

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 24 September 2020 from 10.00 am - 12.12 pm

Membership

Present

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

Absent

Councillor Maria Joannou

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Cheryl Barnard - Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People
Councillor David Mellen - Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, Schools and Communications
Helen Blackman - Director of Children's Integrated Services
Lisa Desouza - Senior Educational Psychologist
John Dexter - Education Services
Nick Lee - Director of Education
Catherine Underwood - Corporate Director for People
Jane Garrard - Senior Governance Officer

7 Apologies for absence

Councillor Maria Joannou (personal)

8 Declarations of interests

None

9 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 July 2020 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

10 Impact of Covid-19 on Children's Services

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People, and Helen Blackman, Director for Children's Integrated Services gave an update on work to manage the impact of Covid-19 on Children's Services. They highlighted the following information:

- a) In response to feedback from parents about concerns of isolation, financial worries and lack of play and social opportunities for children, the Early Help Service has worked to enhance the virtual and telephone offer for families, expand communications to ensure that families are kept informed about the support that is available and provided resource packs for those unable to access things online.
- b) Some parents have also raised concerns about managing child behaviour at this time and issues relating to mental health and domestic abuse. In response to those concerns parenting programmes have been adapted for delivery online, with 1:1 support as required. Within four weeks delivery of group parenting programmes moved online but group size is restricted to 6 parents to allow all participants to engage fully. This has reduced the number of parents who can access a session but it has been possible to hold more sessions due to reduced travel time. Services have been in weekly contact with 129 women who have been referred to access the Freedom Programme.
- c) The Family Intervention Project has continued to provide a service in people's homes supported by the use of personal protective equipment. However, it has been challenging to provide services outside of the home due to lack of access to physical buildings.
- d) It has been a challenging time for care leavers particularly those who were reaching the end of their period in care and needing to move to new accommodation. Some care leavers asked if their placements could continue until things become more settled and this has been facilitated.
- e) The Youth Justice Service has continued to provide socially distanced face to face visits for the high risk cohort, with virtual contact for medium and low risk cases. Major projects such as implementation of the SkillMill and embedding trauma-informed practice has continued.
- f) Capacity to deliver online health and dental assessments for children in care has been a challenge.
- g) There have been delays in the court process for securing permanence for some children with a plan for adoption, particularly in situations when all parties aren't in agreement and courts want to make sure that all parties have a fair opportunity to engage. While courts are now operating again there are significant backlogs. Despite this, plans have continued to be progressed and children placed with adoptive families.
- h) Feedback has been sought from children and families on their experiences. This has found that some parents and children have really liked the virtual services as it doesn't require travel and childcare to be arranged and enables young people to connect with others in a way that they feel comfortable, but it has been

challenging to deliver some services online, particularly where there are confidentiality issues such as in cases of domestic abuse. Some parents have also commented that they miss the social aspect to face to face services.

During the subsequent discussion the following points were raised:

- i) If the 'new normal' is that more services will be provided online, then it is crucial to ensure that all citizens have the means to engage with online services, both in terms of equipment and internet connection. There are some areas of the City e.g. Aspley where internet access not via a mobile phone is very low. Education Services have made a good start on addressing this issue with the provision of laptops and dongles to enable pupils to access online learning while they were unable to attend school (1200 laptops and tablets were issued in the first phase in addition to 200 devices provided to children in care, and a second phase is being managed through schools) but this is a challenge for many services provided by the Council, and partners in the City.
- j) When families who need to access Children's Integrated Services are unable to do so online, the vast majority have been able to be contacted by telephone, although it is acknowledged that this isn't ideal, and if necessary face to face visits have taken place socially distanced on a door step or in a garden. Officers are confident that the most vulnerable families that social care are aware of have been able to access necessary services. Outdoor contact will be more challenging to do in winter months when the weather is poorer.
- k) While services want to try and retain the benefits of working virtually, it is recognised that this is not appropriate for all services and all individuals, and therefore it will be important to take a flexible approach to service delivery going forward.
- l) Detailed reinstatement plans have been developed to enable a return to previous service delivery models as soon as possible but this must be done safely. Services constantly have to adapt to changing Government guidance e.g. youth services are opening up and utilising outdoor space but this will be kept under review as rates of Covid-19 in the City change.
- m) Youth workers and Children's Centre workers have not stopped working during this period, they have just had to be more creative in how they engage with people.
- n) Communications will be kept open so that families have regular opportunities to give feedback as things change.
- o) The first lockdown was done in a period of emergency and crisis and decisions about services had to be taken very quickly. Since then, lots of lessons have been learnt and there is better understanding now of how services can be delivered and service user experience which will inform future decision making in the event of a second lockdown situation.
- p) It appears that things are not going to return to the 'pre-Covid normal' for some time and services cannot stay in 'survival mode' and need to continue to drive

