissioning intentions reflected in the strategy will include a drive towards quality and stability in placements to reduce demand, block commissioning through frameworks and maximising use of internal services to drive efficiencies. Commissioning colleagues are in regular dialogue with providers and will continue to do so.

During discussion the following questions were asked, and responses highlighted:

- g) Members asked how the Council would achieve best value whilst still relying on external providers for placements. There are a number of different activities undertaken to ensure that the Council balances best value with best outcomes for children and young people. Block buying through frameworks established with partners helps to drive efficiencies and provide better placements, particularly work with Health colleagues for young people with complex needs. Commissioning staff liaise with the smaller local providers around the type of provision that is needed for the City and looking to increase the level of long-term foster carers. The challenge is to ensure the right placement for a young person, the first time.
- h) Committee members asked what work was being done with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) around increasing placements for young people with complex needs and highlighted that these placements needed to feel like “homes” rather than “beds”. This is one of the current pilots being trialled by the City. The ICB commission the specialist placements, at present two, which are in a home setting with specialist care and wrap around support which are in a home setting. They are currently short-term placements with wrap around care and support in place which aims to stabilise the placement. This is currently a pilot scheme, due to come to an end later this year. Learning will be taken from the pilot and full consideration to a further roll out will be given.
- i) Committee members asked what was done to monitor the quality of placements which were outside the local area. The same approach is used to monitor the effectiveness of out of area placements as is used to monitor placements within the local area. There is a dedicated contracts team that monitors the provision and placement through the frameworks. Colleagues are also regularly in touch with counterparts in the area where external placements are to ensure local information is gathered too. Ofsted ratings can be made available for the individual placements.
- j) Committee members asked how successful the drive to recruit more foster carers had been, and what work had been done to increase the retention rate. Over the last year the Council has approved nine new foster carers with further families making their way through the assessment and approval process who will go before the Foster Approval Panel in the new financial year. This is up from five additional families the previous year. A new, regional fostering recruitment hub has been launched in partnership with D2N2. The regional fostering hub is in collaboration with 4 local authorities. This pilot project is currently funded by the DfE and the benefits will be monitored for the duration of the pilot. If it is deemed successful work will take place to see how it can be sustained and expanded in future years. In terms of retention of existing foster carers there have been no “regretted” resignations since June 2023. This means that where foster carers have left the authority it is for positive reasons, such as adopting or receiving a special guardianship order for the children they are caring for. Carers report feeling more supported and significant work has gone into improving support for existing carers.
- k) Committee members asked how the sufficiency strategy took into account the aim to spend money in Nottingham to grow the Nottingham economy. The primary job of the strategy is to ensure sufficient placements are available to

the Council for children and young people with as many placements as possible being local to ensure children can maintain familiar relationships where possible. The commissioning team is forming good relationships with providers who are interested to know what provision the City requires within the local area, collaborative work is underway to ensure the kind of provision that is needed is developed within the city and the local area.

- l) Committee members asked whether there were plans to extend the inhouse provision, and what the barriers to doing so would be. Providing in house provision is a balancing act between the benefit and the risk. Most local authorities have some in house provision and compared to many Nottingham City Council has a larger than average inhouse estate. The process from the decision being taken to create new inhouse provision to that provision being available for use can be around 2 years. One significant barrier can be the recruitment of a registered manager, which all authorities are struggling with nationally. The average cost of external provision is not very different to the cost of in-house provision and providing inhouse services comes with additional risk and financial investment.
- m) Committee members asked how complexity of need impacts cost of placement, and whether inhouse or external placements were preferable in cases of most complexity. Each young person's need is assessed and a suitable placement for need is essential. On occasion, both inhouse and externally, the correct placement can only be found by increasing staffing ratios, which usually means, for example, a two or three bed placement becomes a one bed placement. This increased the cost of the placement as the other beds are not able to be used. This is the case both inhouse and for external provision and so costs would not be reduced by using solely inhouse provision.
- n) Committee members asked whether the recent round of budget cuts had impacted the work to recruit and support foster carers. The Regional Fostering hub, set up alongside the D2N2 partnership, has DfE funding and so has not been impacted by the recent budget cuts. The current financial situation is not having a negative impact on the plans to increase inhouse fostering provision. Services still have sufficient resource to offer the therapeutic support to foster families.
- o) Members asked how the report of the CMA highlighted the significant profits of placement providers but that there was not a significant difference in cost between inhouse and external provision. The CMA report is referring to the large national providers who are making significant profit on placements. Commissioners are spending time working with local and independent placement providers to ensure the council achieves best value. These smaller and independent providers charge less on average whereas the large national providers are outliers in terms of cost.
- p) Committee members asked whether the balance of provision for the City was right. The data within the published report is the most up to date data, but does come from 2022, when the strategy was last refreshed. The old Strategy reflected the provision that was right for the City at that point, as the Country

