

# Nottingham City Council

## Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held remotely via Zoom on 25 March 2021 from 10.00 am - 11.53 am

### Membership

#### Present

Councillor Carole McCulloch (Chair)  
Councillor Maria Joannou  
Councillor Jane Lakey  
Councillor Chantal Lee  
Councillor Maria Watson

#### Absent

Councillor Salma Mumtaz  
Councillor Shuguftah Quddoos

### Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Cheryl Barnard	- Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People
Kathryn Bouchlaghem	- Early Years Manager
Katherine Crossley	- Early Years Project Officer
Nicholas Lee	- Director of Education Services
Catherine Underwood	- Corporate Director for People
Helen Watson	- Interim Director for Children's Integrated Services
Marylou Hemsley	- Governance Officer
Kim Pocock	- Scrutiny Officer

### 28 Helen Blackman - A Minute's Silence

A minute's silence was held to remember Helen Blackman, Director of Children's Integrated Services, who died from Covid 19 complications on 3 March 2021.

### 29 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Salma Mumtaz (medical appointment) and Councillor Shuguftah Quddoos (unwell).

### 30 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2021 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

### 31 Declarations of Interest

None.

## **32 Children's Integrated Services Improvement Plan**

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, Helen Watson, Interim Director of Children's Integrated Services and Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People attended the meeting to provide the Committee with an update on progress to address the priority actions arising from the Ofsted Focused Visit, carried out in February 2020. She highlighted the following information:

- a) Following consideration of the Council's arrangements for, and evidence in relation to, children in need and those subject to a child protection plan (focusing on children at risk of neglect) in February 2020, Ofsted issued two priority actions:
  - Address the systemic failures in social work practice to ensure that planning and intervention for children improve their experiences, and that new and emerging risks are identified and responded to; and
  - Stabilise the workforce and address the significant shortfall in capacity to enable social workers and first line managers to respond effectively to children in need of help and protection.
- b) The Children at the Heart Improvement Board (a partnership board) is well established and is meeting regularly. The Board provides a mechanism for holding partners to account in their work to achieve positive outcomes for children and has invited front line colleagues to present information on their work, to enable a true understanding of the challenges facing the workforce.
- c) Helen Watson has been supporting the work to deliver the Improvement Plan and will continue to work with Children's Integrated Services as Interim Director.
- d) In response to the first priority to improve social work practice, progress has been made in the following key areas, in addition to the work of the Children at Heart Improvement Board:
  - the Council's Partner in Practice (PiP), Essex County Council, has undertaken work to support the Council (funded by the Department of Education), including diagnostics (eg fieldwork and duty services), a programme of improvement and a review of improvement progress using its PiP review framework, identifying some positive changes since work began on improvements;
  - a Director of Practice Improvement has provided additional leadership capacity for 9 months and a Principal Social Worker was recruited in November 2020;
  - a Practice Forum was established in June and has met fortnightly since then to look in depth at practice and improvement;
  - a Communications Plan has been developed in consultation with the Practice Forum and other feedback has been gathered from the Forum to facilitate change;
  - the Practice Model has been redeveloped and training has been provided for staff, including retraining and master classes;

- practice tools were launched as part of the Neglect Practice Guidance, with training provided for staff, and distributed via the Practice Forum to improve engagement with children and young people;
  - a partnership Neglect Strategy has been drafted and neglect practice guidance has been launched with a high number of staff attending events to learn more;
  - a Workforce Strategy has been developed and is almost ready to sign off;
  - the Service has re-joined Research in Practice, which provides a range of materials to provide bespoke training (eg neglect and child poverty) and support to staff;
  - the supervision policy has been re-launched;
  - Practice Standards have been re-developed;
  - the Audit Programme has been reshaped with a new process in place whereby individual auditors look at case files, working closely with practitioners and including evaluations of their support by children, young people and families;
  - the framework for hearing the voice of/ lived experiences of the child has been refreshed; and
  - additional capacity has been added to the Independent Reviewing Officer Service.
- e) In response to the second priority to improve workforce capacity, the Service outlined the following key areas of progress:
- a new Social Work progression and pay structure has been put in place and this is consistently benchmarked against other local authorities;
  - a new microsite has been launched by HR colleagues, which is supporting the ability to recruit high quality social workers;
  - the rolling recruitment of Social Workers has continued;
  - the advert and offer for agency social workers have been refreshed and have seen the positive transition of some agency workers to becoming permanent members of staff;
  - an agency social work fieldwork team was recruited for 6 months, which was able to significantly drive cases at a point of high pressure in the system;
  - contact workers have been recruited to release social workers to carry out the more detailed intervention work; and
  - temporary additional business support in field work teams have been recruited.
- f) Three workstreams have been established to move the Improvement Programme forward:
- Workstream One – to continue the journey to ensure that children will benefit from consistently good social work practice through the creation of conditions for good social work to flourish (including a series of workshops with all teams); prioritising neglect in social work practice; achieving permanence for children in care and care leavers and focusing on outcomes for these children; focusing on family interventions and delivery models and on the Fostering Service, to keep children in the city wherever possible.

