

18th January 2021**Agenda Item: 14****REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES****NATIONAL CHILDREN AND ADULT SERVICES CONFERENCE: NOVEMBER
2020****Purpose of the Report**

1. The report informs the Committee of the key messages from the National Children and Adult Services (NCAS) Conference which took place online from 4th to 6th November 2020.

Information

2. The County Council's representatives attending the conference were: Councillor Philip Owen, Chairman of the Children and Young People's Committee; Councillors Sue Saddington and Tracey Taylor, Vice Chairmen of the Children and Young People's Committee; Councillor Tony Harper, Chairman of the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee; Councillors Boyd Elliott and Frances Purdue-Horan, Vice Chairmen of the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee; Colin Pettigrew, Corporate Director, Children and Families Services; and Naomi Russell, Group Manager, Living Well (North), Adult Social Care and Health. The report is supported by the presentations which are available on the conference website www.ncasc.info
3. As a consequence of the COVID pandemic and national restrictions on meetings and travel, the conference was held online this year, through Zoom. A range of issues and priorities in children's services were reflected in the conference agenda, including the identified and anticipated impacts of COVID on service provision. Major topics covered were: safeguarding, funding children's services, challenges and sustainable solutions to supporting Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), addressing mental health needs, the return to education, Ofsted and The Care Review.
4. Key themes this year were the impacts of the COVID pandemic on the health and wellbeing of children, families and workforce (schools and social work), and issues of financing necessary support and addressing missed learning; also, the role of local government in responding to the pandemic, and the significance of proven preventative strategies. The Conference opening was hosted by James Bullion, President of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS); Jenny Coles, President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and Councillor James Jamieson, Chairman of the Local Government Association (LGA). Councillor Jamieson spoke about the strengthened relationships between councils and schools, the impact of lockdown on education and the

pent-up demand on services. He called for a focus on prevention and early intervention as well as the need for fully funded services.

5. Jenny Coles spoke of the risks of lost education for all children, with concerns over an anticipated 18 month attainment gap from primary upwards for children from poorer families. She articulated the case for investing in children through several approaches: it needs all-age multi-agency early-prevention strategies, including the contribution of schools and colleges in this work; resetting the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system and addressing the issues for the High Needs Block; investing in a first class education system; and investing in the care system to address a crisis in placement sufficiency. She went on to stress the need for local and national government to work together; highlighting the Department for Education's (DfE) responsibility for funding and facilitating councils and leaders to challenge the ability of venture capitalists to command the market for children's social care. Jenny suggests the resilience of families is best supported through strong partnerships between councils, schools, the voluntary sector and Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs), requiring the DfE to take a lead, and for us collectively to focus resources from early years upwards and to tackle child poverty.
6. The sub-plenary sessions attended included:

Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion:

Representatives from several local authorities and Peter Molyneux (Chairman of Health and Care LGBTQ+ leaders' network), spoke of the importance of securing people from diverse backgrounds into senior and leadership roles; of the need for a secure and confident workforce; and to ensure inclusive support for all residents and service users.

The Minister for Children:

Vicky Ford MP opened by thanking officers and councillors for their work through COVID in keeping schools open, supporting SEND needs and supporting families. She reprised the various extra funding support measures from Government to Local Authorities, and compared the differences between lockdowns 1 and 2 in respect of the numbers of schools and settings open, children attending, and the maternity and GP services available. The Minister stressed the Government's ongoing commitment to keeping children safe and spoke particularly about:

- adoption, foster and kinship care; and investment in the adoption support fund
- funding and plans to manage fostering, including through joint commissioning
- proposals and ideas through the "What Works Centre", including over domestic violence
- harm to babies and Serious Incident Notices (SIN) and the significance of NHS England's recent directive that staff should not be redeployed away from children's health services during the ongoing pandemic
- SEND needs and the SEND review.

Councillor Judith Blake (Chair of the Children and Young People's Board, LGA) referenced the Care System Review and listed how improving outcomes needs to remain at the core of Government, with education being key (T levels, apprenticeships, school improvement, catch-up funding and adult learners returning to education).

Delegates posed questions about when the Care Review will start, whether Government has plans to review the High Needs formula (especially given impacts of SEND) and a request to end piecemeal funding of local authorities in favour of a whole service approach. The value of youth service provision has been notable in supporting vulnerable children and young people and (as in Nottinghamshire) in preventing placement breakdown; this is a significant opportunity to reassess the role of local authority youth services.

Leading the Mental Health Recovery for Individuals, Families & Communities:

Speakers at this session referenced local government's role in improving residents' mental wellness throughout life, and the particular impact of COVID on mental health arising from limited socialisation.