was emerging from successive lockdowns and the Covid Pandemic. The City's need has changed and the landscape has moved on since the last strategy was published which is why the strategy is being refreshed, and will be refreshed annually to reflect the changing need of the city moving forward. Part of the work to refresh the strategy includes a deep dive into data sets to get a far better understanding of the market.

- q) Committee members asked whether the Authority used independent fostering agencies to increase fostering provision. The Council does work with independent fostering agencies. Following the pandemic there was a national reduction in the number of carers. Commissioning teams and Children's services colleagues regularly liaise with independent foster providers around the services the Council can provide for carers, additional support offered and discussions around specific children requiring care and possible matches to carers. This market engagement has helped to improve placement availability and relationships with the independent foster providers, but there is still work to do to approach more providers that the Council has identified as ones they would like to work with.
- r) Committee members asked how the Commissioning team identified providers they wanted to work with. The team look at a variety of factors, including Ofsted ratings, how local to Nottingham they are, their reputation in the sector as well as with other local authorities. The Team have identified a small number of providers they would not work with and although there is no formal rating system other providers are welcomed to approach the Council to start dialogue.
- s) Committee members asked whether unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people had specific access to translators. Yes, translation services are available for the young people and where they are not placed with a family that speaks their language, for the placement too. Colleagues also work hard to ensure that unaccompanied asylum seekers are helped to connect with communities from their home countries when they arrive in the City. These factors are all built into the work programme behind the Sufficiency Strategy.
- t) Committee members questioned whether the Authority had an open book relationship with the larger providers in the city. The Council is looking at open book relationships with large providers across both adult and children's social care. Work is being undertaken to look at best practice from other authorities and how that can be built into new contracts and used to hold providers to account.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for Children Young People and Education, the Corporate Director of People Services, the Director for Integrated Children's Services, the Head of Commissioning and the Interim Director of Adult Social Care and Commissioning for attending the meeting and answering the questions that Committee members had posed.

Resolved:

- 1) In respect of the quality of local provision outlined in the Strategy, that the ratings for the providers who are not located in the city are shared with the Committee.**
- 2) Recommends that a comparative analysis is carried out to ascertain the outcomes between internal and external provision.**
- 3) Recommends that when the Strategy is reviewed, work with community groups is included and expanded on.**

34 Review of the Early Help Strategy

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children Young People and Education introduced the report on the Early Help Partnership Strategy. Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director of People Services, Ailsa Barr, Director for Integrated Children's Services and Veronica Fairly, Supporting families Co-ordinator gave a presentation outlining the strategy and the work currently under way. They highlighted the following points:

- a) Early help support is mainly delivered through the four Family Hubs which act as a single point of access for whole family support and services from conception up to 19 and up to age 25 for children with special education needs or disabilities. The hubs provide a range of services which aim to provide holistic support, clear referral pathways and links to partner organisations. There are four hubs in total, located in Bestwood, Broxtowe, Meadows and Hyson Green.
- b) The Early Help Partnership Strategy was launched in October 2023 as a way of improving partnership working and ensuring a multi partner response to need across the city. The strategy has a number of aims and priorities around building resilience for families, embedding a whole system approach and joined up partnership working.
- c) The five main priorities of the Strategy each had a subgroup working to push forward and establish their work. Priority 1 is to embed a whole system approach with work being undertaken to agree practice guidance, ensure access to all materials in a variety of formats and in the 5 most prevalent languages used in the city. Additional work is ongoing to ensure partnership access to electronic records and information, and to standardise language and documentation.
- d) The second priority is around partnership working, with work taking place to develop an updated communication and marketing strategy. The website has been launched and has had an encouraging number of visitors, and work to refine the collective Core Offer continues with partners. Work is focusing on how to communicate with the harder to reach families, with advertising being placed in a range of public places, such as GP surgeries, and community centres. All Councillors have received details of the family hubs offer and how citizens can access the services.

