

Nottingham City Council

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held at LB 31-32 - Loxley House, Station Street, Nottingham, NG2 3NG on 3 November 2022 from 10.00 am - 12.20 pm

Membership

Present

Councillor Maria Joannou (Vice Chair)
Councillor AJ Matsiko
Councillor Shuguftah Quddoos
Councillor Phil Jackson
Councillor Georgia Power
Councillor Cate Woodward

Absent

Councillor Carole McCulloch
Councillor Maria Watson

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Cheryl Barnard - Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Schools
Ailsa Barr - Director of Children's Integrated Care
Sam Morris - Head of Strategy and Improvement
Catherine Underwood - Corporate Director for People
Jane Garrard - Senior Governance Officer

15 Chair

In the absence of Councillor Carole McCulloch, Vice Chair Councillor Maria Joannou chaired the meeting.

16 Committee Membership Change

The Committee noted that Councillor Cate Woodward had been appointed as a member of the Committee.

17 Apologies for absence

Councillor Carole McCulloch – unwell
Councillor Maria Watson - personal

18 Declarations of Interests

None

19 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 July 2022 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

20 Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Schools, Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People, Ailsa Barr, Director of Children's Integrated Services, and Sam Morris, Head of Strategy and Improvement, attended the meeting to discuss the recent Ofsted inspection of children's services. They gave a presentation highlighting the following information:

- a) Children's services are some of the most important statutory responsibilities of the Council and therefore are subject to a robust and rigorous regulatory regime, which focuses on the effectiveness of services. The effectiveness of children's services is of importance to the whole Council.
- b) The inspection took place over three weeks in July and included the sharing of the Council's self-assessment. Initial feedback was provided to the Council and the report was published on 5 September.
- c) The Council was judged to be 'Requires improvement to be good' in the domains of the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families and the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers and 'Inadequate' in the domain of experiences and progress of children who need help and protection.
- d) While the outcome of the inspection judgement as 'Inadequate' is disappointing, the Council considers that overall the report is balanced detailing where improvements need to be made but also recognising where progress has been made and areas of strong practice that can be built on. It is recognised that due to the grading for the domain of children in need of help and protection, the rating for overall effectiveness could not be any higher, despite the higher rating for other domains.
- e) Ofsted identified eight specific areas for improvement:
 - i. Effectiveness and timeliness of responses to children's needs when first presented to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) – there are significant weaknesses in this area, with decision making needing to take place much more swiftly.
 - ii. Management oversight and direction of front-line workers and the local authority designated officer
 - iii. Social work capacity so that social workers and first-line managers can respond effectively to children in need of help and protection, and that children in care have greater consistency of social worker – this was recognised as a challenge in Ofsted's previous focussed visits. A changing workforce has an impact on the consistency of relationships for children in the Council's care.
 - iv. Placement sufficiency for children in care and those with complex needs – the main challenge for the Council is finding the right arrangements and other local authorities are also having difficulty with this.

- v. The service response to care leavers aged 21 or over – the Council needs to ensure that information provided to care leavers is clearer and works to support them.
 - vi. The service response to young people who are aged 16/17 years who present as homeless – the Council needs to make sure that accommodation needs are progressed promptly.
 - vii. The quality and timeliness of return home interviews
 - viii. Oversight of children missing from education and those who are electively home educated
- f) It is acknowledged that children do not yet receive a consistently good service and some children at risk of harm are not responded to quickly enough. Children are also waiting too long for decisions to be made about the next steps for them when information is received by the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub.
- a) The scale of improvement required is substantial and the pace of change needs to quicken. This is challenging within the Council's current difficult operating context but Ofsted did note the impact of the new leadership team on practice.
- b) The Service is now revising its Improvement Plan, which will be submitted to Ofsted within the required 70 working days from publication of the report (early December). The Plan will reflect the wider development of the Service in addition to the areas identified for improvement by Ofsted.
- c) It is anticipated that Ofsted will under 3 – 4 monitoring visits a year, each focusing on a specific area. It is likely that the first visit will be in spring 2023.
- d) The Department for Education has a role in relation to improvement and has issued a formal notice about how it sees the type of intervention. As agreed prior to the inspection, the Council is working with an Improvement Advisor who will be chairing the Children at the Heart Improvement Board and working with the Council on improvement. The Department for Education will be providing some support with resourcing.
- e) The Council has met with the Department for Education and Ofsted who have confirmed that the Council understands what is needed and that it has commitment to improve.
- f) Delivery of the Improvement Plan will be monitored by the Children at the Heart Improvement Board. The terms of reference and membership of this Board have been revised and it will now be independently chaired to add rigor.
- g) Although the Improvement Plan is still being revised, work has already started on addressing the issues raised by Ofsted.
- h) Front line worker capacity in the MASH has been increased by eight additional posts and an additional service manager has been appointed. This will help to improve the application of the threshold within the MASH resulting in more timely outcomes. These posts are currently being filled by a mix of permanent

and agency workers and the service manager is an experienced agency service manager. The aim is to recruit to these posts permanently.

