



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on the 17th December 2020

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

24TH SEPTEMBER 2020 at 4.30 p.m.

Present:

Councillor Freeston (in the Chair)

Councillors Abel, Bramley, Harness (substitute for Cairns), Hyldon-King (substitute for Goodwin), Rodwell, Rudd, K Swinburn, Wheatley and Woodward.

Co-opted Member - Maddy Wilson (Non-Voting Youth Voice Representative)

Officers in attendance:

- Spencer Hunt (Assistant Director Safer NEL)
- Sally Jack (Assistant Director Special Projects)
- Guy Lonsdale (Deputy S151 Officer)
- Beverly O'Brien (Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)
- Rebecca Taylor (SEND Strategic Lead)
- Michelle Thompson (Assistant Director Women's and Children's Services – Clinical Commissioning Group)
- Tracey Urquhart (Consultant Clinical Psychologist/Service Manager)
- Helen Willis (Safeguarding Children Partnership Coordinator)

Also, in attendance:

- Councillor Ian Lindley, Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People

SPCLL.11 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received for this meeting from Councillors Cairns and Goodwin.

SPCLL.12 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Rodwell declared a disclosable pecuniary interest in SPCLL.22 as she is employed by Navigo.

Councillor Wheatley declared a personal interest in agenda item SPCLL.20 as a school governor at Beacon Academy.

SPCLL.13 MINUTES

The minutes of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 9th July 2020 were agreed as an accurate record and the Corporate Parenting Board minutes for the meeting held on 15th June 2020 were received for information.

SPCLL.14 QUESTION TIME

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

SPCLL.15 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.16 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.48, Ms O'Brien noted that an update on Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) was being received at this meeting and asked Members if they would prefer for this item to stay on the tracking report or include it within the work programme for this municipal year. Members believed that this was something we needed to keep on top of and it would do no harm keeping it on the tracking report.

Ms O'Brien informed Members that SPCLL.49, the call in of the new approach to the support and specialist assessment for children with additional needs, had now been included in the work programme, but if Members were happy to do so it would stay on tracking also as a healthy reminder. Ms O'Brien added that it linked with the recommendations that were on tracking from the Autism Spectrum Conditions Pathway working group which had now been updated to show progress with these recommendations. Ms Thompson informed members that the new pathway was due to be launched in April 2020, however, due to the need for extensive face to face contact it led to the pilot being placed on hold because of the Covid pandemic. However, the pathway and the panel have continued to be in force and meet during lock down. Overall, the experience for families has been improved and the current pathway has been refined along the way.

Members enquired whether there were any face to face appointments currently taking place as NHS services were now offering face to face services whilst using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Ms Thompson explained that services were starting to work face to face in terms of risk and need where it was deemed appropriate. However, Ms Thompson informed Members that autism assessments need a great deal of face to face contact and take place in different settings so face to face work may be restricted.

Members understood the Covid 19 restrictions but felt that the pathway should have been implemented by now. They wondered whether there was a date set when we may start to see some implementation of the new pathway. Ms Thompson stated that the Access Pathway panel had been meeting and accessing children throughout the pandemic. She explained that the area that they have been restricted on was when the child needs an in-depth assessment for autism. It was normally a 40-hour assessment that took place in several settings over several weeks and this had been a national issue due to the restrictions put in place.

Councillor Lindley understood members concerns. However, he stated that there was now a model in place that was being rolled out, slower than Members would want, but unfortunately, Covid 19 has had a massive impact on this happening. However, he believed the Council were implementing services very well under the current circumstances. He reassured Members that as the portfolio holder he would keep an eye on the implementation of the pathway and make sure it was being pursued at as fast of a pace as possible.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.17 LOCAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN'S BOARD ANNUAL REPORT 2017/18

The panel received a presentation from Helen Willis on the Local Safeguarding Children's Board Annual Report 2018/19.