- e) The third priority is around workforce development across the partnership and developing a cross partnership training plan. A Strategic Steering group has been established and a number of subgroups have been set up to ensure that services across the partnership are aligned. Work is underway to share various training resources across the partnership to allow collaborative and joined up working where all practitioners feel supported and informed.
- f) The fourth priority is around measuring the impact of the Early Help Partnership and creating an audit tool. Work is ongoing with partners to develop and agree key performance indicators, and develop a consistent approach to gathering feedback from service users.
- g) The fifth priority is around funding and identifying sustainability options for the Partnership and how funding can be pooled. Work is happening to develop a sustainability strategy for 2025. The Council and partners are applying for a variety of funding streams to collaborate and maximise value.
- h) Although the partnership is established a vast array of work is underway to maximise the benefits of this collaborative partnership way of working. Recruitment is underway for grant funded vacancies to support the work of the Family hubs. There is further work needed to align the inhouse Early Help services with the wider Early help system and KPIs need to be agreed and monitoring implemented.

During discussion the following questions were asked and responses given:

- i) Committee members asked whether this Partnership was an expansion of the Priority Families work, and whether it was modelled on work found elsewhere in the Country. The development of the Partnership was a response to demand for services as the City came out of lockdown and is an expansion of the work done around the Priority Families programme. The way Early Help services are delivered across the Country differs from authority to authority, with no two Councils approaching it in exactly the same way. This particular model, with practitioners from partners embedded across different organisations has been developed by the City in response to the needs of the citizens. It has been possible to adopt elements of best practice from a number of different authorities operating similar models, but the Nottingham model is further progressed than many authorities at present.
- j) Committee members highlighted that although the services offered are for 0-19 and in some cases 25, the family hub spaces are very much geared towards young children and lacked space that would appeal to teenagers. They highlighted that there was dedicated space within the Councils property portfolio that was already geared towards older children and teenagers. This is a recognised issue and the process to update and diversify the appeal of the spaces within the Family Hubs is underway. Consultation has taken place with teenagers and young people to establish what they would like to see in the dedicated space that would make them feel comfortable.
- k) Committee members queries some of the statistics within the report, highlighting that they included numbers of young people identified to be at risk

of criminal exploitation, but did not include numbers of those at risk of sexual or financial exploitation.

- l) Committee members questioned how the Authority defines at risk as only a small number of the identified young people were referred to the national referral mechanism. The National referral mechanism has very strict criteria for referral but an internal review is underway around how the Council uses it to consider whether more referrals should be made and the outcome of those referrals that are being made with the aim being that every child who should be referred, is.
- m) Committee members raised concerns that the report highlights that the cost of living crisis is having a more acute effect on private renters, and that the recent budget agreed to cut advice services for the private renting sector. Work is already underway to explore options to deliver the advice services in a different way and to continue to effectively distribute the energy vouchers. The Council is working with the voluntary sector to ensure support is available, but it will look different to how services have previously been delivered.
- n) Committee members asked whether the Council had applied for Pathfinder status and if not, what was being done to learn from the first phase. Unfortunately, due to the Ofsted rating of Children's service the Council was not able to apply for Pathfinder status. Officers are meeting with counterparts from Lincolnshire Council, that has Pathfinder status, and although the two authorities are very different it is still possible to take learning from the work done. Officers will also be looking further afield to other Councils such as Telford and Sunderland for more similar authorities with Pathfinder status as well as Wolverhampton.
- o) Committee members asked for more detail on the work being done to develop the KPI's for measuring the effectiveness of the Early Help Partnership, and whether they would be shared with the committee. Work is underway with partners to establish a standard set of KPIs. Discussions have taken place with other authorities but as no authority runs the same model direct comparison is difficult, but there have been some good ideas and thoughts around good practice. The Subgroup is working on the initial draft of the KPI's being careful to ensure that the right targets are being set and the right metrics are being measured. These KPIs will then be signed off by the Steering group and can be shared with this committee. These KPIs will be under review to ensure that the right data is being gathered and that they give an accurate indication of the impact of the Partnership.
- p) Committee members highlighted that support for children and young people with mental health issues were often very hard to access. They asked how the Early Help Partnership work would help to support families around access to mental health support. CAMHS is a mental health service commissioned by the Council through the ICB. There is work underway within the Council to better link these services with school services. The way funding is currently structured it is more beneficial for CAMHS to remain outside the partnership but for the system to have well developed pathways for referral and joint working with CAMHS. In some cases, there are long waiting times for referral

