



Scrutiny Committee

16:30 to 17:45

11 October 2018

Present: Councillors Wright (chair), Fullman (vice chair), Carlo, Fulton-McAlister (M), Hampton, Manning, Stewart, Thomas (Va) and Thomas (Vi)

Apologies: Councillors Coleshill, Sands, Smith and Raby

1. Public questions/petitions

There were no public questions or petitions

2. Declarations of interest

Councillor Wright declared an other interest in item 6 (below), Norfolk County Council Consultation on Early Childhood and Family Service – Transforming our Children’s Services because his wife was a director teacher of a school which had a children’s centre on site.

Councillor Fulton-McAlister declared an other interest in item 6 (below), Norfolk County Council Consultation on Early Childhood and Family Service – Transforming our Children’s Services because he was employed by the National Education Union which was campaigning against the closure of children’s centres.

3. Minutes

RESOLVED to approve the accuracy of the minutes of the meetings held on 20 September 2018.

4. Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2018-19

The chair said that Councillor Carlo had suggested a work programme item regarding the Local Enterprise Partnership but it had been received too late for inclusion with the agenda papers and therefore it would be considered at the next meeting of the committee.

Members then noted the scoping documents circulated at the meeting in respect of *Responses to domestic violence in Norwich* and *Good quality jobs in Norwich and the emerging economy* and agreed to the objectives as set out by the vice chair.

RESOLVED:

- (1) to consider Councillor Carlo's proposed item regarding the LEP, for inclusion on the work programme, at the next meeting;
- (2) having considered the scoping papers for each topic, to approve the objectives of scrutiny for the following items:

(a) *Responses to domestic violence in Norwich:*

To understand and improve the city council response, as part of multi-agency working, to how we as an organisation respond and help citizens facing this form of abuse.

(b) *Responses to domestic violence in Norwich:*

To explore how the Norwich economy is changing and how our economic strategy should respond to this so that the positive opportunities can be maximised for Norwich people.

5. Recommendations – The Impact of Operation Gravity and Organised Crime in Norwich since 2016

The chair referred to the discussion on Operation Gravity and County Lines (organised crime related to drug trafficking) at the previous meeting and introduced the report. Discussion ensued in which members suggested recommendations where the city council could impact on the reduction of County Lines through its services and influence, facilitated by the director of neighbourhood services. The committee's recommendations would be reported to cabinet in November.

Members considered how contractors could assist in intelligence gathering. A member pointed out that contractors comprised a high number of front line staff working in people's homes and the community. Specific training on safeguarding and awareness of County Lines' activity should be provided to all contractors. This would improve intelligence gathering.

A member said that his group had received a talk from a senior criminologist who had pointed out that gangs marked their areas with tags on lampposts. The council could therefore ensure that such tags were removed as this would have an impact on drug dealing activity. Another member said that private owners should remove graffiti too. The director of neighbourhood services said that there was a cost implication if the council was to remove all graffiti but it would be possible to liaise with the police and target County Lines tags. Members commented that criminals would get wise to the removal of tags and look at other ways to demarcate territories.

A member referred to the licensing policy and said that it should be more robust to ensure that anyone convicted of supplying illegal drugs was not licensed to drive a taxi in the city before a period of rehabilitation. The director of neighbourhood services said that under the licensing policy an applicant for a private hire vehicle

drivers' licence or hackney carriage drivers' licence had to meet the "fit and proper person test" with a process for taking away licences. There was no specific reference to County Lines in the licensing policy and it would be possible to review the policy to ensure that the issues were addressed.

Members then discussed how the council could make a rapid response to tenancies being used for County Lines' drug distribution, whilst recognising that the tenant could be vulnerable whilst being "cuckooed" by people who had occupied the property. The chair pointed out that the cuckooed tenant could be considered as intentionally homeless. Members considered that tenancy agreements should be considered in relation to the response around taking the property back when it's been used as a drug den and around providing a right solution for vulnerable tenants where a property was being cuckooed and were at risk of becoming homeless from this activity. The director of neighbourhood services said that tenancy agreements stipulated anti-social behaviour and crime as reasons to terminate a tenancy. However, he said that a rapid response to secure properties being used for County Lines' activities and procedures for rehousing vulnerable tenants who had been cuckooed could be considered.

RESOLVED to recommend to cabinet that it considers addressing the issues of County Lines through the city council's services and influence, as follows:

- (1) liaise with contractors to provide front line staff with training on safeguarding and awareness of County Lines and that there is a process for reporting incidents to contribute to intelligence gathering;
- (2) following consultation with the police, that the council explores the removal of tags which demarcate the territories of drug gangs;
- (3) review the licensing policy and procedures to ensure that County Lines' activity is captured particularly in relation to the fit and proper test in relation to licences for private hire drivers and hackney carriage drivers;
- (4) review tenancy agreements and procedures for rapid response to County Lines' activities and treatment of vulnerable tenants "cuckooed" by criminals:

6. Norfolk County Council Consultation on Early Childhood and Family Service – Transforming Our Children's Services

(Councillors Wright and Fulton-McAlister had declared an interest in this item.)

(County Councillors Corlett and Morphew; cabinet members Councillors Jones and Davies, and a member of the public, Jonathan Watson, attended the meeting for this item.)

The director of neighbourhood services presented the report.

The chair invited County Councillors Morphew and Corlett to address the committee,

Councillor Morpew advised the committee that the consultation had not been approved by elected members of the county council's children's services committee or policy and resources committee. The proposals appear to have been made as part of the council's budget process following a decision to cut budgets to children's services. A Liberal Democrat motion to abandon the consultation would be made at the full county council meeting on 15 October 2018 and would be supported by Labour group members. Councillor Corlett confirmed this and said that the committee should know that the children's services committee had not agreed the consultation.

