

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 26 January 2023 from 10.00 am - 12.15 pm

Membership

Present

Councillor Carole McCulloch (Chair)
Councillor Maria Joannou (Vice Chair)
Councillor Georgia Power
Councillor Samuel Gardiner

Absent

Councillor AJ Matsiko
Councillor Shuguftah Quddoos
Councillor Maria Watson
Councillor Phil Jackson
Councillor Cate Woodward

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Cheryl Barnard - Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Schools
Ailsa Barr - Director for Children's Integrated Services
Sam Morris - Head of Children's Strategy and Improvement
Lou Williams - Independent Improvement Advisor and Chair of the Children at the Heart Improvement Board
Catherine Underwood - Corporate Director for People

29 Apologies for absence

Councillor Phil Jackson – personal
Councillor AJ Matsiko – unwell
Councillor Shuguftah Quddoos – personal
Councillor Maria Watson – personal
Councillor Cate Woodward - personal

30 Declarations of Interests

None

31 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2022 were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

32 Children's Integrated Services Improvement

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Schools, Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People, and Ailsa Barr, Director for Children's Integrated Services, presented the report on the response to the Ofsted Inspection and development of an improvement plan. They highlighted the following information:

- a) The Council has submitted an improvement plan to Ofsted, which has been accepted. It covers eight specific areas and progress will be monitored through the Improvement Board, which is chaired by an independent improvement advisor. The improvement activity dovetails with the transformation programme and its implementation is a priority for the Council.
- b) It is anticipated that the first monitoring visit by Ofsted will take place within the next couple of months and it is expected that it will focus on the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH).
- c) Support is being provided by the Department of Education in the form of some funding and access to resources, and support from an independent advisor to provide support and challenge, who is chairing the Improvement Board.

Lou Williams, independent advisor and chair of the Improvement Board, spoke to the Committee about his role, the role of the Improvement Board and his perspective on the Council's current position. He highlighted the following information:

- d) He is social work qualified and has previously worked at Peterborough and Cambridgeshire, who have faced similar challenges to Nottingham.
- e) He has been appointed to the role to provide challenge to the Council and support improvement through independent oversight.
- f) He is aware of the Council's financial challenges and transformation agenda, and has a relationship with the Improvement and Assurance Board.
- g) The Improvement Board meets monthly to provide oversight. It involves a range of senior leaders including the Chief Executive, Portfolio Holder and Leader of the Council. The Board receives reports on key issues, such as the workforce and considers the impact of sector-led improvement work and peer reviews. It will also receive feedback from Ofsted monitoring visits.
- h) Recently the Board has been looking at the 'front door' to children's services as this is very important for outcomes and likely to be the focus of the first Ofsted monitoring visit.
- i) Going forward, consideration will be given as to how the Board gets reports on wider service issues such as outcomes for children in care.
- j) In his view the Corporate Director, Director and Portfolio Holder have a real grip of the issues that need addressing and a lot has already been achieved in relation to the 'front door' to services. However, while there has been a lot of progress on a range of issues, there is more to do.

- k) The 'front door' to services is a really important area. Essex County Council has looked at the Council's 'front door' arrangements again and their findings are encouraging, with a better culture, less blame and more communication found to be in place. Decision making is more consistent and the timeliness of decision making has improved since the Ofsted inspection. Consent is still an issue. Work that partners do before referral is good and consent is a really important issue to address, enabling everyone who works with children to have difficult conversations. This is not simple to do but is the approach that must be taken. It requires training and experience to do well, alongside an understanding that everyone is there to get the best outcomes.
- l) The Ofsted outcome was very disappointment but there were positive comments, such as those relating to the commitment of staff. The inspectors also said that they had confidence in the senior leadership and he concurs with that view. Senior leaders understand the journey that needs to be made and are committed to achieving it.
- m) Key priorities for the next 12 months are:
 - a. sustaining the improvements that have been made while continue to improve other areas;
 - b. working with partners on early help and strengths based approaches and on consent
 - c. ensuring thresholds are consistent across the service
 - d. investing in frontline managers
- n) There are national workforce issues but it is positive that the Council's workforce is committed and work is taking place locally to review the way that posts are advertised which seems to be working and there is investment in retention schemes. As a result of this, and the work to improve culture and ensure visibility of leadership, immediate workforce challenges haven't happened in Nottingham.
- o) In terms of scrutiny of improvement activity, there needs to be a balance to allow leaders to get on with the work required and also recognition that improvement takes time and there may be periods when there is little to formally report on.
- p) There is a lot to do to secure consistently good outcomes and this will take time, but the service has good leadership, is promoting a good culture and is open to challenge.

