



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on the 14th December 2023.

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

16th November 2023 at 4.30pm

Present:

Councillor Silvester (in the Chair)

Councillors Astbury, Beasant, Boyd, Brasted, Croft, Downes, Goodwin, Patrick, and Westcott.

Co-opted Member: Reverend Ian Robinson (Church of England) and Carole Harrison (Trade Union)

Officers in attendance:

- Simon Jones (Assistant Director Law and Governance, Monitoring Officer)
- Guy Lonsdale (Assistant Director – Finance and Deputy S151)
- Beverly O'Brien (Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)
- Jo Robinson (Assistant Director Policy, Strategy and Resources)
- Janice Spencer (Interim Director of Children's Services)
- Rebecca Taylor (Head of SEND and Inclusion)
- Michelle Thompson (Assistant Director – Families, Mental Health and Disabilities)
- Paul Windley (Democratic and Scrutiny Team Manager)

Others in attendance:

- Councillor Cracknell (Portfolio Holder for Children and Education)

1 member of the press and 1 member of the public were in attendance.

SPCLL.38 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received for this meeting.

SPCLL.39 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

SPCLL.40 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 21st September and special meeting on 27th September 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

SPCLL.41 QUESTION TIME

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

SPCLL.42 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.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

SPCLL.43 TRACKING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF SCRUTINY

The panel considered a report from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer tracking the recommendations of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel. Members were content with the update they received as part of this report.

RESOLVED – That SPCLL.12, SPCLL.27, SPCLL.28, SPCLL.29, SPCLL.30 and SPCLL.37 be removed from the tracking report and all remaining items be noted.

SPCLL.44 COUNCIL PLAN RESOURCES & FINANCE REPORT – QUARTER 2, 2023/24

The panel considered a report from the Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Economy, Net Zero, Skills and Housing, and the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets providing key information and analysis of the Council's finance and resources position at the end of quarter two.

One Member asked about the additional resources that had been invested into children's services as part of the last budget round. Mr Lonsdale stated that the need for the excess demand in resources has changed dramatically.

Another Member asked whether the Council was going bankrupt. Mr Lonsdale explained that although the environment remains challenging, there was nothing to say that this was the case.

A Councillor asked how Officers were planning on getting the overspend down. Ms Spencer stated that they were working tirelessly with providers to reduce costs. Procedures were a lot tighter now and external provisions can not be used without the sign off of the Director of Children Services (DCS). Ms Spencer was confident that the correct systems and processes were now in place to take forward when the new management team were in place.

One Panel Member asked about the two job adverts that had recently been taken down from advertising. Ms Spencer explained that the adverts were outdated. They no longer reflected what the care leavers needed. It wasn't that they weren't wanting to advertise, but some work needed to be done on the job description beforehand.

One Member wondered whether the level of reserves was going to dwindle further. Mr Lonsdale explained that the reserves had lowered overtime, some have been technical, and some had been unplanned. He stated that as part of the budget setting process for 2024-25 they would review the level of reserves available for this service.

One Member commented on feeling confident of the quality of service we were now providing but stated that it would be helpful if Members received key performance indicators (KPI) around key areas to enable them to see the trend of numbers.

An Elected Member stated that the report mentioned using capital assets to cover overspends in certain areas, but assets had not yet been sold and they believed that it was very unlikely they would be any time soon. Mr Lonsdale explained that they had the flexible use of capital receipts. He confirmed that they were expecting to meet the target and funding was available to meet the capital receipt strategy.

Ms Harrison asked whether it was realistic that we would fit all the improvements needed into the 3.5-year timeframe given. Ms Spencer explained that the new DCS and Leadership Team knew the level of direction they needed to take and if they were to continue at the pace, they had recently made changes in, she believed it should give the authority the chance to be rated at 'requires improvement'.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.45 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT UPDATE

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

One Member asked about the phasing of the reconfiguration of service and that it had been noted that they were taking a collaborative approach. They wondered why it was being done that way and why it

would improve the service. Ms Spencer explained that it was so that they weren't so reliant on sector led improvement or agency staff. Currently the service had no permanent senior leaders in place. Once the authority does it would allow them to recruit the right workforce for the service.

One Member stated that they recognised a lot of work had gone into reducing the number of children in care. They asked what amount Officers expected the number of children in care to be. Ms Spencer explained that they now had a funded project team in place who have been specifically looking at different ways to reduce these numbers. 105 had now been taken out of the system and she estimated that looking at all circumstances another 100 could be discharged safely going forward.

Members wondered whether the retention of workforce had changed. Ms Spencer confirmed that it had. They currently had 64% full time equivalent staff who were committed, motivated and very responsive. She stated that change can be very unsettling but have given employees the reassurance that nothing would be changing for them.