improvement forward and be aspirational about what can be delivered. This is a new challenge, particularly in the context of the transformational work taking place.

- q) There is additional support in the system to deal with a potential increase in mental health issues. 40 schools are signed up to the Mental Health Support Teams in School programme and there are two dedicated teams in place. The #YouHaveBeenMissed campaign has been launched and the Early Help Team is commissioning a behavioural and emotional support pathway to help contact young people at an early stage.

Resolved to refer the issue of digital access to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for inclusion in its work programme to look at current digital access across the City; how this impacts on access to services particularly given the likelihood that there will be a continued emphasis on virtual/ online provision for the foreseeable future; and what can be done to address these issues.

11 Reopening of schools and impact of closure

Councillor David Mellen, Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, Schools and Communications, Nick Lee, Director for Education and John Dexter, Education Services spoke to the Committee about the re-opening of schools following their closure to the majority of pupils in March, and the impact of that closure. They highlighted the following information:

- a) Many children were away from school for six months and during that time many did not have the appropriate space, technology or environment at home to facilitate learning. There will have been learning loss but the scale of this isn't yet known.
- b) Some children will have also been without outdoor space for a period of time which limited their ability to play and exercise.
- c) Some children will have had regular contact with their school while they have been unable to attend in person but this has not been consistent and it is known that some pupils had no contact with their school.
- d) Many children will have been pleased to return to school with the benefits of normality, structure and socialisation, but for children who were already anxious about attending school the six month gap may have made this worse. It is important to recognise the need for balance between education and wellbeing.
- e) In anticipation of school closures, children known to social care were risk-assessed to identify vulnerable individuals and their needs.
- f) The Council has a good relationship with, and understanding of the schools which form part of the Nottingham Schools Trust but the Council has been reliant on the willingness of other schools to engage with the Council during this time. In order to support this the Council established a network of link officers attached to each school to facilitate communication, information sharing and the management of practical issues such as provision for pupils entitled to free

school meals. This arrangement has been well-received by Ofsted and the Department for Education and will be continued in order to manage the issues than are likely to remain for the foreseeable future. Schools have also fed back that this work has been valuable.

- g) The Council has supported the early years sector to open as many private settings as possible because the early years offer is vital to the City's ambitions for its children.
- h) The summer programme recognised the need to have opportunities for the huge numbers of children who had not been in school since March. There was a particular focus on Year 6 pupils who would be transitioning to secondary school and a range of activities took place outside over four sites. Activities reflected issues raised by the Educational Psychology survey and work to address these issues continues into the autumn term. It is hoped that all schools will engage with this because there are some concerns about the potential for behavioural issues and it will be crucial to have a graduated response to intervention through the Routes to Inclusion scheme rather than a move towards exclusions.