- Workstream Two – to support and enable services to make a difference for children, through quality assurance (and keeping staff informed of the outcome of audit work), service reviews, workforce development through the new development plan, new ways of working and encouraging participation and engagement of the workforce, children, young people and their families.
  - Workstream Three – children will benefit from a partnership that works together to improve outcomes for them, to be achieved by strategic alignment of plans and strategies; focusing on partnership working to address youth violence and exploitation, early intervention and early help; and commissioning for good outcomes.
- g) There are a number of risk areas where efforts are being made to mitigate these:
- the consequences of failing to meet statutory responsibilities;
  - recruiting to fill a vacancy in the senior leadership team to ensure capacity;
  - the impact of Covid 19 on planned and improvement activity and the need to re-prioritise (well supported by staff who have shown themselves to be committed and resilient throughout the pandemic);
  - the challenging financial context, in which it is essential to establish sustainable children’s social care;
  - maintaining the pace of the improvement and development programme, where there is more to do in spite of positive achievements to date; and
  - maintaining staffing levels to allow for reasonable caseloads and good social work practice.
- h) Next steps will include preparation for the next Ofsted assurance visit expected by June at the latest; continued working with Essex as a Partner in Practice; Covid roadmap service adjustments including return to the workplace; ongoing engagement with the Department for Education, the Local Government Association and Ofsted; continued excellent partnership engagement; and carrying out benchmarking activity.
- i) The Service’s improvement and development priorities will include addressing wider factors contributing to social work capacity and retention (including IT, enabled working and support and parking and office space); embedding practice improvement for consistency; focusing on wider practice learning and development; and developing a business case for a future operating model.
- In response to questions from the Committee and in the subsequent discussion the following points were made:
- j) Essex County Council has been on a ten-year journey of improvement since it faced an ‘inadequate’ Ofsted rating. Its Children’s Services is now rated ‘outstanding’. However, demographically it is a very different authority from Nottingham city.
- k) Essex can demonstrate particularly good practice in work on the edge of care, ie to prevent children coming into the system; a high standard of social work practice and effective partnership working. Nottingham’s practitioners and managers have been able to take great benefit from working with Essex colleagues and their ways of working.

- l) While Essex does challenge Nottingham in a very constructive way, in some areas Nottingham has been able to share some of its positives with Essex, for example adopting the format of Nottingham's case audit pro forma.
- m) When Ofsted visiting in February 2020 the workforce was clearly unable to articulate the practice model in use and the signs of safety elements within it. Positively, the benchmarking work with Essex last December demonstrated that staff are now well able to articulate the model and use it. The focus has been on refining and refreshing the entire workforce and introducing practice standards, leaving Nottingham in a much stronger position.
- n) In response to a concern that work with families is sometimes harsh, colleagues noted that the strength based model is the approach used. There will always be some strengths to find and research shows that working from this base is the most productive and effective way of working.
- o) While £1.5m has been budgeted for improvements (for example business support capacity, contact workers, practice improvement) there have been ongoing requirements to make efficiencies within Children's Integrated Services. Reduction of costs should not undermine the improvement work which has been achieved. In considering savings, the core statutory social work service and its capacity have been protected. Some of the savings relate to the strengths based approach, which can keep children in families rather than going into care or ensure children in care return to their families as soon as possible and save in terms of the costs of care. In addition, savings need to be achieved by looking at how care is bought, eg increasing in-house provision. In addition, modest savings have been found in 'early help'.
- p) The perspective (put forward by Isabelle Trowler, Chief Social Worker for Children and Families in England) that nationally there is too much low risk, ineffective social work, is a live, ongoing issue for the Council. Thresholds for appropriate intervention are regularly considered.
- q) The focus has been on ensuring the basics of good social work practice, access to high quality reflective supervision and getting to a consistently good standard of practice. There is definitely an improving picture, but there is still work to do in a number of areas, eg on high quality chronologies and a focus on building effective relationships with children and families.
- r) In terms of performance, team managers are proactive in addressing issues and putting appropriate training and development plans in place. There have been some cases where action has had to be taken where agency social workers have not provided the quality of work required. There is still work to do to achieve consistency.
- s) Sickness absence levels have improved but the Service is still focused on working with colleagues in HR to pick up on sickness absence issues and offer appropriate support to colleagues.