- i) The Service has reviewed the response when children are missing from home and additional resource is being made available to better understand data and improve the timeliness and quality of return home interviews.
- j) A review of the local authority designated officer arrangements has started and a new colleague has been appointed to that role.
- k) A recruitment and retention package for social workers has been agreed to stabilise the Service and reduce the reliance on agency workers. The aim is to try and attract and retain those with experience. The package was introduced in the summer and over 83% of the eligible workforce has taken it up and this is helping to provide stability from within. The next stage is to make progress with external recruitment.
- l) Places have been secured for all social work team managers to complete the Department for Education Pathways Leadership Programme. This will provide opportunities for managers to network and learn from managers in other areas of the country.
- m) The ambition is that at the next full inspection, the Council will demonstrate that Nottingham's children's services are unequivocally 'good' and will also be confidentially demonstrating some outstanding elements of practice.

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

- n) While the Ofsted judgement was disappointing, it was not surprising. The last full inspection was in 2018 and from focussed visits in early 2019 and 2020 it was clear that services had deteriorated and needed considerable improvement. In response, an action plan was put in place and improvements were brought forward over the next 12-18 months focussed on the specific areas identified during these focussed visits, including the response to those privately fostered and support for children at risk of experiencing neglect because processes to support pre-work were not always effective. While these areas have improved since 2020, they can still improve further.
- o) At the end of 2021 the Council worked with the Department for Education to engage Essex County Council (rated Outstanding) to support the Council's improvement. Essex reviewed the Council's 'front door' arrangements and diagnostics showed the need for improvement, so the Council was aware of this and actively working on making improvements. It was clear that the volume of work triaged at the 'front door' was significant. There have been improvements to reduce the volume but this has not yet been as successful as the Services needs it to be and, at the time of the inspection, Ofsted found that decision making was still not timely enough. Further work has taken place since the inspection.

- p) One of the questions asked by Ofsted in relation to leadership was whether the Council understood its current position and the Service was able to describe its journey of improvement to inspectors.
- q) There could be learning on making sure information is provided to the Committee in support of effective scrutiny taking place.
- r) The inspection report recognises the difficult context that the Council is currently operating in and this has impacted on the service and the pace of improvement.
- s) The inspection report recognises the commitment to and quality of social work carried out by front line workers and that improvements have been made to assessments and understanding the needs of children. However, it is acknowledged that 'enablers' are really important in supporting good social work practice. A focus on use of technology, for example, is happening across the Council and is one of the next significant steps for the Service.
- t) During the week in which the report was published, five sessions were held with staff (four of which were held in-person) to talk both about the report and its findings and how staff feel. The sessions were attended by the Portfolio Holder and staff were assured that their commitment and loyalty was recognised by Ofsted, that the report's findings are not reflective of front-line staff not working hard enough and that improvement is about creating the right environment for staff to practice in. The sessions were well received by staff, who were unsurprisingly disappointed in the inspection outcome, and the overwhelming response was enthusiasm for contributing to improvement. What needs to change and how is now being discussed in more detail with staff. The Portfolio Holder added that in the previous week she had spent the day with the MASH Team who are now on top of work, have a new grading system in place and are keen to make further improvements. It was positive to see good staff morale within the Team and they understand that the Ofsted judgement was not about them as individuals. The Portfolio Holder commented that she was reassured by that visit and will be visiting other areas of the service on the same basis.
- u) After the first focussed visit by Ofsted, staff articulated that they felt things were done to them rather than with them. The Service is keen to take a different approach and get their feedback on things that are working well, areas for improvement and ideas for change. Developing a culture of doing things 'with' people will be a key part of continuous improvement by the Service and commitment to engage in this is testament to the front line staff. These new approaches taken by leadership, which are supportive yet challenging, were described in the Ofsted report. The culture needs to be across all tiers of the Service with accountabilities in all directions.
- v) One area of work started before the inspection is giving managers and staff better access to data and performance information, for example daily information to help them structure their time and work. Front-line practitioners have fed back that this has been really useful. It also helps managers have clear sight of caseloads and whether they are manageable. In addition to

data, managers are also encouraged to listen to when staff say that they feel really busy, even if the data suggests that a caseload is manageable, and support them accordingly.

