

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 24 July 2017

Wards: All

Subject: User voice rapporteur scrutiny review

Lead officer: Annette Wiles, Scrutiny Officer

Lead member: Cllr Jerome Neil, member of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

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Recommendations:

- A. That Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel (CYP) examine the implications of the Staying Put policy increasing the cohort of LAC for which the council is responsible and its effects on participation within the borough;
- B. That a working group – perhaps with the involvement of the CiCC – be set up to consider the viability of introducing a “Mentor/Champion Scheme for Looked After Children” as considered by Leicester City Council;
- C. That CYP ask the CSF Department to continue to monitor its use of feedback loops and report on this at regular intervals through the department update report during this municipal year; and
- D. That CYP examine how best to engage the LAC and care leaver cohort in its work.

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 To present the rapporteur scrutiny review of user voice to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel for endorsement and to consider how best to progress the recommendations made (including a possible reference to Cabinet)..

2. DETAILS

- 2.1 The Children and Young People Overview and The Panel recognised that children and young people are at the heart of the services it scrutinises. In order to carry out effective scrutiny, it was recommended that the Panel undertake a rapporteur scrutiny review to help members understand how children and young people influence policy and frontline practice.
- 2.2 In order to be effective, the Panel recommended that the review focus on the voice of looked after children and young people.
- 2.3 The terms of reference for the rapporteur scrutiny review were agreed as follows by the Panel:
 - To understand how looked after children are supported to express their wishes and feelings;

- To understand what systems are in place to ensure looked after children are able to participate in decisions about their lives;
- To understand how looked after children have a voice in the review and development of the arrangements that affect their lives; and
- To understand how the Panel might routinely hear the views of looked after children to support it in conducting effective scrutiny.

2.4 The report of the rapporteur scrutiny review of user voice is attached at Appendix 1.

3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

3.1.1. The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel can select topics for scrutiny review and for other scrutiny work as it sees fit, taking into account views and suggestions from officers, partner organisations and the public.

4. CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

4.1 In carrying out its review, Councillor conducting the review questioned council officers, heads of service and assistant directors as well as consulting with the Children in Care Council, the special interest group for children in and leaving care.

4.2 The report at Appendix 1 details all those who have been consulted and provides detailed feedback on the information gathered.

5. TIMETABLE

5.1 This rapporteur scrutiny review was established by the Council's Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel and so this report will be presented to its meeting on 24 July 2017 for discussion and comment of the recommendations by the Panel.

6. FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 None for the purposes of this covering report. Any specific resource implications as a result of the recommendations will be identified if these are endorsed by the Panel.

7. LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 None for the purposes of this report.

8. HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1 It is a fundamental aim of the scrutiny process to ensure that there is full and equal access to the democratic process through public involvement and engaging with local partners in scrutiny reviews. Furthermore, the outcomes of reviews are intended to broadly benefit all sections of the local community.

9. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None for the purposes of this report.

10. RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1 None for the purposes of this report.

11. APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

11.1 Appendix 1 – the report of the rapporteur scrutiny review of user voice

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1.1. None for the purposes of this report.

Appendix 1

The report of the rapporteur scrutiny review of user voice

Meeting with CSF head of commissioning, strategy and performance – Paul Ballatt

On **16th January 2017**, Annette Wiles (Scrutiny Officer) and I met with the **Children, Schools and Families** (CSF) department's then-head of commissioning, strategy and performance **Paul Ballatt** to discuss the terms of reference of my review and to hear his thoughts on participation in the borough, particularly among looked after the children. Prior to the meeting, Annette placed a draft copy of the terms of reference of the review, to which Paul agreed.

Paul expressed a great deal of confidence in participation in the borough and CSF's participation team. He specified that the council provides a diverse offering in regards to participation, via the Youth Parliament, the Children in Care Council, Young inspectors, the Your Shout group for learning disabled young people, and school councils. **There was, however, a lack of information as to the quantitative impact of such participation.**

"Feedback loops" were highlighted as another potential area where improvement could be made. This is not an issue unique to Merton. It is, Paul specified, an area where many local authorities are seeking improvement. There was a feeling again, that while Merton's participation offer was diverse, **the feedback that was received from LAC was too often lost in the system or the impression had been created that it was not acted upon.** More transparency as to what happened to the feedback of LAC was needed.