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

- q) There has been no written response from Ofsted regarding the improvement plan submitted by the Council but they have verbally confirmed that they are content with it.
- r) Since September there have been monthly meetings of the Executive Board and the Partnership Board has met twice, with partners engaged and committed. This is very positive.

- s) Realistically it is likely to take 18-24 months to deliver sustained improvements. The experience of other local authorities in similar situations is that there has been approximately three years between inspections and the opportunity to be regraded. While 'Outstanding' should always be the aspiration, that requires an authority to have very low caseloads for staff and that can be challenging to achieve from a financial perspective. The immediate work is looking to achieve 'Good' in 2-3 years.
- t) The in-housing of housing functions to the Council presents opportunities for improving joint working on housing issues e.g. young people presenting as homeless. A joint visit to Children's Integrated Services and Housing from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is scheduled for April to ensure that the right procedures are in place, the right information is available and that quality assurance work is taking place to ensure that changes are resulting in the right outcomes.
- u) The improvement plan is primarily focused on responding to the issues raised by Ofsted but as part of wider service development other work is taking place, for example on exploitation, which is an area of risk that the Council needs to be very focused on. These sorts of issues are where the wider partnership is really important for getting involvement of partners such as the Police and schools. A key priority is to ensure that schools are appropriately supporting children and families and this will be part of the new early help strategy. While schools are stretched there is a very active network of designated safeguarding leads with attendance from every school in the City and that is a good opportunity to have these discussions. Schools also have their own duties and responsibilities that they have to fulfil.
- v) Conversations with partners about areas such as thresholds of need did start prior to the Ofsted inspection but they weren't actively talking about consent. Changes to the threshold document were made last year and conversations about consent started in spring 2022, and those are continuing. Over 200 designated safeguarding leads and others have signed up for training so far. Work to address issues of consent have started and it is in progress.
- w) The Service has reflected on its position and the causes of that, and opened its doors to get a fresh, independent view. Those reflections have been built into how the Service is managed in the future. It is hard to identify a single event/ cause. Going forward, the Service needs to be clear how it assures itself on performance, including through feedback from children and families and benchmarking against others, and ensure a culture of continuous improvement.
- x) Due to timescales, the improvement plan was not co-produced with citizens but their feedback on impact will be important.
- y) The most significant risk to delivery of the improvement plan is workforce. Recruitment of social work apprentices has started with six starting in January to complete their degree within the next three years. Work is taking place to identify funding to repeat this in future years. Work is continuing with universities to offer placements for students, and through the Step Up to Social Work programme. Alongside recruitment of newly qualified social workers, the Council is also

looking at how to attract more experienced staff and extending the learning academy to differently qualified staff.

Ailsa Barr provided a detailed update on progress in addressing the issues relating to the 'front door' to services (the multi-agency safeguarding hub [MASH] and duty and assessment services), highlighting the following information:

- z) Areas of vulnerability were identified and work has taken place at pace to improve and build blocks to create confident permanent delivery of the service.
- aa) Managerial arrangements for the service have been reviewed. The span of responsibility was too wide and therefore an additional service manager post has been created so that both the MASH and Duty Teams have a dedicated manager.
- bb) Work is taking place with social work practitioners to review performance, identify good practice and address issues of drift and delay.
- cc) Eight additional social worker posts have been added to the MASH, which will help to reduce delays.
- dd) Daily views are taken of information to prioritise and respond to information, and daily performance information is analysed. The Council's Insight Team has assisted in developing this approach and performance information is compared with others. This information enables progress to be tracked in current time (rather than just retrospectively) and 'pinch points' identified and dealt with.
- ee) The information coming into the MASH continues to be reviewed, for example managers are reviewing the contacts that result in no further action to ensure they are correct. The audit work will provide assurance on that. Where cases are identified that should be on a different path, the learning will be taken from that.
- ff) The service is embedding a mystery shopper process, involving a social worker contacting the Service face-to-face, by telephone and in writing. When this was first done in autumn 2022 the response was inconsistent but, following reflections, the more recent repeat of this exercise has found improvements.
- gg) Essex County Council looked at the MASH in November 2021 and again in November 2022. It identified strengths that morale amongst staff is high with colleagues keen to support improvement; the changes in leadership have resulted in swift and purposeful change; staffing is in line with demand; responses are positive for staff and families; the relationship with the Duty team is positive; and there is a learning environment. Areas identified for development include consent; advice and information not always in the case management system; written processes and guidance are still in progress and not yet available; lack of formal induction for new staff resulting in risks that processes are not communicated properly; and a strengths based approaches are not evident in written work.

hh) The areas for development identified by Essex County Council are broadly in line with the Service's own assessment of progress, which gives assurance that work is moving in the right direction.