The Role of Local Government in Responding to a Pandemic:

This panel discussion was led by Councillor James Jamieson, James Bullion and Jenny Coles, with guest speakers Paul Najsarek (Chief Executive of Ealing Council) and Dr Jeanelle de Gruchy (President of the Association of Directors of Public Health). They covered:

- the challenges of COVID, including those arising from a second wave and lockdown
- the collective approach and response
- the LGA's response to the spending review and the need for a long term vision
- the benefits of having public health within local government
- great pride in local government in supporting schools, supporting community hubs distributing food and welfare packs and in preparing for a rise in complex cases and the impacts of possible recession
- hidden inequalities arising from poverty and discrimination and how local government has paid attention to the most vulnerable, including through social care and working with schools
- the need for local government services to be fully funded
- the creativity and tenacity of so many and the significance of empowerment and strong leadership versus the burdens of bureaucracy.

7. Workshop sessions attended included:

Safeguarding infants, children and young people:

Sarah Elliott, a member of the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, spoke of the two major reviews commissioned to consider key themes in the rise in Serious Incident Notifications amongst children aged 0-5 years since 2014. The first, Sudden Unexplained Deaths in Infants (SUDIs), identified "out of routine" causes, including background contexts and predisposed vulnerabilities and risks. It raises questions for partners about how well they understand parents' views, how well practitioners are equipped to promote safer sleeping, about commissioning arrangements, and how far SUDI risk is embedded in safeguarding practice.

Debbie Jones, national lead LA multi-agency safeguarding co-ordinator, spoke of its role in intelligence gathering, in providing strength-based interventions and thematic leads on specific work streams, and to assist in determining the impact of reforms on outcomes for children and young people. She identified a number of challenges under the new (2019) partnership model, particularly around shared accountability amongst the three key partners (LA, Police and NHS); also, potential issues arising where the partners' geographical boundaries are not co-terminus. She questioned whether the rise in academy schools means that education should be a fourth partner now. Debbie identified what she calls "wicked issues" around winter planning, Elective Home Education, mental health, hidden harm and thresholds; these she linked to a number of triggers and tipping points: demands and financial pressures, increases in Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), court backlogs, and increase in domestic violence, and reduced staffing levels through COVID.

The final speaker was Dez Holmes, Director in Research and Practice, who refocussed last year's talk about the complexity and risks of intra and extra familial harm towards the additional risks brought on by COVID, and the adaptability of perpetrators of abuse and exploitation. Changing ways of working such as greater use of digital technology, bring both benefits and risks. Dez cautioned over failures to engage whole communities in safeguarding work, and the need for sustainable funding, strong leadership and a holistic approach which is person/people focussed.

Children's Services Funding Issues:

This session was delivered by the Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield MBE, who spoke of the priorities for the spending review and beyond to address existing pressures in Children's Social Care and the additional pressures of COVID. Figures show that 1.6 million children have been the subject of statutory interventions in the past six years. Anne considers services to be unsustainable in the current form and insufficient relative to the needs of children. She asks whether we have been asking the right questions and stresses the importance of a strengths-based model rather than a deficit model.

Jenny Coles summarised the state of local government finances in the context of the heightened impact of disparity since COVID; an anticipated increase in requests for free school meals from families facing unemployment, and uncertainties for children and young people about exams, higher and further education and jobs. Her priorities are a reset for SEND, investment in the care system and education and evidence based early intervention. There are serious challenges to sufficiency of placements, including specialist provision, and concerns were voiced again about private businesses profiting from local authority placement purchases. Jenny mooted the idea of LA's working to increase in-house provision, possibly in partnership with private sector care providers.

Youth Services underfunding was noted, with £634m (over 80% of the entire national youth services budget) going to the National Citizen Scheme (NCS) between 2014-18.

The final part of this session from DfE representatives confirmed that the Comprehensive Spending Review has been delayed to 2021 and summarised the additional funds to local government offered so far. Delegates posed questions around:

- school exclusions and the value of investing in keeping children in school, including a more holistic approach, rather than fixed term, finite interventions
- the insufficiency of funding to support Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)
- the apparent lack of joined up thinking between government departments, with projects being considered separately rather than as being connected.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) – Challenges and Sustainable Solutions:

This workshop was led by Councillor Nick Forbes, Chair of LGA Asylum, Refugee and Migration Task Group, with guest speakers from local government, the Home Office and DfE. Conference heard that 44,000 UASC have arrived in the UK since 2010. Numbers for 2020 are down by 20% on past years but remain the highest in the EU; arrivals in small boats continue to raise concerns. Issues were identified around funding levels, the weighting of allocations against numbers of Looked After Children, placement sufficiency (especially in rural areas), age assessments (particularly in the 16-18 years range) and speed of process around asylum decisions. Sophie Langdale from the DfE spoke of:

- an immediate crisis on the south coast - with placements sought in other local authority areas
- the recent consultation on the National Transfer Scheme - with respondents highlighting issues of placement sufficiency and support for care leavers
- capital funding – to increase and improve the secure estate, and five project areas for joint commissioning arrangements.