Meeting with CSF participation managers – Stuart Barker and Chelsea Renehan

On **8th March 2017**, along with Annette, I met with **Chelsea Renehan** and **Stuart Barker** – two of the council's participation manager in the CSF department – to discuss their experience

At this meeting Chelsea and Stuart spoke frankly about the pressure that cuts to local government funding were having on the council's ability to engage with young people in the borough, especially vulnerable young people, and the multiplier effect of these cuts given the cohort of LAC is set to grow as a result of the **Staying Put** policy.

They reiterated Paul's concerns regarding feedback loops – specifying that, in their experience, young people engaged in council services by and large understood the financial pressure that local government is under and therefore understood it was not able to do everything they would like. **It was when young people were asked their opinion and given assurances that those opinions would be acted on and nothing came of it that frustration arose.**

On the suggestion of having LAC attend scrutiny meetings, Stuart and Chelsea shared Paul's concerns regarding tokenism. **Inviting LAC to speak before committee could result in their expectations being unfairly raised** and this would exacerbate pre-existing issues around participation regarding feedback loops.

There was, expressed by both Chelsea and Stuart, a desire to see bodies such as the **Youth Parliament** (YP) and **Children in Care Council** (CiCC) treated with the esteem their adult counterparts receive. Both YP and CiCC play an active role in shaping services used by young people in the borough yet they are too often regarded as an afterthought. Ideas such as having a YP or CiCC member sit on residents' associations and community forums, or holding meetings of both with strategic themes around young people, were floated as ways of tackling this issue.

Stuart made reference to other councils – namely Leicester City Council – that had previously looked at a “**Mentor/Champion Scheme for Looked After Children**” as a way of encouraging councillors to be more proactive in their roles as corporate parents.

At the conclusion of this meeting, Stuart kindly invited me to invite the next sitting of the CiCC on 15th March 2017.

Mentor/Champion Scheme for Looked After Children

As referenced by Stuart, Leicester City Council looked at introducing a “Mentor/Champion Scheme for Looked After Children” in 2010. This aimed to improve the council's prioritisation of LAC and set the aspiration for this to be judged as outstanding.–

Andy Smith, then divisional director in the Social Care Safeguarding department of Leicester City Council, outlined the three possible models of such a scheme:

Model one: The children's champion at a distance

- Councillor will be matched to a child in care
- No direct contact with the child
- Question the level of services to the child, e.g. school, hobbies and any other services
- Identify and advocate for additional resources to help their child now and in the future

Model two: The children's champion as a befriender

- Councillor or senior manager matched to a child as a champion
- Emphasis on befriending
- Regular contact and relationship building determined by child as to method of contact
- Act as advocate for their rights and needs

Model three: Combination of model one and two

- Councillor will be matched to a child in care
- Councillors can opt to champion or befriend or both
- Essentially they are there for the child

Potential issues with such a scheme, identified by Andy, were as follows:

- Implications given the nature of local democracy
- DBS checks – assessment process for councillors

- Training session for councillors (practicalities/expectations/parameters)
- What to do if it goes wrong or difficult issues are raised
- Identify young people to link through the LAC project worker and the CiCC
- Links with cabinet, scrutiny, CYP and safeguarding panel

Shortly after tracking down this presentation regarding the “Mentor/Champion Scheme for Looked After Children” I attempted to track Andy down. I began by contacting a Leicester City councillor named Sarah Russell, who serves assistant city mayor for children, young people and schools. After some time, Councillor Russell responded to inform me that Andy had left Leicester City Council and the scheme predated her time as cabinet member.

As such, I am unaware to whether the “Mentor/Champion Scheme for Looked After Children” was taken up by Leicester City Council – but given the interest expressed in it by officers, undertaking a similar pilot here – with a view to increasing participation of LAC – is a route that is perhaps worth exploring, resources allowing.

Attending a session of the Children in Care Council

On 15th March 2017, I attended a meeting of the CiCC “chaired” by Stuart. At the beginning of the meeting, I briefly explained to CiCC members that I was carrying out a review of the role of the voice of LAC in participation on behalf of the committee and that I was there to listen and learn.

A pack was provided to all of the attendees that outlined the role the CiCC plays in affording LAC the support to express their wishes and feelings. In this pack a **‘Principles of Participation Checklist’** was provided. It set out 11 prerequisites to ensure that consultation with children and young people was effective. They are as follows:

- Showing respect
- Involving us in deciding/organising – what/when/when
- Making sure adults don’t take over the consultation
- Having fun – making the consultation more interesting – making things fun
- Not making it too intense – making activities user friendly – facilitating change
- Paying attention and taking notes – don’t talk: listen
- Liaising with decision makers
- Finding ways to make us heard in public
- Letting us know what is going on
- Talking afterwards and explaining things
- Evaluating and learning from your experience

Following a short discussion after the presentation of the checklist to the CiCC attendees, it was unanimously agreed that the checklist would be **amended to contain some reference to privacy and respecting the anonymity** of the CiCC. This was deemed particularly important because of the unique and often traumatic experiences of those involved.

