



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

CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

21st September 2023 at 4.30pm

Present:

Councillor Silvester (in the Chair)
Councillors Astbury, Beasant, Boyd, Brasted, Downes, Patrick, Westcott.

Co-opted Member: Reverend Ian Robinson

Officers in attendance:

- Matt Clayton (Head of Service Early Help and Prevention)
- Rachel Cross (Partnership Lead – Team around the Family)
- Natasha Hilderley (Interim Assistant Director Regulated Services)
- Simon Jones (Assistant Director Law and Governance, Monitoring Officer)
- Guy Lonsdale (Finance Group Manager)
- Beverly O'Brien (Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)
- Danielle Marshall (Head of Service – Sector Led Improvement Children's Services)
- Jo Robinson (Assistant Director Policy, Strategy and Resources)
- Janice Spencer (Interim Director of Children's Services)
- Paul Windley (Democratic and Scrutiny Team Manager)

Others in attendance:

- Councillor Cracknell (Portfolio Holder for Children and Education)

There was no members of the press and 3 members of the public in attendance.

SPCLL.20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

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

SPCLL.21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

SPCLL.22 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 20th July 2023 be agreed as a correct record.

SPCLL.23 QUESTION TIME

The Chair invited Mr Vincent to ask two questions submitted by Mr Dicker. Mr Vincent introduced himself and explained that he was asking the questions on behalf of Mr Dicker who was unable to attend this meeting. He asked that a written response for both of the questions be sent to Mr Dicker. The Chair confirmed that it would.

Mr Vincent asked whether the chair was aware that Councillor Brasted, at a public meeting regarding Great Coates Nursery School, had confirmed that the three nurseries that formed part of the recent consultation were working on breaking even, which Mr Dicker understood had been proven, yet the answer to his question from Councillor Cracknell stated that the nurseries were working on a deficit. The only period of deficit was when staff were on furlough for health reasons and to pay covering staff. Mr Dicker felt that this was reasonable and was aggravated by the fact that many parents were working from home and key workers were able to send their children to educational facilities.

The Chair stated that he couldn't confirm whether Councillor Brasted had said that as he wasn't in attendance at the meeting, but after speaking to Councillor Brasted she was adamant that this was not said and had been misconstrued. The Chair explained that the point Councillor Cracknell had made was correct and he directed Mr Dicker to look at the public report on Nursery Provisions for the special scrutiny panel taking place on 27th September 2023, as it gave a picture of financial operations of all the nurseries. He added how the report clearly showed that the nurseries were working in a deficit.

Mr Vincent moved on to the second question. Mr Dicker felt that the public were cautious that the council was working with the nurseries with sustainable plans given that the nurseries were running on breaking even. Mr Dicker argued that the council was using these nurseries to claw back a shortfall within Children Services as a whole. Mr Dicker understood that the nurseries were working as if they were academies. and asked if the panel could confirm if it was the intention of the council to turn them into academy style nurseries.

The Chair explained that the nurseries were not breaking even. He reiterated that this could be seen in the special scrutiny report for Nursery Provisions. The Chair added that he had taken on board what Mr Dicker had stated and this would be discussed at the special Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel meeting on 27th September 2023.

RESOLVED – That the questions be noted and a written response to both questions be sent in writing to Mr Dicker.

SPCLL.24 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.25 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.

At SPCLL.12, Mr Windley explained that Members were to receive a report on the 'Team Around the Family' approach at this meeting and the panel could then decide whether there was still a need for this joint workshop with the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel to be arranged.

The panel agreed that items SPCLL.8 and SPCLL.9 could be removed from the tracking report as both had been completed.

RESOLVED - That SPCLL.8 and SPCLL.9 be removed from the tracking report and all remaining items be noted.

SPCLL.26 COUNCIL PLAN RESOURCES AND FINANCE REPORT - QUARTER 1 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 one of 2023/24.

Before opening the item for questions from panel members, the Chair explained that a workshop had taken place that focused on the Children's Services budget and this had helped him understand the budget a lot better.

One Member asked whether Officers expected an increase in the overspend in Quarter 1. Mr Lonsdale explained that it had been based on the information that had come from the service at the time. He explained that it didn't mean that efforts hadn't been made to limit spending, but there were challenges in the local placement market. He reassured Members that further work was being undertaken to reduce high-cost placings.

Another Member had concerns over the information presented. They believed it was out of date, which made it difficult to scrutinise correctly and could lead to ineffective recommendations being made. They wondered how they could get more transparency with, for example, real time figures. Mr Lonsdale stated that monthly monitoring was done at an officer level. The information recovered was always shared with the portfolio holder and the administration.

A Member stated that it was upsetting to see a £7.1million overspend, but this was an improvement on the quarter one figure over the last four years. He wondered whether Officers saw the overspend as a major cause for concern. Mr Lonsdale stated that various grants and funding were available to assist but the level of overspend could not continue. He explained that they were about to commence budget setting for 2024-25 with the aim to bring forward a financially stable budget.

Panel members wondered why the overspend was rated at amber and not red. Ms Hilderly stated that they were actively implementing appropriate control measures, which would eventually have an impact in decreasing the overspend. She explained that if these tight control measures had not been implemented, the overspend could have been an additional 20% on top. Members wondered how bad it had to get before it would get rated as red.

The Chair explained that during the budget workshop the Commissioner identified two areas that would help the panel to see what controls measures were being put in place to help reduce the amount of overspend within Children's Services. The Chair believed that it would be beneficial if workshops on the Fostering Service and the Commissioning Service could be arranged for members of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That separate workshops on the Fostering Service and the Commissioning Service be arranged for all Members of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel.