Lisa Desouza, Senior Educational Psychologist, gave a presentation about a survey carried out by the Educational Psychology Service to seek the views of children and young people in the Covid-19 pandemic in order to understand their views and experiences, and inform current and future provision of services. She highlighted the following information:

- i) Many children were happy at home citing reasons such as being with their family and less pressures but a significant proportion were unhappy/ upset at being at home missing the calmness and safety of school and missing social contact with friends and teachers.
- j) While many children were initially happy at home, over time some of those children became lonely and missed their friends and teachers. Some children also said they were concerned about missing school work and being anxious about having to catch up when they returned to school.
- k) Some children were anxious about the return to school and for some this may result in school avoidance and require extra intervention. Children need reassurance that they have experienced a gap in learning and that is ok to be nervous but that they will cope, in order to give a sense of control over the situation.
- l) The survey identified that the following issues would be important in supporting the transition back to school: provision of clear information; getting back to a routine; realistic expectations about a return to learning; starting by reviewing old learning to build confidence; and having opportunities to play and be with friends.
- m) Issues raised in the survey responses demonstrate the links between attainment and wellbeing and the need for an initial 'recovery curriculum' that promotes structure, routine, calmness and a connectness to others and a love of learning rather than prioritising catching up on missed work.

- n) The learning for policy makers is that all children's experiences will be different, and schools and the local authority need to be flexible; it is important to consider the wellbeing of teachers as this will impact on students; a 'recovery curriculum' for schools should prioritise safety, a sense of control, connectness, calm and a sense of hope of what can be achieved together.
- o) There are Mental Health Support Teams supporting schools and the Department for Education has a Wellbeing in Education Programme to support schools with training on emotional wellbeing. There are also a range of other online resources available to support schools in addressing mental health issues amongst pupils.

During the subsequent discussion the following points were raised:

- p) Given the loss of learning, it will be challenging for pupils in years 6, 11 and 13 to engage with, and do their best in assessments over the forthcoming year. Secondary schools did open to the then year 10 and 12 pupils in July so they have had more time in school than other year groups but this is a concern. Some councillors suggested that it would be appropriate for assessments to be delayed or be based on teacher-assessment. It has already been decided nationally that there will be changes to assessments in some subjects e.g. poetry will not be assessed in English assessments and Ofqual is carrying out a consultation on the approach to assessments but there has been no national decision taken yet on how the 2021 assessment process will be managed. It is understood the Chief Executives of Academy Trusts, alongside other local authorities are putting pressure on the Department for Education in relation to this.
- q) While some colleges and universities may be willing to offer pupils a place at lower grades than usual given the circumstances, if they have experienced learning loss then they may struggle when they get there and this could actually have a negative impact. Universities and colleges may need to adapt their courses to reflect this position.
- r) While the position in relation to assessments remains unclear, for now it is important to encourage schools to have a settled programme and encourage good attendance to minimise any further learning loss.
- s) Schools have to submit returns to the Department for Education on attendance and the local authority has access to this information. The most recent data shows approximately 83% attendance at secondary schools, 87% attendance at primary schools and 70/80% attendance at special schools. This mirrors the national picture. Attendance rates were slightly higher previously and this reflects that schools are now being affected by closures as a result of Covid-19 cases. So far 12 schools have been affected by Covid-19, but attendance will also be affected by usual seasonal illness.
- t) 'Safer Street' projects have been piloted in some schools and it would be good to roll it out across the City but it needs to work alongside schools in relation to their entry and exit points. The evidence is that it will be popular but there are logistical difficulties related to Covid-19 issues. If there are specific issues with road safety relating to a particular school they can be picked up by the local authority link officer for that school.

- u) All schools have been open throughout the coronavirus pandemic and there has been a lot of learning with regards operational issues and lots of good practice has been developed. The Council's Health and Safety Officer has supported schools with interpreting Government guidance and this has received good feedback from schools. The Director for Education stated that he was confident that the local authority was putting support in place to support application of safe practice by schools.
- v) An important issue is to improve communications with parents and particularly those communities for whom English is not a first language so that they fully understand all the necessary information.
- w) There are no plans from Government for provision of food vouchers for pupils entitled to free school meals during October half term. Issues around free school meals have regularly been raised in the Service's meetings with the Department for Education throughout the pandemic. The Council's catering system does have ways of distributing food and vouchers through schools for schools who buy this service but it would be at an additional cost. There has been a lot of activity locally to mobilise food for people in need during the lockdown period and to support the summer programme and the groups that co-ordinated that may be able to look at provision during October half term.

