



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on the 16th March 2023.

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

19th January 2023 at 4.30pm

Present:

Councillor Silvester (in the Chair)

Councillors Abel, Boyd, Brasted, Croft, Goodwin, Hudson, McLean, Patrick and Westcott

Co-opted Member: Reverend Ian Robinson

Officers in attendance:

- Janice Spencer (Interim Director of Children's Services)
- Sally Jack (Assistant Director Education and Inclusion)
- Simon Jones (Assistant Director Law and Governance)
- Michelle Thompson (Assistant Director Families, Mental Health and Disabilities)
- Natasha Hilderley (Assistant Director Regulated Provision)
- Paul Windley (Democratic and Scrutiny Team Manager)
- Joanne Paterson (Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)

Others in attendance:

- Councillor Cracknell (Portfolio Holder for Children and Education)
- Councillor Holland (Non-panel Member)

No members of the press and 2 members of the public were in attendance.

SPCLL.46 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received for this meeting.

SPCLL.47 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

SPCLL.48 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel meeting on 17th November 2022 be agreed as an accurate record.

SPCLL.49 QUESTION TIME

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

SPCLL.50 FORWARD PLAN

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

Mr Windley drew Members attention to the Skills Strategy and Action Plan and reminded Members that this fell within the remit of this panel. The Skills Strategy and Action Plan was also due to be considered by the Economy Panel and it was suggested that a joint panel be arranged to consider this item and members would be notified when a date had been agreed.

RESOLVED

1. That the Forward Plan be noted
2. That a joint meeting be arranged with the Economy Scrutiny Panel to consider the Skills Strategy and Action Plan.

SPCLL.51 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.9 (Provisional Financial Outturn Report), Ms. Spencer advised that officers were still validating the data, and this was a big piece of work. Ms. Spencer was pleased to report that by the end of January every young person would have been tracked and reviewed.

At SPCLL.12 (Special Education Needs and Disability Update), Ms Thompson advised that the start for life submission had now been made and they were awaiting the outcome of the bid before the workshop could be organised.

The panel noted the updates provided within the report for the remaining items.

RESOLVED - That the tracking report be noted.

SPCLL.52 CHILDRENS SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT UPDATE

The panel considered a report from the Director of Children's Services providing the panel with an update on the Ofsted Improvement Plan for Children's Services.

The report focused on three key priorities and the Chair suggested the panel take each priority individually with any questions on each.

Ms. Spencer advised that officers were currently working on a new fourth priority relating to workforce and this would be brought back to the panel when relevant metrics had been gathered.

The Chair highlighted that the recent Recruitment and Retention Workshop had been very beneficial for the panel.

Priority A, Planning and Safety

A member asked what work was being done to address the areas highlighted in red as cause for concern. In response Ms. Spencer advised that officers were currently reviewing the number of children on child protection plans over two years in order to introduce a more robust process, with a view to these being reviewed at nine months' time.

A member enquired whether the council's partnerships needed improving or strengthening. In response, Ms. Spencer stated that they had now reduced the number of children in need through extensive work with partners. It was noted that contacts had reduced since November and it was considered that partners were now becoming much more engaged.

In response to further queries, Ms Spencer advised that officers had been overoptimistic around progress and at times a more decisive approach was required. Some of the challenges within North East Lincolnshire were around ensuring children were given the right support at the right time, although it was acknowledged that the churn of social workers and reliance on agency staff had not helped the situation.

A member enquired how specifically officers were calculating these targets. Ms Spencer advised that this was a measured target, and would be addressed through a targeted approach, for example, safely discharging children with Care Orders. It was also noted that a fast-track approach had been introduced which would be shared with the local judiciary.

A member suggested that comparison figures with our demographic neighbours be included in future reports. Ms Spencer confirmed that officers could look to provide some comparison data with the Yorkshire and Humber Region within future reports.

A Member highlighted that some of the measures had fallen into the amber category which suggested that front of house services was having an impact, and asked how confident officers were that this could be progressed into the green category going forward.

Ms Spencer acknowledged that those areas within the amber category were very disappointing however children on child protection plans were now the subject of weekly performance clinics, in order to fully examine the reasons.

Priority B – Child's journey through the system

A member asked what action was being taken with the number of contacts into early help.

Ms. Spencer advised that in terms of the number of contacts through the integrated front door, previously within North East Lincolnshire it had been custom and practice to not always record contacts. However, systems and processes were now in place to allow the contacts to be properly recorded on the system which explained the increase. In addition, Ms Spencer reported that the number of contacts converting into referrals had now reduced which was key and it was about managing the demand and targeting resources.