Members congratulated Helen and her team, Members stated that they liked that there were robust scrutiny and assurance arrangements and that the North East Lincolnshire Clinical Commissioning Group and Humberside Police were involved. One member wondered whether it would be a yearly event for an independent person to come and work with them to safeguard the work the Council was doing. Ms Willis stated that we needed to know much more about ourselves. The Council currently have a robust call data and set performance reporting mechanism. However, Ms Willis confirmed that the Safeguarding Children's Partnership (SCP) did need to be directed by the performance data and if this data showed areas of concern then targeted experts would be invited to help us out. Ms Willis also pointed out that working with the young inspectors had been fantastic as children were an expert in their own lives. The professional scrutiny officers were very challenging too and always gave them their independent view.

Members asked how Officers would be selecting a wide range of young people as they would need to make sure they were represented by a whole cohort of young individuals. Ms Willis confirmed that they had worked closely with Pippa Curtin and the Youth Action Group for several years now. There were currently several young people who were part of the young inspectors and from a wide range of backgrounds.

Miss Wilson explained that there was currently a lot of people part of Youth Voice Group who had a range of different backgrounds. They had worked with people in care, people with an autism perspective and people who suffer from mental health issues. So, they do cover a range of different scenarios on how a service can affect people.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.18 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE STATUTORY COMPLAINTS ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20.

The panel received the Children's Social Care Statutory Complaints Annual Report 2019/20.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.19 QUARTER 1 FINANCE MONITORING 2020/21

The panel received a report from the Director of Resources and Governance providing key information and analysis of the Council's position and performance, specifically relating to Children's Services, at the end of quarter one of the 2020/21 financial year.

Mr Lonsdale explained to Members that within Children's Services there had been an overspend of £5.5million in total before the government grants received because of Covid 19. These were due to service pressures, delays to transformation schemes and still increasing numbers in complex cases of looked after children, leading to funding children going into foster care and residential placements etc. However, Mr Lonsdale stated that looked after children numbers had seemed to have plateaued over past few months. He added that looking ahead, the budget process was just beginning for 2021-2024 period and looking at some fairly significant risk going into the financial planning period, significantly affected by Local Taxation collection and this would have an impact on all council activity. The council will continue to work closely with the government, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and other government departments that are dealt with on a day to day basis, to make sure they understand the risk and challenges North East Lincolnshire was facing.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.20 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY UPDATE

The panel received a presentation updating the panel on the work that has been implemented for Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) during and after the Covid 19 pandemic.

Members wondered whether, as there was growing demand for SEN support in mainstream and specialist education, there was enough support to provide the services we need to. Historically, there had been a lack of resources to keep up with the number of children and young people who needed our help. Ms Jack explained that the number of children and young people in receipt of an Education, Health and Care plan had doubled. As part of our inclusion agenda, we would like to look at all services in terms of provision in mainstream settings and the work of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators would be a main part of that. It was now more about adjusting our current work base to make it work for us.

Members asked whether any work had been done around a link between mental health and the autistic spectrum. Ms Taylor stated that, as both mental health and autism were listed as the Borough's highest need, it was something they had experienced before. However, they had not explicitly looked at the links, they have only looked at primary areas of need. Nevertheless, they do know these links exist and if a child were to present with autism and have a mental health diagnosis, it would mean joining up our services to make sure they were supporting that individual's needs.

Members asked about the inspection regime. They presumed that the inspectors were not visiting local authorities due to the current pandemic, but they wondered what their current views were of the changes towards our regime. Ms Jack stated that in terms of the regime before scrutiny they had a meeting with Department for Education (DfE) to consider check and challenge. All Local Authority SEND inspection and reinspection activity had been suspended, but local authorities were invited to sign up for one of the 20 assurance visits around SEND. This council had volunteered themselves to show what we have done so far. She believed that the next inspection could be anytime between January and June 2021. However, Ms Jack enlightened Members that the earlier meeting with representatives from the DfE and NHSE, was quite positive, but did state that our communication needed to be better with families and young people in terms of our website. There were also some concerns around our access pathway, which Officers already knew was an issue. Members wondered how our SEND provision fitted in with our place agenda. Ms Jack confirmed that they were very keen to know how that would work. She explained that they have strengthened their governance with the Union Board and SEND executives, who now send information through the Union Board for decision making.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

SPCLL.21 CHILDREN'S SERVICES COVID 19 RESPONSE

The panel received a presentation on the Children Services response to Covid 19.