Resolved to:

- 1) recommend that the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, Schools and Communications write to the relevant Minister regarding the risks of holiday hunger during October half term for pupils entitled to free school meals; and**
- 2) recommend that the Director for Education contact local co-ordinators of food sharing groups regarding risks of holiday hunger, particularly amongst pupils entitled to free school meals, during October half term and how this could be addressed locally.**

12 Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People, and Helen Blackman, Director for Children's Integrated Services updated the Committee on progress in implementing the action plan arising from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). They highlighted the following information:

- a) A range of work has taken place to ensure that survivors have the appropriate support, including clearly communicating the support that is available, signposting to appropriate services and listening to survivors.
- b) There is now a dedicated Information Officer to support individuals in accessing their records as it is recognised how important this is to people.

- c) The Council has improved how it responds to victims and survivors by offering a written apology and taking a more empathetic approach. The Council is working with counterparts at Nottinghamshire County Council to ensure a whole system response.
- d) Having listened to the feedback from survivors, and based on a needs assessment, a new service is being developed to support victims of violence and sexual abuse. It is proposed that sexual violence and abuse commissioning is mainstreamed into the existing domestic violence and abuse governance structures.
- e) Partners, including the two local authorities, Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and relevant clinical commissioning groups, have agreed to come together as a system and commission delivery of an Adult Sexual Violence Hub and Therapy Support Service for Nottinghamshire. This Service will begin in January 2021.
- f) Work is ongoing in relation to reviewing the risks posed by current and former foster carers, including those from independent fostering agencies. All agencies have been written to but completion of the work has been delayed by Covid-19. A strong methodology for dealing with repeated concerns has been developed to ensure that they are appropriately scrutinised, and there has been a lot of learning about erring on the side of caution. An external consultant has been engaged to provide external assurance on how the Council is responding on this issue.
- g) The NSPCC was commissioned to review practice against the Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework and while individual agencies are responding, a partnership-wide feedback event to consider feedback had to be postponed due to Covid-19. The review identified lots of strengths but also areas for improvement, which now have to be implemented across the safeguarding partnership.
- h) The Council is working with the National LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) Network to promote clearer scrutiny of allegations of sexual abuse of children in care by individuals in a position of trust or a peer. The Independent Reviewing Officers' Annual Report will also provide an independent view in relation to how the system is responding to allegations.
- i) As outlined at the Committee's meeting in July, a lot of work is taking place to refresh the Service's quality assurance framework and ensure practice standards reflect lessons learnt, for example ensuring the voice of the child is embedded throughout.

During the subsequent discussion the following points were raised:

- j) There are a number of actions that still need to be completed, including delivery of the Adult Sexual Violence Hub; and completion of the review of risks posed by foster carers. The outstanding actions will be integrated into the overall improvement plan for the Service.

- k) It was questioned whether it is appropriate to incorporate the outstanding actions into the overall improvement plan rather than keeping it separate to ensure a specific focus on it. In response, it was stated that one of the areas of learning from the Inquiry is that these issues relate to everything that Children's Services does and therefore the work needs to be embedded throughout the Service rather than standalone as a separate piece of work. This will magnify, rather than lose focus on the issues. The Corporate Director stated that she is confident that there will be a clear line of sight on IICSA going forward.

Resolved to:

- 1) schedule a review of implementation of the outstanding actions from the action plan arising from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse for a future meeting; and**
- 2) consider the Independent Reviewing Officers' Annual Report for assurance at a future meeting.**

13 Work Programme

Resolved to include the following issues on the Committee's future work programme:

- i. progress in implementing outstanding actions from the action plan arising from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse;**
- ii. arrangements for children and young people with no recourse to public funds;**
- iii. citizenship registration for children and young people;**
- iv. impact of Covid-19 on attainment by Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority pupils; and**
- v. how the Council engages with children and young people from Traveller families.**

14 Future meeting dates

The Committee agreed to meet on the following Thursdays at 10am:

- 26 November 2020
- 28 January 2021
- 25 March 2021