The Committee commented that this information about progress in addressing issues with the MASH was well-evidenced and reassuring.

The Committee sought reassurance that significant issues affecting progress on improvement will be reported to the Committee and it was suggested that the Portfolio Holder provide a brief verbal update at the start of every Committee meeting summarising key activity and highlighting any concerns that she feels is appropriate to bring to the Committee's attention.

33 Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Schools, Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People, and Ailsa Barr, Director for Children's Integrated Services, presented the papers updating the Committee on progress in implementation of agreed savings for 2022/23 and budget proposals for 2023/24 relating to Children's Integrated Services.

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

- a) Having capacity to deliver changes to services and associated savings is important and, for example, as part of the transformation programme the Service has been clear about the requirements to achieve delivery.
- b) It is acknowledged that the process for offering leases to organisations to use buildings no longer required as children's centres has not been the smoothest. A new corporate landlord function is currently being implemented across the Council and will result in there being a team that are experts in property matters to deal with such activity in the future rather than it being led by service areas that do not have the necessary expertise and experience. Councillors welcomed this to avoid similar situations happening in the future. The Portfolio Holder commented on the need for a robust expression of interest process and that she is confident that the process is moving forward, but agreed that the new corporate landlord model will be an improvement for the future.
- c) It is important for the Council to be clear on the outcomes of proposals for service change and savings, and whether possible mitigations are a replacement for a Council service or not. Some Committee members felt that this hadn't always been clear in the past, with expectations raised that have not been delivered on.
- d) In response to a question about whether changes to early help services are in conflict with the transformation programme, it was explained that going forward a strengths based approach is being taken to supporting families and individuals and work is taking place to redesign early help services. Essex County Council has been asked to input into this redesign work.

- e) The delay to the start of the transformation programme means that, while savings will be of the same scale overall, there will be a delay in the financial impact. However, the delay has meant that the whole Service is able to move forward with a coherent programme of improvement 'Changing Lives Changing Futures' following the Ofsted inspection. It will take time to make and sustain this improvement.

The Committee felt that overall the proposals support getting children the right support at the right time and therefore, as long as there is sufficient capacity and capability to deliver those changes, the Committee was comfortable with what was being proposed.

Nick Lee, Director of Education, presented a paper updating the Committee on progress in implementation of agreed savings for 2022/23 and budget proposals for 2023/24 relating to the Education Division. He highlighted the following information:

- f) The saving relating to disposal of the vacant Thorneywood Hospital School building and site has not been fully achieved because there has been a delay in securing formal approval to dispose of the site. The Council is continuing to press the Department for Education for a decision to approve the disposal and in the meantime the savings shortfall has been offset by increased income generation elsewhere in the wider service area.
- g) There are three proposals for savings in the 2023/24 budget including passenger transport in the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Team, fully funding statutory duties in relation to the Education Welfare Service, School Attendance and Employment Licensing from the Dedicated Schools Grant Schools Block; and removing the subsidy from Curriculum Service Projects relating to the Adventure Team, School Swimming and Why Nott Transport and deletion of a vacant post in the team.

Resolved to submit a comment to the consultation on the budget 2023/24 outlining that the Committee:

- (1) is supportive of the proposals relating to children's integrated services in dovetailing with the transformation programme and having potential to improve outcomes alongside making financial savings, but has concerns about capacity and capability to manage and deliver savings; and**
- (2) is supportive of the proposal for additional resource to support the Council's scrutiny committees in carrying out their role in relation to good governance of the organisation.**

34 Work Programme

The Committee noted the items scheduled for its meeting in March, and discussed plans for the municipal year 2023/24.

Resolved to explore the possibility of holding meetings of the Committee more frequently, with support for increasing officer capacity to facilitate this.