Return to Education:

There are recognised concerns about reintegration of children into school life, particularly whilst fears of contagion amongst the population at large remain. Speakers stressed the importance of developing language around emotions and resilience, and commended many school-based interventions already employed to build resilience, improve attainment and reduce anti-social behaviour and youth violence.

Delegates heard about the role of the LA in schools and how significant this has been through the COVID pandemic; where strong relationships in their statutory roles (LAC, SEND, EHCP etc) has facilitated working together with maintained schools, academies, the Regional Schools Commissioner and government in an unprecedented way. Of particular note is the LA's role in interpreting guidance for providers of education and childcare.

Questions were asked about what LAs can do to help schools with catch-up, and fears over the significant rise in Elective Home Education and the absence of LA powers to address this.

Ofsted:

Amanda Spielman explained that inspections had stopped during lockdown, with frontline staff redeployed to frontline activity, including fostering and working with community hubs and foodbanks. She stressed the value of keeping schools open to children during both

lockdowns, especially the widened facilities since the autumn term began. Elective Home Education has risen significantly, partly resulting from fears of contagion and parental risk, and from the volumes of fake news and social media chatter.

Indicators suggest rises in risk factors around poverty, mental health, domestic violence and harm to babies. There are pressures on the family courts nationally; with virtual court proceedings, and delays hampering orders and adoption. Ofsted assurance visits have begun this term, in schools and homes, but the full inspection regime is still paused. Priority is being given to registering new children's homes and new providers (child minders and nurseries) to meet capacity needs; also, to dealing with homes that do not meet standards. Delegates raised questions over:

- the need for an urgent review of Elective Home Education, including a requirement for registration
- whether the regulatory framework is fit for purpose as we go into the Care Review
- celebrating Social Workers alongside other key worker professionals.

The Care Review:

Speakers in this final session spoke about the importance of the voice of looked after children and care leavers in the review, and the positive significance of The Children's Act. They contrasted what children in care need (secure relationships, being listened to, being treated with respect and kept informed) with what they don't need (overtly professional terminology, labels, for their personal lives to be public knowledge, to be different to other children). They identified the need for a whole system approach and the value of early intervention, particularly through evidence-based strategies. Placement sufficiency issues centre around profit making enterprises and a lack of what's needed, and there is a good case to be made for increased kinship care. Interestingly, the crucial role of the NHS was referenced as being weighted towards adult care and needing to focus more on the needs of children and young people. COVID was referenced as a "bulldozer" that has speeded changes in practice and collaboration. Delegates raised challenges over court decisions which continue to hear the voice of parents above children, including allowing contact in domestic abuse cases; and whether the Care Review will focus on what care is (relationships, connection and healing) rather than simple placement sufficiency.

8. A summary of the key learning points for Nottinghamshire are as follows:

- further implement strengths-based practice and contextual safeguarding and encourage innovative thinking
- consider best practice examples for new and partnership working, as evidenced through COVID adaptations
- continue to make the case for fully funded services, including through the Care Review and any government consultations (e.g. UASC, SEND)
- working through national bodies and the LGA on common national issues
- continuing to promote the value of youth service provision on the national stage.

Other Options Considered

9. No other options have been considered.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

10. The report provides an opportunity for the Committee to consider the key learning points highlighted from the conference and any further actions arising from the summary contained within the report.

Statutory and Policy Implications

11. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

12. There are no financial implications arising from the report.

Implications for Service Users

13. The report highlights opportunities to learn from experiences and models of practice in other councils to improve services and support available to people in Nottinghamshire.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the Committee considers whether there are any further actions it requires in relation to the key messages from the National Children and Adult Services Conference contained in the report.

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Constitutional Comments (AK 16/12/20)

14. This report falls within the remit of Children and Young People's Committee by virtue of its terms of reference.

Financial Comments (SAS 11/12/20)

15. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

[Attendance at the National Children and Adult Services Conference; November 2020 – report to Children and Young People’s Committee on 2 November 2020.](#)

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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