- w) Feedback from staff is broadly that they feel supported, listened to and that the Service is moving the right direction. However, Ofsted did comment that supervision is not always as effective or timely as it could be and that will need addressing.
- x) There were concerns that repeated contacts take place before response is provided. A prompt is now built into processes requiring a response after a certain number of contacts regardless of the nature of those contacts.
- y) The Local Government Association has recently supported a review of the Corporate Parenting Board and, based on that, work is taking place to review the membership of the Board, how it engages with children and young people and the format of its meetings. One aspect of this is the engagement of partners, which is currently limited.

The meeting adjourned at 11:05am.

The meeting resumed at 11:10am.

- z) The Council is working with Essex County Council as a Sector Led Improvement Partner because Essex has a well-developed programme of support and is a large authority that is able to support others alongside delivering its core business. The Council was initially curious about its 'fit' with Essex but feedback from frontline staff and managers has been positive and Essex has helped to identify areas for improvement and provide support in making those improvements. Their input has been both supportive and challenging and the overall impact has been positive, so the Council will continue to work with them. The Council is open to working with other local authorities as opportunities allow and has informal links with peers.
- aa) In terms of improving the quality and timeliness of return home interviews, work is underway to understand the issues relating to this. Not all those missing from home are at risk of exploitation but many of those at risk of exploitation do go missing for periods. It is important for the Service to understand this from the individual and City perspective. The Council is working with partners to identify what needs to improve and also improve internal quality assurance on the return home interview process. It is also important to improve oversight arrangements and changes will be made to case management so that information on those missing from home is more visible. It will take time to make changes to case management systems but the practice response can be changed sooner once the best way of responding has been determined. Actions on this will be included in the Improvement Plan.
- bb) In January, there were only two qualified social workers working in the MASH. All other staff were differently qualified. By April, based on the diagnostic carried out by Essex County Council, it had been identified that the MASH

needed more qualified social workers alongside those differently qualified. This was because of changes in long-standing staff. Therefore, in April it was agreed to increase the establishment by eight additional social workers. The aim of increasing capacity was to respond to a growth in enquiries while dealing with the backlog of cases and ensuring the right skill mix in the team. However, it was a challenge to fill the posts. Permanent social workers in other teams were asked if they would like to transfer to the MASH but there was no interest in doing so and managers did not want to force staff to work in a role that they didn't want to do. There was also a concern that transferring staff from Fieldwork Teams and Children in Care Teams to temporarily support the MASH would have a detrimental impact on the existing relationships built between social worker and child. It would also not necessarily have resulted in having the right skills within the MASH. Therefore, it was necessary to bring in a team of agency workers experienced at working in a MASH in order to have the service fully staffed. The use of agency workers enabled a swift response while posts are recruited to permanently. The experience of the agency workers has also helped in bringing forward ideas for improvement. It is thought that existing staff were initially reluctant to take up roles in the MASH because they did not understand the role and how they would work, but the MASH is now 50% staffed from other areas of the Service. Plans are in place that all staff work in the MASH for 6-9 months and then go back to the Duty Team so that over a period of 3 – 4 years everyone will work in the MASH for a period. This will provide opportunities for staff and learning that they can take back to the Duty Team. The Corporate Director assured the Committee that having agency workers in the MASH was not critical to the Ofsted judgement. Bringing in agency staff to work in the MASH enabled cases to be dealt with quicker but there was not opportunity to fully deal with the backlog and get on top of work fully before the Ofsted inspection.

The Committee noted the positive comments about front line staff commitment, loyalty and good social work practice in the Ofsted report. The Committee commented on the importance of all staff feeling well supported, and welcomed the new emphasis on proactively communicating and engaging with staff at all levels of the Service, including in identifying areas for improvement and helping to shape those changes.

The Committee discussed its role in relation to improvement and encouraged an openness in the sharing the information and also expressed an interest in hearing reflections of front-line staff. The Committee requested sight of the refreshed Improvement Plan and will give consideration to scheduling 'deep dive' reviews into particular areas of the Plan, possibly based around the eight specific areas for improvement.

Resolved to review the Children's Services Improvement in January and agree an approach to scrutiny of its delivery.

21 Work Programme

The Committee discussed its work programme for the remainder of municipal year 2022/23. It noted that the Nottingham City Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2021/22 will not be available for consideration at the next meeting and will

therefore be rescheduled to the meeting in January. The Committee also noted that due to changes in the budget timetable, consideration of the Medium Term Financial Plan will also need to be rescheduled for the meeting in January. Following on from discussion earlier in the meeting about the Ofsted inspection of children's services, the Committee felt that it would be timely to review the Improvement Plan in January. As a result of these changes, items currently scheduled for consideration in January will be rearranged.

Resolved to:

(1) consider the following items at the Committee's meeting in December 2022:

a. Children's Services Transformation Programme

(2) consider the following items at the Committee's meeting in January 2023:

a. Children's Services Improvement Plan

b. Medium Term Financial Plan – Children's Integrated Services and Education

c. Nottingham City Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2021/22