

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 25 January 2024 from 9.31 am - 11.55 am

Membership

Present

Councillor Naim Salim (Chair)
Councillor Samuel Gardiner
Councillor Fozia Mubashar
Councillor Georgia Power
Councillor Ethan Radford
Councillor Michael Savage
Councillor Maria Watson

Absent

Councillor Adele Williams

Colleagues, partners and others in attendance:

Councillor Cheryl Barnard	- Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Education
Ailsa Barr	- Director of Children's Integrated Services
Nick Lee	- Director of Education Services
Kate Morris	- Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer
Sam Morris	- Head of Children's Strategy and Improvement
Damon Stanton	- Scrutiny and Audit Support Officer
Catherine Underwood	- Corporate Director for People
Lou Williams	- Chair of the Independent Improvement Board

24 Apologies for Absence

Councillor Adele Williams – Personal Reasons

25 Declarations of Interest

None.

26 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 November were confirmed as a true record, with the addition of apologies received from Councillor Maria Watson. The minutes were signed by the Chair.

27 Children's Services Improvement

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Education attended the meeting to update the Committee on the programme of work to improve outcomes for children and young people through delivery of the Children's Integrated Services Improvement Plan. Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People Services, and Ailsa Barr, Director for Children's Integrated Services, and Sam Morris, Head of Children's Strategy and Improvement gave a presentation detailing

the work done to date. Lou Williams, Chair of the Independent Improvement Board was also in attendance. The following points were highlighted:

- a) In July 2022 Ofsted visited Nottingham City Council and inspected Children's services. In the subsequent report issued they gave a rating of Requires Improvement to be Good. Since this rating was received the Council has been on an improvement journey focusing on improving services.
- b) Since the initial inspection in July 2022 there have been three subsequent visits by Ofsted, looking at three different themes, the Front Door, Children in Need and Children with a Child Protection Plan, and Care Leavers. The Council expects another 3 monitoring visits by Ofsted indicating that the programme is approximately at its mid-point.
- c) The narrative reports published following the second and third monitoring visit highlighted a number of improvements. They recognised the clear link between improvement and transformation and how that linked to staff morale. The reports highlighted that investment in frontline and management capacity has helped manage workloads and increased management oversight all leading to improved moral. They also note that this has allowed children to make meaningful connections with workers allowing staff to offer good support and care. The workforce report feeling supported by managers and the reduced caseload allows them to focus on delivering best practice.
- d) Additionally, the narrative reports highlight that the senior leadership team within the service have good knowledge and a good level of oversight of performance, supported by a quality assurance framework that has been strengthened and is embedded. This has allowed senior leaders to predict trends and implement additional support and training to strengthen practice.
- e) The narrative reports also highlight areas in need of ongoing development. Although there had been improvement there is still some inconsistency in plans. Some children still experience too many changes of social worker, particularly those in long term care or care leavers. The reports highlight an inconsistency in some areas of supervision, as front-line staff numbers increased but manager numbers were still low. This has now been addressed and improvements will be seen. The reports have also highlighted that there is additional work to be done with partners to reduce delays and ensure that children get the specialist support they need in a timely way.
- f) As a result of the Improvement plan and transformation work there has been a significant decrease in the number of Child Protection Plans and the duration which they are active for. This focus on progressing plans, collaborative working and reducing harm has led to more positive outcomes for children with many staying within their family setting. A whole range of tools and resources have been made available to social workers to support children in need and Child Protection Plans, including tools to understand trends in children coming into care, Family Network Meetings, greater collaboration of forward thinking and additional assessment programmes to establish where the extended family could care for a child

