

Nottingham City Council

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held remotely via Zoom and livestreamed on the Council's YouTube Channel <https://www.youtube.com/user/NottCityCouncil> on 30 July 2020 from 10.00 am - 12.00 pm

Membership

Present

Councillor Carole McCulloch (Chair)
Councillor Maria Joannou
Councillor Jane Lakey
Councillor Chantal Lee
Councillor AJ Matsiko
Councillor Salma Mumtaz (Vice Chair)
Councillor Shuguftah Quddoos
Councillor Maria Watson

Absent

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Cheryl Barnard - Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People
Tajinder Madahar - Head of Service, Children's Social Work
Catherine Underwood - Corporate Director for People
Jane Garrard - Senior Governance Officer

1 Apologies for absence

None

2 Declarations of Interests

None

3 Minutes

The Committee confirmed the minutes of the meeting held on 30 January 2020 as a correct record and they were signed by the Chair.

4 Impact of Coronavirus on Children's Services

Councillor Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People, and Tajinder Madahar, Head of Service for Children's Social Work presented a report about the impact of the current coronavirus outbreak on the delivery of Children's Services and the impact that this has had on children and their families in the City. They highlighted the following information:

- (a) The coronavirus outbreak has reduced the ability to support children and families in the usual ways and it has been challenging to maintain services and protect children and young people.
- (b) The importance of protecting the welfare of children and young people has been the key priority in decision making and immediate action was taken to carry out risk assessments for all children in care to look at their individual circumstances and what support they needed during this period.
- (c) Staffing has been a challenge due to staff sickness and shielding, although this has not been as high as initially anticipated, and at times it was necessary to redeploy staff from across the service.
- (d) Colleagues were supported by the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and guidance on ways of working.
- (e) Initially there was a significant decrease in enquiries to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub and resulting social work assessments by the Duty Service. One of the reasons for this was the level of contact by schools and health services. Referrals have now largely returned to pre-Covid levels and it is anticipated that there may be an increase in referrals once all pupils return to school in September and teams are working closely with education colleagues to manage this.
- (f) While the number of referrals reduced overall, there was no major reduction in the number of children with Child Protection Plans.
- (g) Requirements for people to stay at home can be problematic for people at risk of harm from others in the home setting and there are concerns about risks of domestic abuse and violence which is one of the main drivers for social care referrals. Referrals relating to domestic violence and abuse have returned to pre-Covid levels but there could be hidden cases that are not yet known. Teams are working with partners to identify this and provide support.
- (h) Independent Reviewing Services have had to take place virtually, either by telephone or video link.
- (i) Early Help and Child Mental Health Services have provided online resources for use by children and families, and prioritised contacting families identified as most in need of intervention.
- (j) It has been challenging to deliver youth and play services, and the focus has been on those at risk of exploitation and anti-social behaviour. 278 young people were identified as most vulnerable and colleagues have been in regular contact with them.
- (k) It has been necessary to make substantial adjustments to respite services, with no residential breaks. The Short Breaks Service and Crocus Fields Services have worked together to provide some sitting services, shopping collection etc for those most in need.

- (l) Some children and carers in the fostering service have found this to be a positive time allowing strong attachments to be formed, but others have found it very challenging particularly where there are health concerns and there has been an increase in placement breakdown.
- (m) The main impact on adoption services has been delays at some stages of the court process.
- (n) Residential care homes have continued to operate but there have been staffing challenges due to staff sickness and shielding so it has been necessary to redeploy colleagues from other services.
- (o) Some services are closed to maintain health and safety and meet Government guidance. These include aspects of services at Crocus Fields, Children's Centres, Contact and Play and Youth Services.
- (p) Colleagues have worked closely with education services to support vulnerable children in relation to education. This has focused on both academic issues and also the protective benefits and wellbeing aspects of being in school. Cases where vulnerable children were not in school are most often related to family circumstances. There will be a 'summer offer' targeted at the most vulnerable children and a focus on mental health support. Teams are working with schools to maximise the number of children returning to school in September.
- (q) The Council has not enacted all of the available temporary regulatory flexibilities introduced by the Department for Education. Decisions about this have involved the Portfolio Holder and senior managers.
- (r) There are a number of risk areas including the high number of children with Child Protection Plans and the anticipated increase in referrals in autumn as children become more visible again; differences in how social work teams have operated which has reduced the ease of peer support and advice and reflective practice; increased activity online has increased the risk of data breaches; and the impact on improvement work required by Ofsted.
- (s) Partnership working has been vital during this period.
- (t) The staff response to challenges has been excellent and overall the transition to more online working has gone well.
- (u) The full impact of the coronavirus outbreak has yet to emerge, with anticipated hidden harm and the financial impact on families and communities.