Ms Linton explained that back in July, Cabinet approved the Council's Strategic Recovery Plan for Covid 19. In terms of Children, Families and Education, a lot of the services had already returned to business as usual.

Members had concerns around elected home education and wondered whether this was due to the pandemic. Ms Linton stated that it was a national issue in terms of the increase, but some of the reasons were because of parental anxiety and some young people and families felt more comfortable with the virtual platform and educating at home. Ms Jack confirmed that the DfE had raised concerns about this happening all over the country. However, a triage system had been implemented to make sure the council can validate the reason for children and young people being home schooled.

Members asked about Looked After Children out of the area and how we were managing to ensure they were maintaining contact with their families. Ms Linton was unable to answer that herself but was happy to take it back to the relevant Officer to make sure an accurate answer was provided.

Members asked for clarification around the laptop scheme, whether it was only mainstream schools that could apply for it or whether academies also had that opportunity. Members just wanted reassurance that if a school were to close every child that needed a laptop would have the opportunity to get one. Ms Jack assured Members that the scheme was available to academies and that the DfE would contact academies for allocation.

RESOLVED – That the update be received.

SPCLL.22 CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING UPDATE

The panel received a presentation that provided an update on how mental health and emotional wellbeing services across North East Lincolnshire had adapted to the pandemic and national lockdown guidance and restrictions.

Ms Urquhart referred to an earlier question with regard to the assessment pathway for autism, specifically for children and young people during and coming out of Covid. She stated that in terms of the autism assessment pathway, there were approximately 30 children who were waiting for their autism assessment to be completed and diagnosed. She mentioned that this was a national problem because as part of an autism assessment,

children and young people need to have a psychometric test, which involved observing the children in different certain situations, but to be able to do this they needed to observe the child's behaviour closely and this cannot be done when the children have a mask on. Therefore, it would not be a valid assessment. However, she confirmed that all referrals that have come through for an autism assessment have been started on by looking at their history and interviews they have had with parents etc. Ms Urquhart stated that all the way through Covid they had been trying to come up with a way to get around this and an interactive software solution had been identified, which was now awaiting approval to proceed.

Ms Urquhart added that there was also an Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) that everyone currently used as part of a autism diagnosis and she confirmed that there was now a brief version of this which they were looking to implement. This would allow all cases that had been put on hold to be completed. Ms Urquhart assured members completing autism assessments was a national problem, but hopefully this new software would allow the Lincolnshire Partnership to complete theirs.

Ms Urquhart confirmed that the timescale from referral to assessment for autism was very good in North East Lincolnshire compared to other areas, so the service was in a good position to ensure assessments were concluded within good timescales, avoiding long waiting lists, once restrictions were lifted or other methods were put in place.

Members wondered whether they monitored waiting times when children and young people rang up as one Member had experienced a conversation with a young person who had given up waiting for the phone to be answered and therefore not received the service they needed. Ms Urquhart confirmed that additional measures had been put in place during Covid to take account of an increased call volume, and she was not aware of anyone raising any issues in this regard.

A panel member stated that in normal times, children would rely on regular routines, but with the absence of school this would have impacted on them. The Member wondered whether it would have been better if they had access to youth workers, youth clubs or open spaces as this would help with their mental health. Both Ms Urquhart and Ms Thompson agreed but explained that the advice from the government was very specific during lockdown.

Miss Wilson added that she had used the 'Young Minds Matter' lines during lock down and she got through straight away. She was well supported and thanked the services for their help, and she had found it very useful.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

SPCLL.23 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

There were no questions for the portfolio holder at this meeting.

SPCLL.24 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 6.35p.m.