- g) There has been significant work done around improving fostering and the fostering service. Currently there is a mostly even balance between Council foster carers and agency foster carers, with an ambition to have more Council recruited carers within the service. Work has been done to diversify the type of recruitment events, and their frequency, different marketing strategies and methods of tracking their impact.
- h) Alongside social media marketing and advertising foster care opportunities similar methods have been used for recruitment of social work staff. Nottingham City Council has always been popular for newly qualified staff and education placements but in recent years has struggled to retain or attract more experienced staff. There has been a conversion of existing experienced agency staff to permanent contracts, and more recently there has been the opportunity to employ more experienced staff through recruitment events.
- i) Work continues around supporting staff with development of a direct work kit, the continued celebration of practitioners, monthly shoutouts and regular acknowledgement that despite a difficult work environment some life changing work takes place in the service. Staff are reporting that they feel supported, and the cultural change is leading to a better work environment with reduced caseloads. Although they remain very busy, they feel more supported.
- j) Moving forward consistency in practice will be a focus of the improvement work, through learning and team development. Work will continue with partners to embed the Early Help Strategy and Thresholds of Need to ensure timely support to families and there will be a continued review of recruitment and retention. Work will be done to assess data in order to plan and realign staffing and resources for areas with higher or increasing demand, such as support for Care Leavers and children in care over the age of 12.
- k) The next monitoring visit is likely to focus on Children in Care services. These services support some of the more complex cases, challenging work environments, and higher caseloads. There has been a high turnover of staff in recent years, although this has somewhat stabilised recently, but has also taken time to turn around in terms of practice. Senior management has been bolstered through the transformation work, but this is only until the end of March 2024.

During the discussion the following questions were asked, and additional information was provided:

- l) Members wanted to know what reasons were given when foster carers left the Council. The most common reason for carers leaving the council was that the carers decided to adopt, or they got a Special Guardianship Order, which is an excellent outcome for the children. These reasons are reviewed and tracked in order to try and get ahead in terms of overall numbers. It is rare that carers leave for negative reasons, and they mostly leave due to positive outcomes for children or life choices for carers, such as increasing age.

- m) Committee members asked whether the reasons children were coming into care were being tracked, and what the main reasons were. Services track the reasons young people come into the care of the Council. The main reasons for entering care were risk of significant harm, breakdown in relationships with older children and unaccompanied asylum seekers.
- n) Committee members asked about the delays some children and families faced being able to access support services, and whether the children who experienced these delays were more likely to come into care. Some children and families do face delays in accessing some types of specialist support, but this is a national issue and distinct from the Council budget, and there is no recognised correlation between these delays and care. Reports from the monitoring visits have highlighted that plans need to include support from all services that are needed, and there is work taking place to ensure better consistency in plans and creating a network of support and interventions around families.
- o) Committee members queried whether there had been analysis on the data around the decrease in number of Child in Need status and Child Protection Plans as to whether the children re-entered care services. This analysis was taking place and where children did re-enter services the reasons why were carefully looked at. This data is fed into audits and assessments to consider if anything is missed, or any further work could have been done to prevent the young person returning. Re-referral rates will show confirmation bias, as closer monitoring of children who have received support is in place and re-referral rates sit within the national average of between 20-25%. More understanding is needed around reasons of re-referral and a piece of work is starting to understand what is the most effective interventions for subsequent plans.
- p) Committee members asked if there was a significant link between children and young people who go missing then present as homeless. Although theoretically there could be a link between missing children and homelessness, a link is not really seen in Nottingham.
- q) Committee members asked for more detail around work being done on recruitment. Alongside the social media exposure and marketing, and community events, traditional recruitment and targeted advertising work with faith groups, work is also taking place with D2N2 partners and the Department of Education to support an increase in regional recruitment. The target for foster recruitment is a year on year increase in numbers of foster carers which has been exceeded this year already.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Education, the Corporate Director for People Services, the Director for Children's Integrated Services, the Head of Children's Strategy and Improvement and the Chair of Independent Improvement Board for attending the meeting.

28 Children's Integrated Services and Education Budget Proposals

Councillor Cheryl Barnard, Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Education, Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People Services, Ailsa Barr, Director for Children's Integrated Services and Nick Lee, Director of Education presented a report on the development context of the Council's 2024/25 budget proposals and their anticipated impacts on the services delivered by the Children's Integrated Services and Education. The following points were highlighted:

- a) The 2024/25 budget proposals have been developed in the context of very challenging circumstances both locally and nationally. There are significant pressures in a number of service areas, by December 2023, growing inflationary and demand pressures indicated a requirement to make savings of £53.7 million to achieve a balanced budget for 2024/25. As a result, a strict 'Duties and Powers' approach has had to be taken to the development of the new budget, identifying potential savings of £20.5 million.
- b) The 'Duties and Powers' methodology assesses where the Council has a legal obligation to deliver a function and where it can exercise functions on a discretionary basis. It is a recognised approach in the Local Authority sector and is used to create a focus on the Council's core statutory activity and identify work areas where savings can be made. As a result, the current budget proposals have been developed on the basis of establishing all service options in the context of delivering the legal minimum as the base position. Although the current proposals have been discussed between senior officers and Executive Councillors, and been subject to a formal public consultation process where required, a number have not been agreed by the Council's Executive.
- c) It is proposed that around £5.4 million in savings will be made from within the Children's Integrated Services and Education Budget over the next two years, with the majority to be delivered within 2024/25. The identification of these savings has been an extremely challenging piece of work. In making the proposals, full regard has been given to the written guidance on the required standards of statutory services. Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) have been produced for all relevant proposals and work is taking place to mitigate service impacts wherever possible.

