



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2025.

## **CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL**

**14<sup>th</sup> November 2024 at 4.30pm**

### **Present:**

Councillor Silvester (in the Chair)

Councillors Clough, Downes, Goodwin, Lindley, Parkinson, Patrick, K. Swinburn and Wheatley

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

### **Officers in attendance:**

- Paul Cowling (Service Director Children's Regulated Services)
- Helen Davis (Place Nurse Director, North and North East Lincolnshire)
- Simon Jones (Assistant Director Law and Governance, Monitoring Officer)
- Guy Lonsdale (Assistant Director Finance)
- Ann Marie Matson (Director of Children Services)
- Michelle McMahon (Head of Virtual School)
- Bev O'Brien (Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)
- Jennifer Steel (Service Director – Education, Inclusion and Integration)
- Charlene Sykes (Service Director – Safeguarding and Early Help)
- Joseph White (Agency Head of Pupil Support)

### **Others in attendance:**

- Councillor Cracknell (Portfolio Holder for Children and Education)
- Councillor Shutt (Heneage Ward Councillor)

There were no members of the press in attendance and one member of the public in attendance.

## **SPCLL.35 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Boyd for this meeting.

## **SPCLL.36 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

## **SPCLL.37 MINUTES**

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2024 be agreed as a correct record.

## **SPCLL.38 QUESTION TIME**

The Chair invited Mr Bate to ask the panel the following questions:

*The reasons given by the 'Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman' (LGSCO) for investigating a complaint regarding services provided by a local council includes a) delay; b) giving out misleading information; c) poor record keeping, and d) the institution not doing what it said it was going to do.*

*By Councillor Shreeve's own admission at nursery review meetings in Spring / Summer 2024, the costings shared with the public associated with updating the buildings of all nurseries so that they could be functional and meet Department of Education standards, were 'figures plucked out of the air'. Such figures were shared with the public during the consultation to close thus creating a negative financial narrative about the nurseries. In the same meetings, it was presented to lead officers and lead councillors that suitability reports produced by the Local Authority officers were not based on actual recent visits to the nurseries, as purported to be, and contained many factual inaccuracies, again creating a negative suitability narrative about each of the nurseries. It was agreed this would be investigated. To date it has not.*

*At the same meetings, it was also discussed that communication to the public should be sent out confirming the positive outcomes of the meetings and the futures of the nurseries no longer being under threat. To date it has not.*

*Bearing in mind all the aforementioned concerns, along with the worrying findings of Wilkin Chapman related to the consultation on nursery closures, was it not time that the LGSCO, an external group from the council and not commissioned by it, investigate the council for a) delay b) giving out misleading information c) poor record keeping and d) not 'doing as it said it would' during and after the consultation to close the nurseries.*

The Chair stated if Mr Bate sought the involvement of the LGO, then it was open to him to make a referral. Local authorities in the UK were not

legally bound to refer themselves to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). However, they were required to cooperate with the LGO if a complaint was made against them.

*When would North East Lincolnshire Council provide a written statement, to be published online, backing the nurseries and celebrating the progress they have made financially so as to solidify customer confidence in the provisions.*

The Chair responded that during the September meeting of this panel, officers openly praised each of the three settings for how hard and diligently they had worked to both review and reduce their spend. A note of caution was also shared with members that the settings' calculations were based upon predicted numbers of children and take up of places. Officers were continuing to support the settings and governing bodies with their financial predications, and they awaited a Department for Education decision as to whether a Schools in Financial Difficulty report would need to be submitted.

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

#### **SPCLL.39 FORWARD PLAN**

The panel received the current forward plan with a view to identifying any items for examination by this panel via the pre-decision call-in procedure.

Mrs O'Brien explained that the only item that would be suitable to come to this panel would be the Children's Home Transformation report and that was already on today's agenda to be considered.

RESOLVED – That the forward plan be noted.

#### **SPCLL.40 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.

The panel agreed that items SPCLL.13. SPCLL. 25 and SPCLL.29 could be removed from the tracking report as both had been completed.

RESOLVED – That items SPCLL.13. SPCLL. 25 and SPCLL.29 be removed from the tracking report and all remaining items be noted.

## **SPCLL.41 2024/25 COUNCIL PLAN RESOURCES AND FINANCE REPORT QUARTER 2**

The panel received a report from 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.

RESOLVED – That the 2024/25 Council Plan Resources and finance Report for Quarter 2 be noted.

## **SPCLL.42 COUNCIL PLAN 2025-28 CONSULTATION**

The panel considered the review of the Council Plan.

One Member mentioned that the regeneration on the Town Centre only needed to be included if we were confident that it was going to come into fruition.

On the scheme around Carbon Net Zero for 2030. a panel member felt that members of public thought this was a real over promise. It would be helpful to have aims and goals against it to help the public understand how the Council was going to achieve it.

One Member asked about the public transport scheme. They hoped that the new initiative that had come in from the new government would be included within this information.

RESOLVED – That the comments made on the review of the Council Plan be noted.

## **SPCLL.43 CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL - WORK PROGRAMME REVIEW**

The panel considered a report from the 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 welcomed the following topics:

- Children's Residential Care (progress update)
- Key Stage 2 and GCSE results.

RESOLVED – That the report and members' comments be noted.

