

Nottingham City Council

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held in the Ground Floor Committee Room - Loxley House, Station Street, Nottingham, NG2 3NG on 11 September 2024 from 9.31 am to 11.15 am

Membership

Present

Councillor Georgia Power
Councillor Fozia Mubashar
Councillor Michael Savage (Chair)
Councillor Maria Joannou
Councillor David Mellen

Absent

Councillor Maria Watson
Councillor Naim Salim
Councillor Adele Williams

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Cheryl Barnard - Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education
Ailsa Barr - Interim Corporate Director of Children and Education Services
Lee Kimberley - Head of Sold Services to Schools
Adrian Mann - Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer
Damon Stanton - Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer

12 Appointment of the Vice Chair

Resolved to appoint Councillor Michael Savage as the Vice Chair of the Committee for the 2023/24 municipal year.

- As the Chair of the Committee, Councillor Naim Salim, was absent, the Vice-Chair, Councillor Michael Savage, chaired the meeting.

13 Apologies for Absence

Councillor Naim Salim - unwell
Councillor Maria Watson - unwell
Councillor Adele Williams - work commitments

14 Declarations of Interests

None

15 Minutes

The Committee confirmed the Minutes of the meeting held on 10 July 2024 as a correct record and they were signed by the Chair.

16 Children's Services Improvement

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education, and Ailsa Barr, Interim Corporate Director of Children and Education Services, presented a report on the progress made in the delivery of the Children's Integrated Services Improvement Plan. The following points were raised:

- a) Following Ofsted's full inspection of Children's Services in July 2022, five monitoring visits have taken place – with the latest (in July 2024) returning to focus the 'front door' services (which had been reviewed previously during the first monitoring visit in February 2023). Individual monitoring visits do not provide a new rating for the Service, but Ofsted does publish its findings in a formal letter. As such, although the July 2022 rating of 'inadequate' remains in place, the most recent monitoring visit identified clear evidence of tangible progress being made – including in investment in frontline capacity, the steps being taken to ensure that the workforce feels more supported, reductions in individual caseloads, and the development of stronger relationships between caseworkers and the children and young people that they support (particularly the most vulnerable).
- b) New data dashboards have been implemented to ensure the proper prioritisation of key tasks so that they can be completed in a timely way. The quality assurance framework and performance monitoring processes have been strengthened so that areas for improvement and development can be identified clearly and easily. However, the monitoring visit did identify some inconsistency in the frequency and quality of supervision – with some children and young people experiencing too many changes to their Social Worker. As much work as possible is being done to address this, but there are problems around the recruitment and retention of staff, which is currently a significant challenge for Local Authorities nationally.
- c) 'Front door' services have been strengthened since the last monitoring visit, with increased stability leading to a greater consistency of work with families. Decision-making at the 'front door' is timely and appropriate, to ensure that the right support is delivered quickly. Where a child is identified as being significantly at risk, strategic meetings between the relevant partners are held quickly, with clear measures and expectations in place for the delivery of assessments and proportionate plans. The 'out of hours' emergency duty response has been strengthened.
- d) Close partnership work is underway with the Police on how they exercise their powers of protection to keep children safe. Local Authorities have a significant role and responsibility for ensuring that a child is safe when they receive concerning information from families, partners or anyone else. Usually, consent from parents is required for the Service to be able to work with a child, unless there is a clear risk of imminent harm. As a result, a great deal of activity has been carried out across the wider system to strengthen and develop the Early Help intervention offer, particularly with health and education partners.
- e) It is anticipated that the next monitoring visit will take place before the end of the year, with a likely focus on children in care. A full Ofsted inspection is expected from the summer of 2025.

The Committee raised the following points in discussion:

