

Nottingham City Council

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held at Loxley House, Nottingham on 30 September 2021 from 10.00 am - 12.00 pm

Membership

Present

Councillor Carole McCulloch (Chair)
Councillor Maria Joannou (Vice Chair)
Councillor Jay Hayes
Councillor Phil Jackson
Councillor AJ Matsiko
Councillor Shuguftah Quddoos
Councillor Maria Watson

Absent

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Cheryl Barnard	- Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People
Kathryn Bouchlaghem	- Early Years Manager
Jane Garrard	- Senior Governance Officer
Nick Lee	- Director of Education Services
Tajinder Madahar	- Head of Extensive and Specialist Services
Catherine Underwood	- Corporate Director for People
Phil Wye	- Governance Officer

50 Membership

The Committee noted that Councillor Phil Jackson has replaced Councillor Jane Lakey as a member of the Committee.

51 Apologies for absence

None.

52 Declarations of Interests

None.

53 Minutes

The Committee confirmed the minutes of the meeting held on 29 July 2021 as a correct record and they were signed by the Chair.

54 Children's Integrated Services Improvement

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, introduced the report to the Committee. This was followed by a presentation delivered by Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People:

- (a) in February 2020, Ofsted undertook a focussed visit to look specifically at Nottingham City Council's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan, with a focus on children at risk of neglect. Ofsted issued two priority actions as a result of their findings. In June 2021 Ofsted carried out a follow up focussed visit looking at the same elements of service. No further priority actions or areas for improvement were identified, however a number of concerns were raised;
- (b) the report recognised the exceptionally difficult year for Nottingham, with not just Covid, but also significant bereavements within the service, and noted that in spite of this improvements have been made. Improvements in staffing stability and capacity were recognised. The reduction in caseload for some staff was recognised, although other caseloads remain too high;
- (c) the Service has been working with Essex County Council as a peer, and as an outstanding Council, to support and challenge the new model and ways of working. Committee members questioned why Essex had been chosen and were told that they have had a similar journey and have reached their outstanding status following around 10 years of continued improvement. Nottingham's initial ambition is to improve and no longer be judged as requiring improvement, but there is ambition for continuous improvement leading to best quality services;
- (d) additional funding was secured for a limited period to support some agency staff to stabilise staffing gaps, to fund a temporary Improvement Directorate and business support, and to release capacity to develop a training programme. The challenge going forward will be to embed this training and remain fully staffed with the current financial constraints, and without the additional funding;
- (e) following a question on how the children of Nottingham directly benefit from the changes, Catherine confirmed that the voice of the child is a really important part of the Service's work, and tools and techniques have been developed to support engagement. Workload is gradually reducing for practitioners, they are now paid more and have more opportunity for progression. Improvements have been discussed with staff in small groups, reflecting on the conditions needed to flourish and what they need to develop good practice;
- (f) the Committee suggested that children or young people, and frontline social workers, could be invited to the Committee in order to give their reflections on the improvement work being undertaken;
- (g) a permanent Principal Social Worker has been appointed. On being asked about this role and whether they are simply another manager, Catherine confirmed that they do not carry a caseload, but act as a link between the frontline workforce and the leadership, working alongside practitioners and chairing workforce forums;
- (h) on being asked about families with no recourse to public funds, Catherine informed the Committee that the Council works closely with the Home Office to resolve their cases as quickly as possible, and the number of these is reducing;

- (i) the Council makes representations to the Government for additional funding jointly with other East Midlands Councils, as forming alliances makes the message stronger.

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People assured the Committee that, from what she had observed, the Service is on the right track in making improvements.

The Committee agreed to schedule a further review of progress in 2022, and it was suggested that, prior to that review, Committee members speak directly to front line social workers to hear their perspective.

55 Early Years Entitlement

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, introduced the report to the Committee. This was followed by a presentation delivered by Kathryn Bouchlaghem, Early Years Manager:

- (a) all families in England are entitled to 15 hours of free childcare at ages 3 & 4, with working families being entitled to 30 hours. Additionally, families receiving some form of support are entitled to 15 hours of free childcare at age 2. The Local Authority has a statutory responsibility to produce an annual Childcare Sufficiency Statement;
- (b) there are currently sufficient childcare places across all year groups, and the quality of childcare is high with 99% of nurseries and 95% of childminders graded as good or outstanding;
- (c) participation rates across all free entitlements are rising slowly but not yet back to pre-pandemic levels. In some wards this is still way below local targets. Following a question from the Committee, Kathryn confirmed that the reasons for low participation include fear of infection, self-isolation, school closures and furlough. Many partners are provided with information so that they can inform parents of their entitlement. It was suggested that this information be sent to Councillors and Neighbourhood Development Officers too;
- (d) following a question on the mix of private and public sector provision, the Committee was informed that there is a mixed economy in Nottingham, with most primary schools having nurseries, and many childminders employed by the local authority, but also many private day nurseries which can provide childcare from 7am to 7pm which the public sector cannot;
- (e) professional development opportunities are available to all early years providers, including training on domestic abuse, race, safeguarding, English as an additional language and special educational needs.

Resolved to recommend that the Early Years Service takes the following actions to support promotion of the early years offer and encourage higher levels of take up:

- (1) provision of information about entitlements to free childcare and the availability of childcare locally to ward councillors and Neighbourhood Development Officers;
- (2) engagement with Neighbourhood Development Officers to identify appropriate local events at which entitlements to free childcare and the availability of local childcare provision can be promoted, particularly in wards with the lowest levels of take up; and
- (3) engagement with other housing associations across the City, in addition to Nottingham City Homes, to identify opportunities for promoting the availability of local childcare provision.

56 Work Programme

The November meeting will include a discussion with the Regional Schools Commissioner and local Academy Trusts. The Committee suggested inviting a representative from a Pupil Referral Unit and/or a union.

Resolved to note the work that is currently planned for the 2021/22 municipal year