During discussion the following points were made:

- (v) Some of the Pupil Premium funding has been used to purchase laptops for those without access to online learning.
- (w) It is important to be prepared for a potential 'second wave' of coronavirus cases.

- (x) The Council is working with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to ensure that the right support is in place and child-focused.
- (y) The Summer Hubs will involve mental health support, and Youth and Play Services are focusing on those that find school difficult and will find it most challenging to return.
- (z) Now that restrictions have been eased, it would be beneficial for Youth and Play Services to encourage young people to get outside into a different environment rather than just staying indoors.
- (aa) Some young people have said that they prefer virtual rather than face-to-face contact because it fits better with their lives and is the way that they communicate with other people.
- (bb) Funding is a challenge and while there has been some funding for particular services, overall funding for local authorities has been insufficient. The cost of Children's Social Care Services is putting significant pressure on the Council's budget. There are risks that the Council will have to only provide the statutory minimum services and additional preventative work will be lost.
- (cc) The numbers of children currently with Child Protection Plans is reasonable given the context of the City, and an early intervention approach is likely to result in more children in care. Ofsted did comment on the high numbers of children in care. The most important thing is to ensure that services are working with the right young people and that those young people are getting support from the relevant partners, recognising that everything doesn't have to be provided by Children's Social Care Services.
- (dd) Children eligible for free school meals have received food vouchers and some schools have engaged with social eating projects.
- (ee) In terms of feedback from staff, initially there was concern about being supported with guidance and PPE, which has been resolved. Working at home has worked well for some staff but there is an evidence base of the benefits of co-located working and a desire for more time in the office to enable staff to get together for peer advice and support due to the nature of the work. This is being considered as part of the recovery plan. Many colleagues have worked very hard with little break, which is not sustainable. The Director of Children's Integrated Services is meeting with the workforce to take on board their feedback.

Resolved to recommend to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People that children, young people and families are asked about their experiences and perspectives of services during this period to inform decision making on current service provision, restoration of services and planning for any future lockdown/ new restrictions situations.

5 Children's Integrated Services Ofsted Focussed Visit and Improvement Programme

Councillor Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People, and Tajinder Madahar, Head of Service for Children's Social Work, presented a report updating the Committee on the outcomes from Ofsted's Focussed Visit in February 2020 and associated improvement programme. They highlighted the following information:

- (a) Ofsted's Focussed Visit looked specifically at arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan, with a focus on children at risk of neglect as these had previously been identified by Ofsted as areas of concern.
- (b) Focussed Visits do not result in a rating but Ofsted issued two Priority Actions which is significant.
- (c) The Service is committed to addressing the issues and strong oversight and support has been put in place to progress improvement work.
- (d) Following the Visit, swift action was taken to review the areas of concern. Ofsted don't formally sign off action plans but their feedback on the improvement plan was sought. An ongoing dialogue with Ofsted is taking place, with informal conversations held every week.
- (e) A Children at the Heart Improvement Board has been established, chaired by the Interim Chief Executive and involving councillors, senior officers and partners including schools, health and the police. The role of the Board is to hold to account and challenge progress on improvement, but also support improvement work.
- (f) Working with partners is vital for the improvement work because although the Priority Actions were directed at the Council they relate to services delivered in partnership with other service areas within the Council and partners external to the Council.
- (g) Regional colleagues are supporting the Service to reflect and learn, and the Council is also working with the Local Government Association and Department for Education. Through the Department for Education, the Council is getting improvement support from the Partner in Practice Scheme. As part of this the Council is getting substantial support from Essex County Council to help strength practice and services.
- (h) One of the key areas to address is stabilising the workforce. Workforce gaps have been filled through use of a recruitment agency and this has provided short term capacity, and work is now taking place to recruit substantive post-holders.
- (i) The Nottingham practice model and standards have been relaunched and everyone is being trained to these standards. A strengths-based approach is being taken.
- (j) Ensuring that the voice of the child is at the heart of services is being re-energised. Work is taking place to test that this is in place.

