

Comments, conclusions and recommendations from Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee 2020/21

Report of the Chair of the Committee

Over the course of the year the Committee has considered information and evidence from a variety of different sources. Based on this evidence, the Committee has drawn the following conclusions and makes a number of comments and recommendations as set out below.

1. The Committee recognises the hard work and commitment from staff in Children's Integrated Services in dealing with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to respond quickly and change the way that it operates to effectively support children, young people and families. It has been a significant challenge to maintain services and protect children and young people as much as possible.
2. The Committee is concerned about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the response to it has had, and continues to have on children, young people and families. The Committee has heard about the impact on statutory and priority work supporting individuals and families, and on the Service's improvement work.
3. Despite the proactive work that has taken place to try to continue to provide services during this period, the Committee remains concerned about the impact on children, young people and families of services that have had to temporarily close or change in terms of content and/or delivery model, for example aspects of the play and youth services, children's centres, short breaks and Crocus Fields, face to face contact from social workers.
4. In July, **the Committee recommended 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 service provision, restoration of services and planning for the future.** The Committee welcomes how the Service has responded to this feedback, for example by enhancing the virtual and telephone offer and expanding communications to keep families informed about the support available.
5. It has been interesting for the Committee to hear the positive feedback from some young people about the provision of virtual services and that in some ways this is a preferable method of engagement for them. However, the Committee considers that it is crucially important that all citizens have the means to engage with online services – both in terms of access to equipment and internet connection and data. In some areas of the City internet access not via a mobile phone is very low. Over the course of the year, a lot of work has taken place to address this issue for school-aged children and young people through supporting the provision of laptops and dongles to enable pupils to access online learning while unable to attend school. Vodafone has provided sim cards to Nottingham Schools Trust schools and other national providers have made data available to support home learning. While most households now have a suitable device there are still challenges for households with multiple siblings. However, the need for digital access goes beyond households with school-aged children. **In September, the Committee referred 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 continued

emphasis on virtual/ online provision for foreseeable future; and what can be done to address these issues.

6. In addition to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Committee is also concerned about the impact of the Council's challenging financial position on work to drive, and maintain improvement in children's services. In July, the Committee was pleased to note that most improvement activity was on track, but some areas were at risk of slippage. Short-term funding has been made available to support this work but the Committee is concerned about risks to the delivery of long-term sustained improved when this ends.

The Committee will continue to monitor progress in the delivery of the Improvement Plan during 2021/22.

However, the Committee has been pleased to note the current relatively good position in terms of workforce. Recruitment, retention and capacity of social workers has been an issue for a number of years, and the Committee was pleased to hear the Director of Children's Integrated Services comment that in terms of staffing, the Service is in the best position that it has been for a number of years. This needs an ongoing focus, and the Committee is concerned about the impact of budget pressures on schemes such as Grow Your Own Social Worker.

7. The Committee reviewed progress in implementing the outstanding actions from the Action Plan arising from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). The Committee is keen to ensure a continued focus on this work and questioned whether it was appropriate to incorporate the outstanding actions into the overall Improvement Programme for Children's Integrated Services or keep it separate to maintain an explicit focus. The Committee accepted the explanation of the Corporate Director for People that one of the areas of learning from the Inquiry is that these issues relate to everything that Children's Services does and therefore needs to be embedded throughout services and reassured by her confidence that there would be a clear line of sight on the learning from IICSA going forward. However, **during 2021/22 the Committee will take a focused look at progress on the specific actions relating to the Inquiry that still need to be fully implemented.**
8. The Committee also reviewed the progress being made in implementing the actions arising from HMIP inspection of the Youth Justice Service. While the Committee welcomed findings of the inspection that delivery of statutory work was generally strong with lots of positive aspects, it is concerned that the Service was rated as 'requires improvement' and there were six recommendations for improvement. The focus of the recommendations was on Out of Court Disposals and young people on the edge of criminality. The Committee welcomed improvements, such as the availability of data on very young people to the Youth Justice Board and that the disproportionate representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic young people is now a focus. The Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People assured the Committee that she was satisfied that feedback from the inspection was being taken seriously, that an action plan had been developed and the Board is robustly monitoring progress against the action plan. The Committee was satisfied with the progress made so far and plans for future improvement to address the recommendations.
9. The Committee heard evidence about the importance of the Youth Justice Service closely aligning with play and youth services to ensure that there are appropriate opportunities to divert lower level offenders to, and that there is sufficient knowledge

within the Service about making referrals. The Committee heard about the recent reshaping of play and youth services to take a more targeted approach to delivery in light of available budget and concerns about serious youth violence. In these circumstances, the Committee supports services being targeted towards children and young people who are most at need of intervention and diversion e.g. those permanently excluded from school, those at risk of involvement with County Lines.