- t) The learning from the improvement work is supporting a widespread understanding of what good looks like and the feedback from the workforce has been positive. The workforce is passionate and committed and wants to be the best it can be. However, there is a high number of relatively inexperienced, newly qualified members of staff, as well as experienced staff, and the challenge is still to achieve consistency across all elements, ie assessment, planning, review, chronology, supervision etc.
- u) Lead officers have now been identified for key areas of improvement delivery.
- v) Work with the Children in Care Council is ongoing and the relationship is strong. Work with the Youth Cabinet will be picked up as soon as the appropriate member of staff returns from sick leave.
- w) A domestic abuse toolkit has been developed in work with partners which is bespoke to Nottingham city.
- x) Play and Youth Services are involved in the improvement meetings within Children's Integrated Services.
- y) It is difficult to compare the costs of Nottingham's children's services with those of Essex. Essex has had significant investment from the DfE (Department for Education), as a Partner in Practice. It is a very large county – about four times the size of Nottingham city – with a very different demographic, so comparing budgets would not be useful. However, the costs of key areas are discussed, where this might be useful. An example of this is recent discussions with Essex about their placement panel and high cost placements. The investment they have made into their now well established in-house fostering service to ensure that this is the first point of call for their children in care service has brought down the cost of placements significantly. This is an area where Nottingham could benefit.
- z) The Council has its own 'grow our own' social worker scheme as well as adding front line units in the last year, which helps to ensure consistency and quality.

The Chair thanked the contributors and requested an update on progress to implement outstanding actions in 6 months' time.

### **33 The Impact of Speech and Language Needs on Outcomes for Children and Young People**

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, Kathryn Bouchlaghem, Early Years Manager, Katherine Crossley, Early Years Project Officer and Nicholas Lee, Director of Education Services attended the meeting to outline the Council's response and progress to address the recommendation arising from a Local Government Association Peer Challenge carried out with Nottingham City Council in 2019 to develop a collaboratively produced citywide Early Years Strategy, with a particular focus on speech, language and communication. They highlighted the following information:

- a) The Council is working with partners to develop a workable Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) Strategy for the city. This has involved establishing and understanding what interventions are being used across the city.
- b) It has been clearly identified (pre pandemic) that some of Nottingham's children are not developing their speech and language skills to the best of their ability. This can impact on all of a child's life skills, including attachment, attainment, offending, good mental health, wellbeing, employment opportunities etc. The pandemic has impacted on the ability to engage with some young children, but the Early Year's Foundation sector has been open throughout and available for parents to use.
- c) Partnership working with other cities (Derby and Leicester) has enabled Nottingham to learn from others, for example the Council aspires to extend its age range for SLC work from 0-5 to 25, as Leicester has done.
- d) It is hoped to replicate across the city, at low cost or no cost, the work with Small Steps Big Changes (National Lottery funded programme of activities designed to give children the best start in life) in Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green, Arboretum and St Ann's.
- e) The Peer Reviewers are due to return in the summer this year, by which time the SLC strategy will at least be in draft form if not further progressed. The Health and Wellbeing Board is responsible for overseeing the work to develop the strategy.
- f) There are lots of really positive programmes of work across the city in schools, community settings etc, which support SLC. Going back to basics, eg using the first 100 words, is considered key in how to move forward to a workable citywide partnership strategy.
- g) Early Years colleagues are working with Derby and Leicester to centralise SLC resources for the city and to support parents, carers and professionals to navigate what is available, so that they can help children to develop their SLC skills. Information has been centralised in one place, called the Balanced System pathway, providing clear guidance and support. The Committee was shown a short video which introduces the Balanced System pathway and the range of resources on offer. This tool is being widely shared.
- h) Work is ongoing with partners from birth onwards to encourage parents and provide them with the confidence to take up a free childcare early education place to enable SLC work to begin as early as possible.

In response to questions from the Committee and in the subsequent discussion the following points were made:

- i) Inequalities within the workforce are known to have an impact on early years' development. Graduates working within an early years setting can have a significant impact on SLC. While funding previously used to employ graduates in such work is no longer available, in Nottingham approximately 60% of early years'

settings within the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector, have a graduate-led workforce. Within the schools' early years sector it is 100%.