- (k) The performance and quality assurance framework is being improved to include a strong moderation process and make sure that learning from audits is fully understood and used to inform best practice services.
- (l) Going forward there will be a refreshed social worker recruitment campaign to try and attract permanent social workers that want to stay in the service and develop as part of a great team. Part of this will include developing an attractive and supportive workforce development offer.
- (m) The role of Principal Social Worker is being created, who will be an expert practitioner able to provide advice, leadership and mentor colleagues.
- (n) Standards are being developed so that everyone knows what 'good' looks like. This will inform management standards that set out a clear and consistent understanding of expectations.
- (o) Work is also planned to look at the other associated factors that enable social workers to do the best job that they can, for example good IT support, good business administration support.
- (p) This is a really major programme of cultural and practice change and there are a number of risks to its delivery.
- (q) The current coronavirus outbreak has impacted on improvement work and it has been challenging to deal with both really significant issues at the same time and ensure a continued strong focus on progressing improvement activity.
- (r) The Council's financial situation is also a risk and lack of workforce capacity relates to lack of funding.
- (s) Most activity remains on target but some areas are slipping behind.
- (t) It is anticipated that Ofsted will visit in autumn 2020 with a full inspection in 2021. It is important that the Council can demonstrate improvement and get quality assurance, but learning from Essex County Council is that improvement takes a long time.
- (u) It is vital that the Council ensures that it meets its statutory responsibilities, otherwise the Government will intervene.

During discussion the following points were raised:

- (v) The Council has provided short-term funding to deliver improvement but it will be challenging when this ends and there are risks to the delivery of long-term sustained improvement.
- (w) Nationally, there are issues with funding for children's social care and the Council is involved in lobbying for more funding.
- (x) The 'Grow Your Own' social worker scheme has been really successful. The most recent cohort has all just passed and are at various stages of registration so

agency workers will need to be retained until they are able to practice. There is already interest in the next phase and the Service wants to continue doing it, but its launch is affected by budget challenges.

- (y) It is important that new social workers are supported to develop and work in an environment of best practice and there needs to be quality control in place to ensure this is happening. Ofsted found that over time not all social workers are kept on a journey of continued improvement and the Council now needs to make a commitment to do this. Workshops are being held for newly qualified staff and qualified staff to increase knowledge, develop skills and provide a safe environment to reflect.
- (z) While many staff are working at home, managers are keeping in touch with teams on MS Teams, holding reflective sessions and auditing cases to identify areas for improvement.
- (aa) Lessons are being learnt from Essex County Council about the importance of good auditing.
- (bb) The Council has an online performance system showing performance by case, practitioner and service area. Performance is monitored closely to identify areas of concern and practitioners are held to account in 1:1s and in team supervision sessions. Statutory reporting to the Department for Education takes place regularly.
- (cc) It is anticipated that Ofsted will be looking at the experience of children during the coronavirus outbreak and how services have responded. The Service is confident that it will be able to show how Nottingham has responded, that robust decision making is in place and services are in place.
- (dd) The Service will also be able to show that it is focussed and committed to improving practice and increasing capacity. There are some examples of this already coming through in practice and colleagues should be able to articulate the changes in relation to their work, but it is still early days so it won't be possible to demonstrate this across all work by autumn.
- (ee) It will be important to get feedback from children and families on changes as evidence of improvement.

The Committee requested that outcomes of the Ofsted assurance visit in autumn 2020 and progress on the improvement plan be reported back to the Committee.

6 Work Programme 2020/21

Jane Garrard, Senior Governance Officer, introduced the report asking the Committee to identify issues that it would like to focus its work on during municipal year 2020/21. The Committee discussed the following issues for inclusion in its work programme for the year:

- (a) reopening of schools to all pupils and the extent of learning loss and support for addressing this;
- (b) outcomes of the Ofsted assurance visit regarding Children's Services;
- (c) findings of the Committee's recommendation to survey families about their experiences and perspective of services during the period of the coronavirus pandemic to review how this is being used to inform decision making;
- (d) progress in implementing the action plan related to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation; and
- (e) impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the mental health of children and young people.