Another Councillor asked about the retention of the South African social workers. Ms Spencer confirmed that they were all still working with the authority and had become great assets to the service.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.46 OFSTED MONITORING VISIT UPDATE

The panel received a report from the Director of Children's Services providing an update on the recent Ofsted monitoring visit.

A Councillor asked whether the days have gone when families had several social workers. Ms Spencer confirmed that it was no longer happening. Families now had more stability.

One Councillor asked Ms Spencer to expand on removing risk instead of the child. Ms Spencer explained that they were now being more reactive. Historically, if Officers were worried, they'd remove a child from the home, but they now assess, manage and mitigate the risk more assertively and look at other options first before taking that child away from their home.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

SPCLL.47 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES

The panel received a report from the Director of Children's Services on the current and future educational need for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

One Member asked why the preferred route was an Academy School and not Local Authority. Ms Taylor informed Members that as part of the

Department for Education (DfE) process local authorities were no longer allowed to open schools.

Another Member explained how they had recently visited the Launchpad and explained how amazing it was. They wondered if there were more plans to do other settings like this within the borough. Ms Taylor confirmed that they were looking for up to an extra 60 spaces across the Borough. They were currently working with the trust to replicate the model. The Panel thought it would be useful if a visit was scheduled for all members to visit the Launchpad.

A panel member asked whether other primary and secondary schools in the Borough were liaising with other settings to express an interest in the work they were doing. Ms Taylor stated that the headteacher where the Launchpad had been launched had spoken honestly about the service and it had generated a number of schools to be interested.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.48 NURSERY SCHOOL PROVISION

The panel received an update on the nursery school provision.

Ms Spencer explained that they had concluded planning meetings with all three settings and all three presented sustainable business cases. Each setting would be asked to present a sustainable business plan to Cabinet in the spring term 2024. Plans would show how each setting can implement these objectives and officers believed work was progressing well. Finance colleagues were to work with the settings, but Ms Spencer stated that it looked like they were in a good position. She confirmed that the next milestone would be Spring 2024.

One Councillor asked whether there had been any progress on the internal review. Mr Jones confirmed that the reviewer was on with this. Another Member asked how the panel would be consulted on the results of the review. They hoped there would be engagement with Elected Members before the results were made public. Mr Jones confirmed that it was a review of the Chief Executive so it was for the Chief Executive to decide how he shared the results.

One Member stated that the settings received a lot of reputational damage over the notice of closure. They wondered what support the authority was giving to help solve the damage done. Ms Spencer explained that conversations were being made on how to make settings viable. The Elected Members asked whether the authority accepted the damage they had caused. Ms Spencer stated that the independent review would alleviate the concerns Councillors had.

Ms Harrison asked why a Section 188 notice had gone out before any of the settings had gone through consultation. Ms Spencer stated that the

review would unpick that issue and hopefully give some answers as to what happened.

A panel member believed that a special meeting should be called to review the results of the ongoing review. Mr Jones reminded Members that the review did not have any constitutional weight and fell outside the remit of scrutiny. review. However, if the results were put into the public domain, then that was when scrutiny can request them to come to a panel meeting. The Chair stated that if published it would come as part of this standing update on the agenda and then the panel can discuss best options going forward.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

SPCLL.49 CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL – WORK PROGRAMME REVIEW

The panel received a report from the Assistant Chief Executive (Statutory Scrutiny Officer) providing panel members with the opportunity to reflect on the progress of the panel's work programme at the half year stage and provide a formal opportunity for the panel to update its work programme.

Members were eager to get the workshops in place. They asked that they take priority in being organised.

One Member asked if something could be brought to panel on young people's usage of vapes and in some cases, them being spiked with cannabis. The Chair explained that there had been conversations with the Communities Scrutiny Panel to look jointly at anti-social behaviour. He believed that this could be beneficial if we also looked at the usage of vapes during this joint working and also invite the Director of Public Health to have their input.

RESOLVED –

- 1) That options be explored to assist members with their deliberations around anti-social behaviour in young people and their use of vapes.
- 2) That the report be noted.

SPCLL.50 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

The Portfolio Holder received a question from Councillor Downes.

I note that in the q2 out turn figures, £1.6m has been taken from school reserves (in addition to £8.7m from Council reserves) to reduce the forecast overspend. What school was this from and what was the basis on which the decision had been made to take that money from schools and

into general council spending. Was there any long-term impact of this decision?

Councillor Cracknell explained that the reserves used was not part of the Councils general money. It had already been ring fenced to be part of the schools' reserves. The money the Councillor was referring to had come from last years outturn, which had come into the current year.

SPCLL.51 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.

SPCLL.52 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED - That the public and press be excluded for the following item on the grounds that discussion of the following business was likely to disclose confidential information within paragraphs 1 and 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 172 (as amended).

SPCLL.53 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT

The panel were provided with an opportunity to discuss any confidential matters of concern with the Director of Children's Services. No such matters were raised.

There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed at 6.10 p.m.