During discussion the director of neighbourhood services referred to the consultation documents and answered members' questions. In reply to a member's question, the chair said that it had not been possible to arrange for a county council officer to attend because the item had only been placed on the work programme three weeks' ago.

Members noted that Norwich had higher levels of deprivation than the surrounding rural district councils. The current proposals for the closure of children's centres would mean that each district would have one children's centre despite differing levels of deprivation or need. Members considered that given the higher levels of deprivation in the city, its residents would be therefore be disproportionately affected by the withdrawal of the service. It was noted that there was no information provided on the current usage of centres. Members also expressed concern that there was no equality impact assessment. Members noted the value of investment in early years. A member pointed out that there was no financial information or analysis of the social and economic cost of withdrawing the children's services.

A member suggested that the children's centres not only provided help for parents and children in their early years, but that trained professionals picked up on other issues such as domestic violence and safeguarding. A member pointed out that the proposal for voluntary or peer groups to provide services in local communities should not replace experienced employees. Members considered that the people most affected by the proposed closure would be women, lone parents and people whose original language was not English. The centres provided an important social function. The vice chair said that he had seen this at first hand when visiting centres as Lord Mayor last year. . It was suggested that the service should be expanded rather than constrained to include other services to assist young mothers and target mental health issues in young people, increasing the use of the centres for other community or social purposes.

During discussion on digital access, members noted that there was a correlation with poverty and lack of individual wifi or internet access. People most in need of accessing children's services were therefore excluded unless they travelled to libraries. Members noted the difficulty that this would have for people with young children and no car. Most of the existing centres were in areas where people lived or worked. People could not use services that they were unaware of. The chair pointed out that the lack of digital access was also an issue for rural communities.

Further discussion on access included members' concerns that people won't actively seek help. Sessions in schools would be difficult for someone with a bad experience of school to attend. People would need to actively seek a home visit. Members

considered that trust was built up between the service providers and service users. The director of neighbourhood services said that the proposals did not address this directly but proposed that services would be incorporated into other facilities. The proposals were high level and further work would be needed by the county council in conjunction with other organisations following the outcome of the consultation. A member suggested that it was important to engage with vulnerable residents who required the service. She asked whether the city council could be involved in retaining the children's centres in community centres. The director of neighbourhood services said that there had been no discussion with the city council about using city council buildings for children's centres. The council's community centres were leased or licensed to other groups to run. It was therefore not in the city council's gift to provide accommodation in these buildings. A member commented that it would be difficult to have provision in place by the autumn of 2019.

Members concluded in expressing strong feelings about the consultation proposals and procedures. Members considered that the consultation was proposing to cut a service when nationally services for early years had been acknowledged as value for money. A member agreed that the county council was being disingenuous in its proposals at a time when the government had announced that austerity was at an end. Members noted the financial constraints on local government elsewhere and considered that the purpose of the proposed closure of children's services was that the budget would be halved.

The chair said that the committee's response could be that it considered the proposals to be "dishonest" and "disingenuous" and referred to Councillor Davis's response to a question about the children's centres at council in September. The strategy manager had been taking notes to formulate the council's corporate response. He said that the discussion was helpful and clarified some points. He was in discussion with officers in children's services and it would be important for the city council to be engaged in an ongoing dialogue. Discussion ensued in which members expressed that there should be multiple responses to the consultation.

A member said that he had attended the county's health overview and scrutiny committee where parents with children with special needs had attended. Some of these parents had to fight very hard to get help for their children, including resorting to the Disability Tribunal Service. He considered that reducing access to children's centres would make their situation worse. The consultation to close these centres was set in a background where existing services were failing the most vulnerable children dramatically.

A member said that the proposal to close children's centres was to cut costs rather than anything else. There was still a high percentage of children who did not have a good level of development at the age of five, when they started school. Thorpe Hamlet came 81st out of 84 on the level of deprivation. Children's centres were needed to mitigate the effect of deprivation but also to benefit all children from all walks of life. It was more important to target early years than end of school life when the damage had been done. The chair spoke in support of targeting early years and that it was important.

Members commented on the veracity of some statements in the proposal documents including the purpose of cutting the service and expressed concern that the voluntary

groups that would be expected to pick up the shortfall in service provision were aware of the consultation.

The chair then invited Councillor Corlett to address the committee.

Councillor Corlett then addressed the committee. She commented on the lack of an equality impact assessment for rural and urban areas, and that women would be disproportionately disadvantaged from the closure of the children's centres. The reliance on digital inclusion to target people most in need of the services did not address the issue of people on low wages or universal credit who did not have online access to services. It was also difficult for residents with a low reading age to access services on a mobile phone. The equality impact assessment should be a fundamental part of the consultation document so that people can relate to how it affected them.

Members then considered that they would like to make an overtly political response and to ask the chair to draft it. Discussion ensued on the committee's response and how it would feed into the cabinet corporate response. Members considered that the "one size fits all" approach would mean that residents in Norwich would be disproportionately affected to other districts with less need. Reference could be made to the contradictions to the consultation which was contained in a leaflet published by the North Norwich Sure Start centre. Members also considered that a statement should be made to the press on the members' concerns.

The chair then invited Jonathan Watson to address the committee.

Mr Watson said that he considered the members' comments refreshing. His family benefited from a Sure Start centre and he was campaigning to keep them open.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) ask the chair to write to the chairs of the children's services committee and policy and resources committee to advise them of the committee's concerns about the proposals;
- (2) note that the strategy manager will write up a detailed note of the discussion which will be used to inform the council's corporate response for consideration by the cabinet at its November meeting.

CHAIR