to these specialist services and within the Partnership work is being undertaken to establish additional support for families waiting for referral. There is some very good practice in schools that is being used to help shape the services available to support children and parents.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for Children Young People and Education, the Corporate Director of People Services, the Director for Integrated Children's Services and the Supporting Families Co-ordinator for attending the meeting and for answering the questions Committee members posed.

Resolved:

- 1) The Strategy (page 18) outlines that 232 children out of 5383 of those assessed were at risk of child criminal exploitation (CCE). The Committee recommends that this also includes sexual and financial exploitation.**
- 2) That the KPI's proposed to monitor the Strategy are shared with the Committee.**
- 3) Recommends that there is a review of the statistics outlined on page 10 of the Strategy.**
- 4) Recommends that the Council explores how it can make its buildings and services more teenage friendly.**
- 5) Recommends that the Council uses existing service provisions to support families with the cost of living crisis and child poverty.**

35 Children's Services Improvement

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Education updated the committee on the work being undertaken as part of the Children's services improvement plan. She highlighted the following points:

- a) Since the last update to the Committee there has not been a further monitoring visits by Ofsted, however preparatory work for the next one, which will focus on the Children in Care Service, is under way. The visit will take place in mid-April, and the report with comments will be available from mid-May. This visit will be one of the more challenging areas for the Council as there is a higher reliance on agency staff within this area, and caseloads are still high.
- b) Improvement specialists are working with managers looking at funding from the DfE to increase staffing levels, and to make agency staff into permanent team members. Resources are being redistributed to address current need and work continues to address the rising cost of external residential care placements.
- c) Children's Services recently held its annual practice conference, designed by the workforce, and supported by the DfE. Content was delivered by a wide

range of colleagues including frontline staff. Feedback has been positive with staff finding the content helpful.

During discussion the following questions were asked, and answers given:

- d) Members asked how the Council is working to convert agency staff into permanent colleagues. Managers are in regular contact with agency staff to discuss converting their contracts into permanent colleagues. These are both informal and formal discussions which have been successful in a number of cases.
- e) Members asked about the timelines and when the bulk of the transformation work would be complete leading to a more stable service with a Good or better Ofsted rating. Transformation work will continue throughout the services as an ongoing thread of work. There will always be changes within the service as it responds to changing pressures and challenges within the area. Following the completion of the monitoring visits Ofsted will likely complete a full inspection. The monitoring period is likely to continue until September 2025 so a full inspection would be anticipated after that point.

The Chair thanks the Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Education, the Corporate Director for People and the Director for Integrated Children's Services for attending and for answering the questions put to her by the committee.

The Chair extended thanks and well wishes to the Corporate Director for People on the news that she would be moving on from her role with Nottingham City Council. He thanked her for her hard work through what had been a difficult time for Nottingham.

Resolved that in light of Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People leaving the Council, the Committee recommends that the Council considers the establishment of a Corporate Director for Children and Young People (as Statutory Director for Children's Services), and a Corporate Director for Adults Social Care (as Statutory Director for Adult Social Services) given the large areas of responsibility and share of the budget

36 Recommendation Tracker

The Chair introduce the Recommendation Tracker to the committee noting that there were a number of responses outstanding. He asked that responses were received in a timely manner and that outstanding responses be presented at the next Committee meeting.

37 Work Programme

The Chair of the committee introduced the Work Programme, highlighting that as this was the last meeting of the municipal year there were no further items. Work to collate the 24/25 work programme was underway. The Chair asked that any suggested items be forward to the Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer.

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Members requested that an item around the cost of living crisis and child poverty be considered for the 24/25 work programme. The Chair would scope this item further with officers to determine how best an item can be scheduled into the Committee's Work Programme.

The Committee signed off the 23/24 work programme.