- j) Drilling down on ward and community data shows that creative language and writing skills for some boys have slipped below the national average. The Council has invested in focused workforce development training to enable support for boys' development of fine motor skills to aid this. In some schools there has been evidence of an improvement in boys' engagement.
- k) The department monitors hard data as part of its responsibility for statutory reporting. EYFSP (Early Years Foundation Stage Profile) data is the first data captured and held on a child's education. However, the provision of data to the local authority is not currently mandatory for all settings, eg schools. It is part of the Council's strategy to engage with all schools, including academy trusts, to build robust data back to 2015.
- l) Work is ongoing to link the health and education 2.5 year-old checks. It is essential to share data with partners as the collection of data and forensic analysis improves, to join up the education and health sectors (the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, based on education, and the Healthy Child Programme) to tackle inequalities.
- m) Attainment and the ability to thrive in education have a significant impact on behaviour and the ability to navigate life beyond school, impacting on worklessness. Colleagues are keen to see the work with young children extending as part of the SLC Strategy.
- n) The levels of deprivation in Nottingham have enabled the Council to access funding for the work with Derby and Leicester, which experience similar widespread challenges with SLC across their cities.
- o) The Council worked closely with health visitors and speech and language therapists to develop the '100 words' programme. It will now be helpful to reinvigorate that through a range of communications to schools, early years' settings, parents' forums etc.
- p) A childcare sufficiency audit has shown that there are enough spaces for under 5 year-olds. The best outreach tool is to engage with parents and carers, as well as schools, to promote the benefits of going to an early years setting. More work needs to be carried out with Health Visitors to formalise promotion toolkits.
- q) To improve the time spent on waiting lists for speech therapy, the Council is working on both training its workforce and how services are commissioned. This is being looked at by the Health and Wellbeing Board. Linked to this is the importance of engaging parents and carers in the Balanced System pathway to empower them to support their child.
- r) The Dolly Parton Library free book per month for under 5 year-olds is a resource on the pathway and has been embraced widely, including by the PVI sector, to

support parents with reading to their child and help to identify literacy issues, which can then be addressed.

- s) The overarching vision for SLC would enable work to be extended to support older young people and adults whose learning and progress has been/ is impacted by difficulties with SLC. It was agreed that it would be useful to look at this particularly at a future Committee meeting.
- t) Councillor Barnard agreed to distribute a copy to Committee members of 'Talking About A Generation', which reviews recent developments in policy and practice of SLC on health and wellbeing, educational progress and employability beyond school.

The Chair thanked contributors and requested an update on progress with the SLC strategy, including work with older young people and adults, in one year's time.

### **34 Work Programme 2021/22**

- a) The Chair presented her report which summarised the work of the Committee in 2020/21. The report proposed a number of recommendations for consideration by members in relation to that work, which were discussed and agreed.
- b) The proposed work programme identified a list of items for potential scheduling in 2021/22, suggested by members of the Committee and proposed in the Chair's report. The Committee agreed the list of items as its priorities for 2021/22, to be timetabled following the meeting.
- c) The Committee agreed that it would review progress in implementing outstanding actions from the action plan arising from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse at its May meeting.

### **RESOLVED to recommend that**

- 1) the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People considers establishing Youth Networks for each area of the city to enable partners to share intelligence and tackle challenging issues;**
- 2) the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People explores ways of routinely collecting data on the number of young people that Play and Youth Services work with who have been excluded from school, to help managers ensure that the service is focusing on, and reaching, the young people likely to be most in need of intervention and support;**
- 3) the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People ensures that Play and Youth Services introduces mechanisms and tools to robustly assess what is and isn't working well and to evaluate the effectiveness of services, with regular review of this evaluation by senior managers;**

- 4) when allocating the Area Based Grant (ABG) the Portfolio Holder for Communities, Highways and Strategic Transport ensures that systems and processes are in place so that the Council is satisfied that organisations deliver what is needed, avoiding duplication and gaps in provision, to the standard required, for example through a quality mark and clear agreements about expectations;**
- 5) the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, Schools and Communications writes to the relevant Minister to express the importance of continued support for pupils entitled to free school meals during school holidays for as long as the Covid 19 furlough scheme is applied; and**
- 6) the Health Scrutiny Committee considers including in its work programme an item on how children and young people with mental health and wellbeing issues will be supported as the city recovers from the pandemic, with particular reference to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and including the impact on transition of children and young people to adult services.**