



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on the 28th July 2022

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

10th March 2022 at 4.30pm

Present:

Councillor Freeston (in the Chair)

Councillors Abel, Astbury, Goodwin, Harness (substitute for K. Swinburn), Patrick.

Officers in attendance:

- Matt Clayton (Head of Service Early Help and Prevention)
- Sally Jack (Assistant Director – Education & Inclusion)
- Simon Jones (Assistant Director Law, Governance and Assets)
- Vicki Lawson (Deputy Director of Children Services)
- Guy Lonsdale (Deputy S151 Officer)
- Beverly O'Brien (Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)
- Yvonne Shearwood (Assistant Director Safeguarding and Early Help)

Others in attendance:

- Councillor Lindley (Portfolio Holder for Children and Education)

SPCLL.53 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cairns, Robinson and K. Swinburn for this meeting.

SPCLL.54 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received in respect of any item on the agenda for this meeting.

SPCLL.55 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel meeting on 13th January be agreed as an accurate record, subject to the additional information Councillor Patrick requested

to be added and that the minutes of the Corporate Parenting Board meeting on 17th January 2022 be noted.

SPCLL.56 QUESTION TIME

There were no questions from members of the public for this meeting.

SPCLL.57 FORWARD PLAN

The panel received the Forward Plan and members were asked to identify any items for examination by this Panel via the pre-decision call-in procedure.

RESOLVED – That the Forward Plan be noted.

SPCLL.58 TRACKING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF SCRUTINY

The panel received a report from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer tracking the recommendations of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel.

At SPCLL.20, the chair stated that with the implementation of the Children's Services Oversight Group (CSOG) he believed that to avoid duplication of the work the CSOG were currently doing, the agency workers working group be dismantled.

Some of the panel members did not think that this was the right thing to do. One member stated that the working group wasn't only looking about agency workers it was delving into lots of important factors. Another member stated that they were flabbergasted by the chair's proposal. They stated that they were passionate about finding out why the Council had fallen into the need to use agency workers so much. Members were given reassurance at Full Council that the CSOG would work in parallel with this scrutiny panel and that it wouldn't take any work away from the scrutiny work programme. However, they now felt that they had been informed incorrectly.

The Chair added that he felt this was a common-sense decision and it would allow Officers to put their time into one group and have a better ability to explore it in greater detail.

One member wondered whether Officers had expressed to the Chair any concerns that officers would be under undue stress if this working group was to continue. The Chair stated that rather than duplicating work, he felt that this was a better approach. A member of the panel stated that this was a clear example of scrutiny not getting to look at the real issues at hand. They added that the Ofsted report stated that there was a lack of oversight, and this was a clear example of this happening.

The chair proposed that the working group on agency workers within Children Services be closed. Councillor Abel seconded this.

At SPCLL.38, Councillor Lindley informed members that this action came about because the guidance was severely outdated. However, this has now been updated, but the statutory register on elective home education was still an issue, which he confirmed he would take forward. The chair asked if the Portfolio Holder had received a letter back from MPs. Councillor Lindley stated that he had and he would be happy to share this with the panel. The panel agreed to it would be useful to see the response as part of the Elective Home Education update that would be part of the work programme 2022/23.

RESOLVED –

- 1) That the Agency Workers in Children Services Working Group be dismantled.
- 2) That SPCLL.20, SPCLL. 38, SPCLL.49 be removed from the tracking report and all other actions be noted.

SPCLL.59 FAMILY HUB REVIEW (POST CONSULTATION REVIEW)

The panel received an update on the outcome of the Family Hub consultation.

Mr Jones explained that the review had only come back to this scrutiny panel to allow members to review the consultation results. He confirmed that the matter in had had already been called in and there was no longer an opportunity for members to call it in. He advised members that if the panel wished to do so they would be able to make recommendations to the leader due to this subject coming under his portfolio remit.

The chair thought it was positive that officers were now recommending for Immingham Family Hub to stay open. He asked for reassurance whether anyone could use the facilities as the majority of people who had taken part of the consultation had stated that they had used the service or would want to in the future. Therefore, it did represent the need for it in this setting. Mr Clayton confirmed that they would as there was a reoccurring theme that there was a need for this service in Immingham.

One Member asked whether Officers had looked into the Family Hub transformation fund to see whether the Council was eligible to apply. He wondered whether we could use this for the hubs in the borough. Mr Clayton explained that this funding related to Family Hubs that had not yet progressed into the integrated family hub model for 0–19-year-olds. In 2019, Officers recognised that there was a need for the hubs to offer a service for more than early years, so the local authority made the change then. This funding was to help areas that had not yet made this transformation.