During the discussion the Committee asked a series of questions. The following points were highlighted:

- d) Members were concerned that information around risk was not included within the report, and that Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) were also not included. Papers were produced in liaison with the Chair and papers have contained slightly different information for all the Scrutiny committees. The EIAs are available on the Council's website.
- e) Members of the Committee raised a number of concerns about the proposed closure of the Ridge Adventure Centre. Members were concerned about the impact that this would have on antisocial behaviour in the area, and the lack of consultation with Ward Councillors around the proposals. Discussions are still ongoing about this proposal with additional work being done to establish the best

proposal. Liaison with Ward Members would take place as part of these additional discussions.

- f) Members raised concerns around the potential for the Schools Board not accepting the proposed budget cuts. This is a risk, the Schools Forum had agreed one paper in principal and another two are due before the next meeting. One of those papers is around changes to Transport and requires approval from the Secretary of State as well as from the Schools Forum. The proposal increases the number of placements in local special and support for SEND pupils in mainstream schools, reducing costs of transport, and higher cost out of areas placements in the longer term. Much of the Education budget is ringfenced, surplus within these budgets can be used to support the additional support proposed. There are risks with this strategy, but those are being thoroughly considered.
- g) Committee members raised concerns about the impact that a reduction in the Household Support Fund may have on young people's access to school uniforms and the implications this may have for them in a wider setting. This fund is for those families where children attend a maintained school, and the continuation of the fund has not yet been announced in the Spring Statement. The impact that this fund has had must be recognised, and work with the Nottingham Schools Trust is underway to see how support for the cost of living can continue so as to reduce the impact of this proposal.
- h) Committee members were particularly concerned about the proposals stopping the Area Based Grant, highlighting that this is likely to impact a high number of services across different directorates. Work is taking place to better understand the cumulative impact of this proposal and what mitigations can be found to limit the impact.
- i) Committee members expressed concerns about the reduction in preventative and early intervention services highlighting that this work reduced pressure on statutory services in the long term. As many of the preventative and early intervention services are not statutory services, the Duties and Powers methodology requires officers to consider those services for reduction to produce a balanced budget. Work continues to take place to assess risk and potential mitigation measures.
- j) Committee members asked for more detail around the proposed changes to the Youth Service structure and what work was being done to ensure that the proposed changes would not disadvantage one group over another. The restructuring work had been identified as part of the transformation work and has been developed to achieve the same aims and goals, but at a reduced cost. Work continues to take place on fully developing the EIA for the proposal. Work is also underway with partners looking at how the wider system works together and identify additional cost saving measures. Fragmented services will be consolidated and there will be more specific targeting of work and interventions. The management structure of the service has been considered as part of the transformation work.

- k) Committee members raised concerns about the possible closure of the Bulwell Riverside Centre and the impact that that would have on services provided from the building, in particular that NHS sexual health services would cease to exist. Although services will cease to be delivered from the Riverside Centre work is taking place with partners to find alternative venues for the existing services to be delivered from so that the services can continue to be offered going forward. The building itself will be considered for alternative uses.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Education, the Corporate Director for People Services, the Director for Children's Integrated Services, and the Director of Education for attending the meeting.

Resolved to:

- 1) Request that ward Councillors are consulted on budget proposals that impact directly on their ward**
- 2) Request that the Director of Education shares the outcomes of discussions that will take place with schools in the City on the budget proposals.**
- 3) Request that Officers provide the Committee with a breakdown of the risks associated with the budget proposals and relevant Equality Impact Assessment.**

29 Work Programme

The Chair introduced the Work Programme, highlighting that the meeting in April was cancelled due to its proximity with the Mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner elections.

The Committee noted the Work Programme.