Shortly thereafter another pack was provided entitled “**Join the Children in Care Council**”. This pack set out to define the role of the CiCC in relation to the council, council services and the CiCC’s relationship to the Corporate Parenting Panel:

- A forum for developing ideas and projects that aim to improve the lives of children and young people in care and leaving care
- A lobbying group to influence change in services accessed by children and young people in care and leaving care
- A consultation group for managers and policy-makers in the design, deliver and evaluation of projects and services
- A forum for feeding back to Corporate Parenting Panel
- An opportunity to meet other young people in care and care leavers and make friends

The role of members of the CiCC – and the responsibilities that come with being a member of the CiCC – was then defined as such:

- 1) Representing the views of children and young people who are looked after by Merton Council, or are leaving care
- 2) Advising managers and policy makers about the design, deliver and evaluation of projects and services
- 3) Lobbying and campaigning to influence change in services accessed by children and young people in care and leaving care
- 4) Raising awareness of the rights of children and young people in care and leaving care, and what it’s really like growing up in the care system
- 5) CiCC members would need to commit around 2 hours per month. This commitment includes attending meetings, the completion of accreditation and checking/responding to emails or texts

It was agreed by CiCC members in attendance that **membership of the CiCC should be attained via application**. The basis for this decision was that given the responsibilities that filling out an application form required more commitment than simply attending a meeting. Members that were successful in their application to join the CiCC were asked to be members of the CiCC for a minimum of six months.

Following on from this debate, the **CiCC discussed whether membership should also be rewarded with some form of accreditation**. What form this accreditation might take was discussed and ultimately the CiCC decided that – given the disadvantages children in care face, any accreditation CiCC members could amass by way of reward for their participation should be taken up, if only to go some way to redress these disadvantages.

Several CiCC members with experience of **interviewing social workers**, involvement in **foster carer training** and **the young inspectors**, gave very positive accounts of having been involved in these processes. Among those that had been, there was agreement that it had been a worthwhile exercise, that their own experiences as LAC lent them particular expertise that those without it could not bring, and they went to recommend it to other CiCC members present.

There followed a **debate about whether members of the CiCC should continue to receive a stipend for attending meetings**. Surprisingly, there was by no account a consensus around this. Some CiCC members argued that the stipend was necessary to cover the cost of travel to and from CiCC meetings – especially for those living outside of the London borough of Merton. Some felt that involvement in the CiCC should be considered a reward in and of itself. Others that given CiCC were being asked to sign what amounted to a “contract” with obligations regarding to their time, that payment was only fair. In the end, a decision was taken to retain the stipend.

There was a short discussion regarding how the CiCC would retain contact between meetings. **The use of WhatsApp to circulate the dates of future meetings and to allow members of the CiCC to communicate was mooted**. On this, too, there was no consensus – some members voiced concern that they might be inundated with “annoying” notifications from the CiCC WhatsApp group chat. A tentative agreement was met that ground rules should be set should alternate methods of communication, such as WhatsApp or BBM, be undertaken by the CiCC.

As with my meetings with Paul, Stuart and Chelsea, **the possibility of CiCC members attending scrutiny meetings was raised**. There was enthusiasm expressed in some corners for this, though concerns regarding discussions at CiCC – and Youth Parliament – meetings being intimidating for younger members cast some doubt on the viability of this.

There was, I am pleased to report, much positive feedback regarding the experience of CiCC members in regards to participation. One CiCC member that had experienced several other boroughs’ participation units felt that Merton’s participation offer compared very favourably – to which several members of the CiCC agreed.

It may well be that CiCC is a self-selected sample, attracting those whose experience of participation with the council is already positive, but learning why their experiences are positive and attempting to replicate them elsewhere is key to enhancing our service offer to LAC.

Recommendations

- That Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel (CYP) examine the implications of the Staying Put policy increasing the cohort of LAC for which the council is responsible and its effects on participation within the borough;
- That a working group – perhaps with the involvement of the CiCC – be set up to consider the viability of introducing a “Mentor/Champion Scheme for Looked After Children” as considered by Leicester City Council;
- That CYP ask the CSF Department to continue to monitor its use of feedback loops and report on this at regular intervals through the department update report during this municipal year; and
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