SPCLL.27 CHILDREN'S 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.

One Member asked about the newly developed governance within the service. They wondered how all the boards would operate and be transparent with each other. Ms Spencer explained how the boards operated and who chaired them. She reassured members that this new

governance service would allow a continuous monitoring of all services. The panel asked whether we were at risk of having too many boards and sought reassurance that they were working as they should be. Ms Spencer stated that this governance allowed Officers to be held more to account than before. There was no longer the opportunity for actions to be missed or not followed up.

Another member was worried whether the operation of these boards would add to drift and delay. Ms Spencer explained that historically there had been too many panels and boards, but ones that were no longer needed had been cancelled. Having the one overarching board that would drive forward the improvement plan would reduce the chance of anything getting missed. It was requested that a structure of the Boards be sent to members of this panel.

One Member asked what the medium and short term targets were for Children in Care. Ms Spencer stated that the number of Children in Care had reduced since this report had been submitted but noted that they had to be very careful on the children they exit. She confirmed that they were seeing less children come into care, but they had to get their timing right on exiting children. They hoped that numbers would dramatically fall over the next six months as there were still children in care that shouldn't be.

Members showed concerns over the number of caseloads officers had. Ms Spencer confirmed that Officers now had a more comfortable workload. One Member stated that the report showed an increase in Children in Need and Child Protection cases. They wondered whether this had continued or whether it was now decreasing. Ms Spencer stated that they were currently not in keeping with our statistical neighbours, but Child Protection Plans had now decreased, and the workforce was becoming more confident. There was now a robust care plan of the family network at the beginning of each intervention, so more support was now available to families to help keep them together within their own communities.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the Children Services governance structure be sent to all Members of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel.

SPCLL.28 TEAM AROUND THE FAMILY

The panel considered a report from the Director of Children's Services on the Team around the Family approach.

A panel member enquired about the role of the voluntary sector within the programme. Ms Marshall explained that there was now more of a coordinated support role with the voluntary sector. Ms Cross confirmed

that they had built a good relationship with the voluntary sector and they were now strong enough to be able to work alongside them not only short term but as part of the longer term plan. The panel wanted reassurance that we were supporting them when they were working alongside us. Ms Cross confirmed that they held regular meetings to make sure they were communicating effectively about families they were working together with.

Another Member asked if there had been an increased engagement with schools. Ms Cross stated that their relationship with schools had not always been great, but since implementing this new approach schools had embraced the pathway brilliantly. She explained that the briefing sessions about the launch had reached over 100 people. Ms Spencer added that they had even received referrals from General Practitioners, who historically had been hard to implement new approaches with. She believed this showed the impact of this approach and how it would help going forward.

One Member asked whether there had been a change in the process for new mums coming in for initial assessments, as a resident they had spoken to had experienced long waiting times. Ms Thompson explained that she hadn't been made aware of any changes but would follow up outside the meeting and contact the Councillor directly.

A panel member welcomed the report as a believer in early intervention and wondered whether panel members could receive feedback and statistics on the programme in 12 months' time.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel receive performance feedback and statistics on the Team Around the Family approach in 12 months' time.

SPCLL.29 FAMILY HUBS

The panel considered a report from the Director of Children's Services on the services and support delivered from the Council's six Family Hub sites.

One Member wondered whether Family Hubs would refer to 'Team Around the Family'. Mr Clayton confirmed that they would. Ms Marshall added that Team Around the Family was a universal targeted approach, where Family Hubs were to create a one stop shop for families needing help fast.

Members wondered whether activities would be put on to attract people. Mr Clayton confirmed that they would. There were a range of groups being put on, some of which had recently started with good attendance.

A member of the panel mentioned that when the Family Hubs review came to panel before, they very much opposed the closure of the five Family Hubs. They pointed out that the report indicated that closing these hubs would make the others more accessible, but they were struggling to see how as the ones that had been closed were near wards that could do with them being close by. Ms Marshall explained that the Family Hubs now had an open door policy, where anyone could walk into them, whereas before it was planned support and no one was attending. Ms Spencer added that historically you needed a social worker to refer you to gain access, but now anyone walking past could access the provision and they had become more responsive.

One Member wondered whether it would be beneficial if the panel received a report on how the hubs were performing in six months time. The panel agreed. Members had concerns whether the programme would be sustainable for the future. They asked whether it would be staff relocated or a new workforce. Ms Spencer confirmed that it would be a mixture of both. They were looking to shift the workforce by looking at case numbers and seeing whether it would be beneficial if early help teams worked as front of house staff. The Chair thought it would be useful if they also received data on where the families that attended lived.

Mr Windley reminded the panel about the tracking report action on the joint workshop with Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel. He asked if Members were happy for Democratic Services to write on their behalf to the Health Scrutiny Panel informing them that this panel had received an update on the whole family approach and would continue to monitor progress. The panel agreed and, on that basis, the action could be removed from the tracking report.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel receive a report on the Family Hubs performance in 6 months time.
2. That the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel be informed of the update they had received on the whole family approach and that the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel would continue to monitor progress.

SPCLL.30 CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY

The panel considered a report from the Assistant Director of Regulated Provision on the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

Members welcomed the report. One Member asked for a copy of the strategy to be put in each Group Room for all Elected Members to see.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.

2. That a copy of the Corporate Parenting Strategy be placed in all Elected Members Group room for information.

SPCLL.31 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

There were no questions for the Portfolio Holder for Children and Lifelong Learning at this meeting.

SPCLL.32 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.33 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.34 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.

RESOLVED – That the matters of concern be noted.

There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed at 5.50 p.m.