In terms of the percentage of children into early help, this remained low and needed to be reviewed to reflect better some of the positive work that had been undertaken. It was also noted that additional capacity had now been brought into schools which included an early help worker. Currently work was progressing on a new early help assessment and a working group had also been developed to support this.

In relation to the early help offer for families, Ms. Spencer assured members that the council had a well-established early help service. However, this needed to be targeted to children correctly with less emphasis on universal provision and more targeted to social care provision. It was noted that the council was currently reviewing the structure of early help practitioners.

Ms. Spencer advised that the Team around the Family approach needed to be more embedded in practice than it was currently.

A Member enquired whether early help related to those children at school age. Ms. Spencer advised that reference to schools included early years provision. Furthermore, it was suggested that the panel may benefit from a discussion around Family Hubs at a future meeting. Reference was made to the Family Hubs Programme and whole range of services to support young children to be school ready. There was also a commitment to provide this support at an early stage.

A member asked whether there was any feedback around work being undertaken in nurseries. Ms. Jack advised that some of the struggles were around behaviour, speech and language barriers.

A member referred to the number of referrals and felt that it would be useful to include the last 2 to 3 years for context. Ms. Spencer was not sure how productive this data would be but confirmed she could explore this if necessary.

A member asked what could be done to prevent some of the measures going from amber category back into red. Ms Spencer advised that this was about various factors such as the demand in the system, the churn of social workers and understanding why cases that were previously closed had come back into the system, and learning from this. Further developments included a reconfiguration of teams and a new Tactical Improvement Board.

In response to a query regarding online referrals, Ms. Spencer advised that a paper was taken to the previous Safeguarding Children's Partnership. Most online referrals did not include the necessary details and therefore were no longer being used. However, the new contact system would allow staff to ask the right questions. Ms Spencer explained in detail how the system worked and how the outcome of the referral was fed back to people.

Priority C – Homes and Families for Children who are looked after

There was a query about whether the number of unallocated cases had led to the number of children looked after and the rate of children looked after still showing as red. Ms Spencer was hopeful that over the next couple of weeks there would be no more unallocated cases and there was now less than previously, also the number of children in care had come down.

Members queried the targets for the number of Children Looked After for March 2023 and how realistic these figures were. Ms. Spencer acknowledged that they had been ambitious in setting this target and she did not think it was achievable but it was vital to bring some energy to this matter.

A member asked whether there were enough places for children coming into care. Ms Spencer advised that there was a national shortage of placements and this had led to children being placed out of area.

There was a query about whether steps were being taken to stop unregistered placements. Ms Spencer assured members that since she had been in post there had been no children put in unregistered provision and made a further commitment to ensuring the Council had the right children in the right placement.

In terms of provision for those children that were the most challenging, Ms. Spencer advised that she was exploring returning some of these children to their families and was committed to reducing those in unregistered provision.

A member asked whether the Council were doing any analysis around how children had come to be in inappropriate placements. Ms Spencer confirmed that the Council had commissioned an analysis of all children, which was due to be completed by the end of January 2023.

Furthermore, Ms Spencer referred to those children that had come into care through a Section 20 and noted that the Council had used voluntary arrangements more than it needed to. Ms Spencer also advised that they were committed to working with legacy cases, also those that were before the court had been there far too long and there was a need to restore confidence with the courts.

The Chair made reference to the 629 children look after and how many were placed out of area and asked whether this information could be included in future reports.

A Member acknowledged that the Council's objective was to reduce referrals into social care, but was concerned about the impact of a large number of children leaving care. Ms Spencer advised that it was hoped that some children would leave care and return home to their parents, others would be living with relatives under foster care arrangements. Although there would be demand it was anticipated that there would not be a significant increase.

Councillor Holland had requested permission to raise a number of concerns about corporate parenting matters. The Chair invited him to address the panel.

Councillor Holland noted the corporate parenting role of Elected Members and was concerned that an Improvement Board had been established but no improvements appeared to have been made. He felt that there had been a lack of strong leadership and social workers were not able to practice safely. Furthermore, the increase in caseloads had left social workers feeling overwhelmed and demoralised. He was concerned that the Improvement Board was not being fully informed of what was happening 'on the ground'.

Councillor Holland made a number of suggestions to the Panel for consideration, including co-option of independent people onto the panel, chairmanship of the panel not being from the leading group on the council and managers receiving appropriate training.