- f) The Committee queried how Social Worker caseloads were managed effectively, and how many frontline staff were required to deliver a good service. It was set out that too high caseloads would prevent Social Workers from operating effectively. Steps have been taken to ensure that all caseloads are broadly appropriate and sustainable, with each Social Worker engaging with around 15 individual children. However, there are certain peaks in demand during the year that must be addressed – particularly at the start of the school summer holidays. Action has been carried out to ensure that there are the right number of staff in each team and, though short-term cover by agency workers is sometimes required, less agency provision is needed now than was previously. The majority of staff in ‘front door’ services are permanent and feel properly supported in their work by their line managers.
- g) The Committee asked whether reductions in youth provision in the city had impacted on the ability to deliver Early Help effectively, and queried how prevention support for parents was being increased. It was reported that a number of parenting groups and classes are in place, both in person and online. However, further work is needed to coordinate delivery more effectively and ensure that the offer is fully known and understood – particularly for parents and smaller partner organisations. An Early Help Strategy has been launched with a coordinating partnership board in place. Schools are often the first to identify and respond to early needs, but it is vital that Early Help services are coordinated effectively with other partners and providers – particularly with community-based groups in the voluntary sector. Additional resourcing is being put into accessing Early Help, and learning has been taken from other Local Authorities to develop and embed a coordinated offer and an effective system of best practice.
- h) The Committee queried what work was underway to plan for the next version of the Early Help Strategy, and what the main reasons were for children presenting to the Service. It was set out that the current Strategy, which had been reviewed with Ofsted, would run to 2025. Work is underway to refresh and update the Strategy, with activity taking place now to establish a strong foundation for future versions.
- i) The Committee asked how it was ensured that all initial visits and assessments were carried out effectively and in a timely way, particularly for families at risk of being homeless. It was explained that proper processes were being established to ensure that any need for an initial visit was flagged quickly within the case management system. A stable housing situation is vital for support to be effective, so and the Service aims to work with families in the full context of their situations and engages closely with colleagues in Housing Services where required. The whole Council is working to deliver the Child-Friendly City initiative, so there is a good understanding and buy-in across all Council teams in supporting the Service and its work on child protection, where needed.
- j) The Committee asked how the Service ultimately aimed to achieve a ‘good’ rating from Ofsted. It was reported that significant improvement had been made since the July 2022 inspection, though some areas of vulnerability remained within the provision for children in care. However, development work is still ongoing and the Service is confident that this will be reflected in the outcomes of the next Ofsted inspection.

- k) The Committee sought assurance that Child Protection Investigations were carried out quickly, and that following Child Protection Conferences were held in a timely way. It was set out that all formal Section 47 Investigations are carried out within the appropriate timescales, with the following Conferences held at the right time to implement appropriate mitigations and safety plans, where required.
- l) The Committee noted that the local NHS was in a position of needing to achieve significant savings in its 2025/26 budget, so work should be done to identify and mitigate any potential service impacts that this might have across the partnership.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education and the Interim Corporate Director of Children and Education Services for attending the meeting to present the report and answer the Committee's questions.

Resolved:

- 1) To request that further information is provided on the most common reasons identified for children in need of protection plans, and why children are coming into contact with Children's Services.**
- 2) To request that the Committee is kept updated on the NHS Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care Board's current budget savings plans and the impact this might have on Children's Services.**
- 3) To request that further information and assurance is provided on the timeliness and consistency of time between Section 47 Child Protection Investigations taking place and the holding of a Child Protection Conference.**
- 4) To recommend that the Council considers how it can expediate its initial assessment of children's needs.**

17 Children's Services 2024/25 Budget Savings and Transformation, and Education Services 2024/25 Budget Savings - Progress Update

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education, Ailsa Barr, Interim Corporate Director of Children and Education Services, and Lee Kimberley, Head of Sold Services to Schools, presented a report updating the Committee on progress made in delivery of the Children's and Education Services 2024/25 budget savings programme, and the delivery of transformation within Children's Services. The following points were raised:

- a) Both Children's and Education Services needed to put forward savings towards achieving the Council's 2024/25 budget, while continuing to deliver an ongoing major transformation programme. Nevertheless, ensuring that Nottingham is a Child-Friendly City remains a clear objective of the current Strategic Council Plan.
- b) Within Education, activity is taking place to ensure the delivery of ongoing efficiencies as part of managing the overall budget. The provision of School Catering services have been reviewed to ensure that best value is achieved, with

a slight uplift in pricing coming into effect. Properties within the Education estate that are no longer required are being sold and, instead of being provided through general funds, the School Uniform Grant is now being supported through the specific Household Support Fund. Discretionary elements of the Education Partnership Service have been reduced, along with Education Psychology costs. Income from the Health and Safety in Schools service is being maximised. The Colwick Park Activity Centre has been closed, but work is underway to find an alternative provider for this outdoor activity resource.