## **SPCLL.44 MAINTAINED NURSERIES AND DAYCARE PROVISIONS**

The panel received a verbal update from the Director of Children's Services on the maintained Nurseries and Daycare Provision.

Ms Steel confirmed that they had now received signed budget plans from the chair of governors for both Great Coates and Scartho Nursery Schools but noted that they were still carrying a deficit. The work the settings had put in was having a positive impact in relation to figures.

A panel member mentioned the public statement requested by full Council. They mentioned how helpful it would be if a public announcement was made to state that these settings were still open.

RESOLVED – That the maintained nurseries and daycare provision be noted.

## **SPCLL.45 CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY**

The panel received a report from the Director of Children's Services providing the panel with an update on the performance and implementation of the transformation programme that would deliver the Improvement Plan.

Elected Members welcomed the report and praised Officers for all the work they had done. They did raise a few questions on the local offer to care experienced people. They wondered how they were going to expand it beyond the Council. Ms Matson said that their aspirations would be that it was adopted over the whole partnership and community. Interest had been raised since it had been communicated with the public and it had raised the public's awareness.

The panel also mentioned how well the fostering initiative had been doing. A panel member stated how they hoped Officers were prepared for the peer review in mid-January in order to avoid any hidden surprises. Members then asked for reassurance that the reduction in numbers of children leaving care was a good thing.

Ms Matson explained that the main focus of the peer review was Corporate Parenting, and they were prepared for the focus to be on their most challenging areas. She also confirmed that there had been a significant reduction, but it was due to some naturally turning 18, some moving to legal permanence, and some had gone home where it was safe to do so. Officers confirmed that children didn't leave without a care plan in place.

One Member asked about the average workload for social workers and how it was going recruiting them. Officers reassured members that progress was positive, but they were always looking at each social worker's circumstance to make sure their workloads were manageable.

RESOLVED – That the Children’s Services Improvement Journey be noted.

#### **SPCLL.46 NORTH EAST LINCOLNSHIRE CHILDREN HOMES TRANSFORMATION**

The panel considered a report from the Director of Children’s Services providing the panel with an update on the performance and implementation of the transformation programme that would deliver the Improvement Plan.

Some Elected Members had reservations on supporting this report. They believed that it would have been helpful if more detail of costings were included. They also had some reservations over the Residential Homes Manager job being advertised by Navigo and how this would impact our services if this was to go ahead.

Officers reassured Members that if Navigo were to create a children’s home, then they would have discussions with them to see whether it would be beneficial to work together as it was all about children coming together into a safe space.

Councillor Downes did not feel comfortable in supporting the recommendations so she proposed that the report be deferred to a future date, so the panel could receive more detailed information on the scheme. Councillor Patrick seconded this.

Mr Jones reminded Members that they could not overrule what Cabinet decided to do. If this proposal was to pass, it would only be a recommendation to Cabinet.

The panel voted on the proposal. There were three members for and six against. The proposal fell.

The Chair noted how children living out of area was the authority’s biggest expense. He asked whether Officers thought that if we were to bring children back into the area, we would make budget savings rather than expense. Officers confirmed that we would.

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET – That the recommendations within the report be agreed.

#### **SPCLL.47 SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2023/24**

The panel considered a report from the Director of Children Services on the Safeguarding Children Partnership.

The Chair asked whether our external colleagues felt that partnership working was stronger than it was. Ms Davis confirmed that this calendar

year has been indescribable. They have refocused on their governance and reprioritised their key components. She added that they had no scrutiny before and that this had now been amended. Ms Matson reported that an incredible amount of work had been done as the partnership was very disjointed, but reassured members that they were transforming every day, but they did feel like things were now more aligned.

RESOLVED – That the Safeguarding Children’s Partnership Board annual report be noted.

## **SPCLL.48 ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION**

The panel considered a report from the Service Director for Education, Inclusion and Integration on Elective Home Education.

A Member proposed that this item be deferred to a special meeting of this panel so that they could look at Elective Home Education in more detail. The panel did not think there was a lot of local contexts within the report, and they hoped to see figures on whether we were doing enough to impact the numbers. Members acknowledged that there was still a lot of work to be done, but they just wanted to understand it in more detail.

RESOLVED – That the Elective Home Education report be deferred to a special meeting of this panel in early January 2025.

## **SPCLL.49 SCHOOL ATTENDANCE**

The panel considered a report from the Service Director for Education, Inclusion and Integration on school attendance.

The panel sought assurance on:

- Alternative provision and why they used a part time timetable
- Supporting schools’ penalty notices
- Social workers version matching schools version of events.
- Unauthorised absences

Ms Matson stated that work was underway strategically across the partnership and with our school leaders to increase school attendance across the borough. This was beginning to have an impact. In relation to Personal Education Plans (PEP) following discussion, social workers would now be invited to each child in care’s PEP.

Members thought it would be useful if the panel could see regular information to inform them on whether attendance was improving.

RESOLVED – That the school attendance report be noted.

## **SPCLL.50 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER**

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

## **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 and to consider the risk register in relation to the Improvement Journey.

One member of the panel enquired about which children's homes may be used as part of the transformation scheme.

RESOLVED – That the matters of concern be noted.

There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed at 6.15 p.m.