In response to concerns raised, Ms Spencer concurred with the historic issues raised and reported that the council was now starting to reduce the demand and had already closed cases. Clearly the level of demand in the system could not be sustained as this minimised the council's

capacity to protect children. In terms of training, Ms Spencer confirmed that colleagues from overseas had undertaken a four-month induction programme and the training needs of managers were being looked at. Ms Spencer reiterated that this was a long journey, and it could take two to three years for major changes to be seen.

In response to a query around social worker safety and management oversight, Ms Spencer was confident in social workers' current skills and advised that a staff survey was being undertaken. She offered to share the outcome of this survey with the panel.

A panel member added his concerns over the lack of progress since the Ofsted report and how this panel had conducted itself previously.

Another panel member however was optimistic about the future and was confident that things would change for the better.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That relative comparison data with the Yorkshire and Humber Region be included within a future report to this panel.

SPCLL.53 NATIONAL REVIEW OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND COMPLEX HEALTH NEEDS PLACED IN RESIDENTIAL SETTINGS

The panel received a report from the Director of Children's Services which set out the findings for North East Lincolnshire Children's Services in respect of the national review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential schools.

Ms. Spencer confirmed that the five children referred to in the report were located in one establishment, and these were for children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential and social care provision 26 weeks of the year. These types of settings were only in Lincolnshire and were outside of the borough, and it was reported that all children in these settings were safe and well.

A member was concerned that children were placed out of the borough and queried why there was not this type of setting within North East Lincolnshire. Ms. Spencer explained that these were children that had sensory needs that went to a specialist provider. It was highlighted that there was an issue with deprivation of liberty associated with young people requiring one to one support but currently receiving two to one support.

In response to a member's query, Ms. Spencer confirmed that Care Plans were regularly reviewed and were very robust. Members were

also assured that Educational Health Care Plans and visits from health social care regularly took place.

In response to a query around the type of support needed, Ms. Spencer advised that some children required a 2:1 ratio of support due to individual circumstances. Ms Spencer further advised that when children reached 18 years old, they automatically transferred as they met the criteria for adult services.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.54 ANNUAL CHILDREN IN NEED CENSUS ANALYSIS

The panel received a report from the Director of Children's Services summarising North East Lincolnshire's annual submission of Children in Need census data to the Department for Education.

Members raised concerns with the waiting times for Cambridge Park Special School in Grimsby and what was being done to encourage more children with learning difficulties into these placements.

Ms. Jack advised that the council had a set number of spaces at each setting, and it was very difficult to expand these settings. The council was working with Cambridge Park to explore expansion of the site. The council had bidden for funding through the 'Free School Bid' and the council would be informed very soon if they had been successful and would be able to cater for these types of needs.

The council was also meeting with head teachers who were very keen to be inclusive, and utilise this funding in their own settings, thereby helping schools to become more inclusive.

Ms Jack advised that both Cambridge Park and Humberston Park were good provisions and by enabling schools to be more inclusive it meant there was less spend out of area and more spend within the borough.

In terms of the bid and how the provision would be coordinated between the two schools, Ms Jack stated that both schools were very different in terms of their mental health needs.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.55 SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP BOARD

The panel received a presentation from the Chair of the Safeguarding Children Partnership (SCP) Board on safeguarding children's arrangements in North East Lincolnshire.

The presentation focused on the following key topics: -

Purpose of local arrangements

- Children were safeguarded and their welfare promoted
- Partner organisations collaborating to achieve shared outcomes
- Early identification of safeguarding issues

SCP Local Arrangement Plan

- How safeguarding partners jointly identify/ respond to the needs of children in NEL.
- Mechanism to assess outcomes of multi-agency practice.
- Process for responding to safeguarding incidents.
- Ensuring arrangements engage with children and young people.

SCP priorities

- Early Help
- Neglect
- Sexual Harm

How the SCP will meet its functions and priorities

- Strategic delivery plan
- Scrutiny and Assurance Framework
- Core Data Set, performance analysis

A short discussion ensued with Members enquiring about what provisions were in place to protect children in local sports clubs. Mr Cook advised that most of these establishments should have safeguarding policies in place.

RESOLVED

1. That the presentation be noted.
2. That the panel receive a further update in 6 months' time on developments with the safeguarding children's arrangements in North East Lincolnshire.
3. That the topic of safeguarding children's arrangements be added to this panel's work programme.

SPCLL.56 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

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

SPCLL.57 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 Chairman declared the meeting closed at 6.21 p.m.