- c) It has not been possible to secure additional national grant funding to support dedicated transport for pupils with special educational needs and disability, but alternative means of delivering the savings target have been identified. A full review of commissioned high-cost school transport routes is underway as part of the Council's general fleet review, to seek to develop in-house provision wherever possible.
- d) Within Children's Integrated Services, a restructure of staffing, roles and responsibilities has taken place within the Youth Justice Service, to ensure that it operates more efficiently. The closure and disposal of the Ridge Adventure Playground and the Bulwell Play and Youth Centre is moving forward, with youth services now being targeted directly to the young people in most need, wherever possible. The overall transformation work is on target in helping the Service operate more efficiently, and resources for administrative support work have been reduced.
- e) Steps are being taken to decrease care placement costs as much as possible. As part of this work, there is a substantial focus on the delivery of effective early support and prevention, to seek to lower the demand for high-cost intervention services – particularly the requirement to bring children into care. As much as possible is being done to address needs effectively in the shortest period of time, with Social Workers being deployed only to cases where they are required. The recruitment and retention of foster carers is being increased, with an outreach campaign taking place in partnership with other Local Authorities in the area.

The Committee raised the following points in discussion:

- f) The Committee asked how best value was achieved in school catering services. It was explained that a robust tendering process is in place to ensure the best value delivery of school catering, with all contracts designed to achieve a viable surplus. Due to inflation in food costs, meal pricing has had to increase from £2.50 to £2.70 – but a great deal of work is done to ensure the delivery of seasonal menus, while taking proper account of specific dietary requirements. There is recharge in place that aligns with the funding that schools receive to provide Free School Meals, and any changes to national funding are tracked and accounted for.
- g) The Committee asked what the primary challenges to the delivery of the 2024/25 Education budget targets were. It was reported that the most significant challenge is in the delivery of savings within transport costs, given that it was not possible to secure a higher national grant. However, a great deal of activity is taking place

across the Service to increase efficiency and deliver the savings requirement, which remains on target.

- h) The Committee asked what work had been done to recruit and retain foster carers, and to ensure that they felt valued. It was set out that the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education attended many of the foster carer network meetings and events, to ensure a strong dialogue and engagement, and support retention. The Mockingbird project has been launched to deliver sustainable foster care, with a particular focus on working to reduce the number of breakdowns in placements. There are also a number of opportunities for fostered children to mix with each other and form peer support networks.
- i) The Committee raised concerns that the closure of youth centres could result in poorer outcomes for young people, particularly in the context of the Council seeking to deliver a Child-Friendly City and needing to establish new Young Futures Hubs. It was explained that discussions are underway on alternative means for how the Ridge Adventure Playground could continue as a community resource, and consideration is being given to how existing community and children's centres could also be used to provide an offer to teenagers.
- j) The Committee sought assurance that the Youth Justice Service would still receive a proper level of funding and resource to be able to work effectively. It was set out that only a small reduction has been made within Youth Justice, which still has an overall budget of around £1 million to ensure that it remains a strong and effective service.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education, the Interim Corporate Director of Children and Education Services, and the Head of Sold Services to Schools for attending the meeting to present the report and answer the Committee's questions.

Resolved:

- 1) To request that further information is provided:**
 - a) on the Young Futures Hub and how this provision will work;**
 - b) from Property and Estates on how disposed-of Children's Services buildings will be used going forward; and**
 - c) on how the Council is preparing for using funding streams such as the Family Hubs Programme.**
- 2) To recommend that work is done to understand the needs and reasons for children coming into the Council's care, and whether the Transformation Programme is still meeting those needs effectively.**

18 Recommendation Tracker

The Chair presented the latest responses received in relation to the recommendations made by the Committee to the Council's Executive.

The Committee noted the Recommendation Tracker.

19 Work Programme

The Chair presented the Committee's current Work Programme for the 2024/25 municipal year. The following points were discussed:

- a) The Committee noted that childcare provision was delivered through a number of community centres, some of which could now be at risk of closure – so it queried how the review of community centres had taken into account how childcare needs were being met through them.
- b) The Committee considered that, following its discussion of the issue at its meeting on 15 May 2024, an item on the partnership strategy and arrangements in place to prevent child exploitation should return to the Committee by May 2025. The Committee also considered that an item on the Early Help Strategy should be included as part of its 2025/26 work programme.
- c) The Committee noted that Jill Colbert would start at the end of September as the new Corporate Director for Children and Education Services, and that Ailsa Barr would return to her substantive role as Director of Children's Integrated Services. The Committee thanked Ailsa Barr for her hard work as the interim Corporate Director.

The Committee noted the Work Programme.