A panel member added that it may be worth holding off on the decision to see what other options may become available. Mr Clayton stated that it was difficult because proposed funding isn't detailed in any way so there was no way of knowing whether we would be eligible. He added that the closures were not about having a range of buildings open it was more about providing a dedicated support programme to children and families who need it. He stated that Members need to think about how we can maximise support for those that need it as they were staffing buildings where no one was attending.

One member wondered why we were looking at keeping Immingham open if it wasn't about building but dedicated support. Mr Clayton stated that it had become apparent that there was a higher level of need identified in this area. A panel member added that he believed it was more about process and systems rather than listening to the community.

Another member stated that they saw first hand issues people had when there was a potential of Immingham Family Hub closing. They stated that they were glad to see the recommendation for it to stay open.

An elected member stated that there obviously had been a clear voice from residents that they don't want to see any of them closed. Covid had hit communities hard and the Covid aftermath would cause more issues moving forward. They believed Family Hubs should be the focal points within the communities. They added that officers expect charities or third parties to step in and use these buildings, but they knew first hand that charities were already very overstretched. They hoped that members could see beyond the fact that officers were willing to only save Immingham, but members should also see the need to save them all.

Councillor Patrick proposed that option one be recommended to the leader to retain and open all Family Hub buildings. Councillor Goodwin seconded this.

Mr Clayton added that it was more about delivering early help and using the community hub model where several different organisations work together to build community models. He stated that these were already happening. The consultation showed that individuals wanted the right support and that there were many other options to do this than keeping all the Hubs open.

The panel took a vote on the proposal and the proposal fell.

The Chair proposed that option four; to close five Family hubs as identified in the original Cabinet report and reopen the Immingham site. Councillor Astbury seconded this.

RESOLVED – That the Children and Lifelong Scrutiny panel recommend to the leader that the five Family Hubs, identified in the original Cabinet report be closed; but the Immingham site be reopened.

Councillor Lindley left the meeting at this point and did not return.

SPCLL.60 OFSTED INSPECTION OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES – IMPROVEMENT PLAN UPDATE

The panel received a verbal update on the improvement plan.

Ms Shearwood updated members on the work that had begun to improve our Children's Services following the Ofsted inspection in 2021. She stated that they had brought in additional resources to screen a high volume of cases for assurance purposes. The service had now changed their audit process which was now in line with Ofsted gradings. There are regular meetings with legal, EDT and the service had implemented regular handover meetings and had a significant roll out of the signs and safety practice model. They had an agreed legal process to avoid drift and delay which initially generated additional work, but they could see that it had now had a significant impact on the service. The pre-action state was initially a 20-week programme and had now been reduced to a 16 week programme. Ms Shearwood added that they were now working towards it being a 12-week programme. She added that the CSOG had now been established which would work alongside the scrutiny work programme to inform members on improvement. There was now a clear governance process in place and certain staffing challenges were being dealt with. They were keen to improve management visibility so that they had a better understanding of the workers needs.

Ms Shearwood stated that the improvement plan and now been finalised. They were now making sure it was embedded in their service model which they would continue to monitor. They had tightened up public law process and were, making sure that children were coming into the service in a timelier way. They were working towards having a stable and efficient work force, particularly by partnership working and external support.

The Chair stated that Ms Shearwood mentioned that all efforts had been made to ensure that children were not left in unsafe circumstances. He wondered how confident Officers were that this was the case. Ms Shearwood stated that while Ofsted were here, they escalated a number of cases because of the circumstances children were left in. Lincolnshire County Council also came in to review where further actions had been identified. The challenge for local authorities was allocating the work. Now that they had improved their risk management service, they now felt more confident to identify who was most at risk and put the work needed into motion.

One member questioned what the chair thought was challenging questions. They asked for reassurance that the chair wouldn't see certain questions from panel members as them being difficult moving forwards. The Chair agreed.

One member asked for more information around the meaning of drift and delay. Ms Shearwood explained that drift and delay was essentially not taking prompt action to safeguard or promote a positive outcome for children. Historically the period to take action within the public outlaw pre action period was 20 weeks, as this was the amount required to enable all the necessary assessments to take place. She confirmed that they were now working at a 16-week timeline but were hoping to get to 12 weeks. This was more in line with what neighbouring authorities would work towards.

