

Chair of the Child Friendly Coalition, Gloucestershire – Written evidence (PSC0049)

1. About Child Friendly Gloucestershire:

Child Friendly Gloucestershire (CFG) was initiated by the PCC who, following adverse reviews, wanted to be assured that all young people in the county were being supported to develop their potential. A Steering Group was set up on which sat statutory, faith, business and voluntary/charitable organisations. Research was undertaken and the following findings were reported:

- There was no universal strategy for children and young people in the county;
- The previous Children's Partnership, which had been established to deliver the collective responsibilities under the Children's Act Section 10 in 2004 had been disbanded in 2018 as it was not considered to be effective;
- Users reported services as lacking coordination and being difficult to navigate and/or inaccessible;
- Voluntary agencies, faith communities and charities were not seen to be partners with statutory agencies in the development of local services although many had considerable expertise;
- There was an absence of the young person's voice in services which affected them and which they used. Access to mental health and sexual health clinics were often quoted as examples. Young people's voices were not routinely sought in policy debates nor in the development of future strategy (e.g. Vision 2050).

The CFG has since progressed under the auspices of our Health and Wellbeing Board and a Children's Wellbeing Coalition established in late 2020 with statutory, faith, business and charitable organisations represented. It is a partnership in which organisations across sectors commit to working together to improve wellbeing outcomes for all young people in the county. At the moment data suggests the general outcomes for young people in the county are in line or marginally better than national average but this masks significant inequalities between cohorts and localities, particularly in Gloucester, parts of Cheltenham and more rural areas.

From working with professionals, young people and communities, the coalition will be focussing its initial work on three areas:

- Pre-birth to 5 years,
- Mental health across all age ranges,
- Transition to work from school or college.

2. Issues related to the pandemic:

The pandemic has had a significant impact on how civil society works. The local eco-system has altered with some organisations temporarily ceasing to provide services ,or changed their access/delivery arrangements, as resources were necessarily redirected towards pandemic crisis response . This was against a background of generally rising demand that is likely to be further exacerbated by the pandemic, which emerging evidence suggests has widened pre-existing outcomes gaps and inequalities. Many charities stepped up to fill the vacuum and were awarded short term contracts to achieve required outcomes e.g., provision of holiday meals.

The voluntary and faith communities, often working with local businesses, demonstrated flexibility, nimbleness, the capacity to recruit volunteers and share resources with other charities and the energy to work in demanding situations to deliver to their communities.

This dynamic needs to be captured in future. Local non-statutory organisations have earned the right to be round the table and contribute their expertise and experience of responsive delivery relating to the needs of local communities.

This will probably require new sorts of leaders who are less intent on curating existing systems and contracting in traditional ways and more focussed on working with all of the talents locally. New models of contracting need to be developed along with a new partnership language.

Who is an expert and who has the experience to plan service development are interesting questions. We could think of the paid expert as the only person who has the authority and training to undertake such development. However, it is difficult to think that a person with lived experience of poverty, abuse or a caring responsibility should be absent from service-shaping.

Co-commissioning should be more widely adopted. This would develop democratic participatory skills and support the development of civil society.

In Gloucestershire we have experience of the Ambassadors who are young, paid care-leavers – they are very effective and are called onto interview panels and undertake peer mentoring. We also have a further group of Youth Representatives who are a diverse cross section of young people resident in the County, paid by the County Council as part of the Future Me team – it is the aim that the members should help the Coalition to have authentic dialogue with young people and act as a key channel of communication.

There is also a place to employ social media to gain views – the Sussex Police is developing a useful model. Gloucestershire also has young people engaged in a Climate Change Council; the Stroud Youth Team helping with a transport survey and the LEP undertaking a youth survey which was integral to the development of the Industrial Strategy.

The levelling-up agenda is important. A project which the CCG is developing with the Coalition and which the Coalition's partnership approach will support is based on taking the key players in Gloucester City and seeking together to tackle inequalities. This will require collaboration between all partners and sharing of data and resources. A locality approach will be adopted with faith, voluntary, business, education and statutory organisations contributing along with those who have lived experience of the situation and their hopes and dreams.

3. Conclusion:

This approach has placed children and young people at the heart of children's services: models and rhetoric need to change supported by data analysis and a co-ordinated approach to service development on the part of multiple partners. This is not an easy option but one which will help young people to see that they are valued and that their wellbeing is important to the wider community.

Some young people from Gloucestershire will be happy to meet the Committee and support it in its work.

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