10. It is positive that the Head of Service recognises the gaps in provision, and acknowledged to the Committee that play and youth services do not have sufficient capacity to do everything that they would want to e.g. in relation to County Lines and Asian boys. Budget pressures facing the Council impact on capacity to carry out this work and the service has to work in partnership with others.
11. The Committee welcomes the partnership working taking place, including secondment of staff between services and shared training. In addition, the Committee would like consideration to be given to establishing Youth Networks for each area to enable partners to share intelligence and tackle challenging issues.

It is proposed that the Committee formally recommends this action to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People.

12. The Committee would like to see an explicit focus on vulnerable children in service delivery through the Area Based Grant (ABG) process. When allocating ABG the Council needs to ensure that it is satisfied that organisations are delivering what is needed, avoiding duplication and gaps in provision, to the standard required. The Committee supports the use of a quality mark as a way of ensuring ABG partners meet the standards and requirements to achieve agreed outcomes.

It is proposed that the Committee formally recommends this action to the Portfolio Holder for Communities, Highways and Strategic Transport.

Given the targeted approach to service delivery the Committee was surprised that data is not available on the number of young people that play and youth services work with who have been excluded from school. The Committee considers that this sort of data should be routinely collected 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.

It is proposed that the Committee formally recommends this action to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People.

13. While acknowledging that impact and outcomes can be difficult to quantify, the Committee thinks that it is important for play and youth services to have mechanisms and tools in place to robustly assess what is and isn't working well, and evaluate the effectiveness of services. The Committee was surprised that this isn't already in place and would like the service to consider appropriate mechanisms and tools are put in place to enable this to happen and evaluation is reviewed regularly by senior managers.

It is proposed that the Committee formally recommends this action to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People.

14. The Committee is concerned about the links between permanent exclusion from school and risks of offending. The Committee has previously reviewed the work of

the Council in trying to reduce the number of permanent exclusions from schools in the City, the vast majority of which happen at secondary school. All secondary schools in the City are academies and therefore the Council is limited to an influencing role. It is positive that the majority of schools engage positively but unfortunately this is not the case with all schools. The Committee is concerned about the relatively high rates of permanent exclusions from some secondary schools, and the consequential impact this has on the lives of those young people. **Therefore, the Committee intends to invite the Regional Schools Commissioner to a future meeting to discuss the issue of permanent exclusions.**

15. **The Committee would also like to explore the focus on educational outcomes for specific groups e.g. white working class boys and gypsy/ Roma children with the Regional Schools Commissioner.**
16. During the course of the year the Committee has reviewed the changing provision of education for children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic. There have been significant negative impacts on attendance, academic attainment and mental health and it is particularly concerning that research shows that disadvantaged children will have the largest gaps in their rates of progress. One positive has been the close working between Education Services and Children's Services to identify and support vulnerable children and the Committee would like to see this closer working relationship continue once the pandemic is over.
17. There have been huge pressures on head-teachers, teachers and other school staff during the Covid-19 pandemic and the Committee would like to thank them for their hard work and commitment to supporting pupils during this difficult time.
18. The Committee welcomed the work that took place through the Education Psychology Team to understand the experiences of children and young people and use that to inform decision making and approaches to the full return to school in September and during subsequent lock-down and return to school periods. In addition to the findings of this survey work, the Committee has heard evidence from the Director of Education and the Portfolio Holder responsible for schools about the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. The extent and impact of this e.g. on behaviour has yet to be fully established. The Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has provided welcome virtual support to schools and has been using non-face to face methods of service delivery but this isn't always as easy for children and young people to engage with, especially if they are experiencing mental health difficulties. Adequately supporting children and young people with mental health and wellbeing issues will be very important as the City recovers from the pandemic.

It is proposed that the Committee formally recommends that the Health Scrutiny Committee considers including this area of work in its Work Programme for 2021/22.

19. The Committee has previously looked at work to tackle 'holiday hunger' in the City and this year the issue has had high national and local media attention. In September **the Committee recommended 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 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 can be addressed locally. The Government subsequently changed its position on the provision of meals to those entitled to free school meals during the school holidays.

It is proposed that the Committee formally recommends that the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, Schools and Communications write 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.

20. The Council Plan has a target for at least 75% of eligible two year olds to access free nursery provision. The Portfolio Holder reported that this will be challenging to achieve and, given the importance of early years for school readiness, **the Committee is considering exploring this issue in more detail during 2021/22.** The Committee has heard anecdotal evidence that factors affecting this include that some settings are still not fully open due to Covid-19 restrictions; some parents have lost their jobs or are working at home as a result of the pandemic and therefore do not feel that they need to send their child to nursery/ pre-school; and some families do not feel that it is safe to send their child to nursery/ pre-school in the current circumstances.

**Councillor Carole McCulloch
Chair of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee
25 March 2020**