Another member stated that at the CSOG, members looked at front door and statistical issues. They believed this would be useful for the scrutiny panel to look at going forward. They also asked, since the Ofsted inspection, what lessons had officers learnt and what did they know now that they didn't know beforehand. Ms Shearwood stated that they now know themselves better. The way they now audit allows them to identify and recognise where we wish practices to be improved. They now knew what good looked like. Ms Lawson added that the inspection had brought people together. They now had a sharper focus on governance and the CSOG and improvement board would oversee everything that was taking place. The elected member stated that the response was reassuring, but they believed Officers should have known what good looked like already, as Children Services was not a new service.

A panel member wondered what financial implications had been recommended by the commissioner. They wondered if Officers had an idea of what extra financial support the Council would need for the service to support the improvement plan. Ms Shearwood confirmed that there was a possibility that other resources may be available, but until they had received the commissioner's report it was difficult to be specific to what resources may be needed. Ms Lawson added that it was to be a 2-3 year improvement plan so they would link with the financial strategy to be sure that requirements were in line with the financial strategy.

One member had been told that there had been an increase in children requiring special attention after Covid. They wondered whether services were in place to tend to this. Ms Lawson stated that all authorities were applying additional resources to focus on children's mental health and resilience, as well as the rise for the need of food banks due to poverty including fuel poverty. She explained that this was something public health could lead on, but understanding the impact was something they all partner agencies would need to work together on

RESOLVED – That the Ofsted Improvement plan update be noted.

SPCLL.61 FINANCIAL MONITORING 2021/22 – QUARTER 3

The panel received a report from the Executive Director of Environment, Economy and Resources providing key information and analysis of the Council's position and performance for the third quarter of the 2021/22 financial year.

The Chair wondered what contingency plans Officers had in place when there was a rise in numbers for looked after children. Mr Lonsdale stated that there had been a significant reduction in service-based reserves. However, there was a contingency in the budget each year, which was not allocated to any particular service.

A panel member stated that they hoped the administration focused on using the budget on areas in demand and decided what their priorities were. Mr Lonsdale explained that they were trying to work collaboratively across the services. They try to prioritise, but Officers acknowledged that there was a need for interaction between different service areas. He went on to reassure members that this was being done. The panel member added that he understood that spending controls had been implemented across several departments. He wondered if it had been successful or whether there had been any fall out because of spending controls. He asked whether there were plans for these to be removed. Mr Lonsdale explained that these were introduced in the summer and acted as an additional control method to help with the potential overspend.

RESOLVED – That the Quarter three financial monitoring report be noted.

SPCLL.62 DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION'S HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES AND SCHOOL GRANT

The panel received a report from the Interim Director of Children Services on the acceptance of the ring-fenced Department for Education Holiday Activities and Food grant.

Members welcomed the report. Members believed it would be useful to see where the grant went and how successful the grant had been.

RESOLVED – That an updated on the use and success of the Department for Education's holiday activities and school grant, come back to panel in municipal year 2022/23.

SPCLL.63 SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN'S PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT

The panel received a report from the NEL Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report for 2020-2021.

RESOLVED – That the Safeguarding Children's Partnership Annual Report be noted.

SPCLL.64 SCHOOLS CAPITAL PROGRAMME

The panel received a report from the Interim Director of Children Services that looks at the rolling programme for the Local Authorities

School Condition, High Need and Basic Need government grant allocations within the Councils school estate.

One Member raised concerns around the number projected addition places for Children and young people Humberston and New Waltham. There were 20,000 properties planned for the area and already five developments currently on the go. They were concerned that this area did not qualify for a new school to be built. They wondered what assessment Officers were using to come up with the figures included in the report. Ms Jack stated that projections were accurate when they were done at the time and all schools capacity was regularly reviewed, and in line with existing or proposed housing developments. The Cabinet report also indicated that any pupil place capacity issues in New Waltham would/are being factored into future school capital work programmes.

RESOLVED – That the schools capital programme be noted.

SPCLL.65 CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME – REVIEW 2021/22 AND WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23

The panel received a report from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer (Assistant Chief Executive) summarising the panel's agreed 2021/22 work programme and the timetable of activities to undertake this work. The also considered any issues it may wish to retain in or add to its work programme for 2022/23. The members of the panel requested that the following be added to the work programme:

- Use of agency workers in social services and the ability to retain existing employed staff
- Use and success of the Department for Education's holiday activities and school grant.
- Front door and statistical figures

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the items listed above be added to the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel work programme for 2022/23.

SPCLL.66 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

There were no questions for the Portfolio Holder at this meeting.

SPCLL.67 CALLING IN OF DECISIONS

There were no formal requests from Members of this Panel to call in decisions of recent Cabinet and Portfolio Holder meetings.

There being no further business, the Chair declared the meeting closed at 6.36 p.m.