



CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

21st July 2026 at 4.30pm

Present:

Councillor Downes (in the Chair)

Councillors Augusta, Aisthorpe (Substitute for Beasant), Clough, K. Batson, I. Oliver, Patrick (substitute for Goodwin) and Shreeve.

Co-opted Members: Canon Ian Robinson (Church of England) and Simon Jones (Trade Union)

Officers in attendance:

- Liz Brummer (Head of Finance)
- Zoe Campbell (Senior Scrutiny and Committee Advisor)
- Paul Cowling (Service Director for Regulated Services)
- Simon Jones (Assistant Director of Law and Governance)
- Ann Marie Matson (Director of Children's Services)
- Harriet Malkin (Deputy Service Director Safeguarding and Disability)
- Julie Poole (Head of Service, Practice, Performance, Quality and Assurance)
- Jo Robinson (Assistant Director of Policy, Strategy and Resources)
- Jenni Steel (Service Director Education, Inclusion and Integration)
- Charlene Sykes (Service Director – Safeguarding and Early Help)

Others in attendance:

- Councillor Bonner (Yarborough Ward Councillor)
- Councillor Grice (Portfolio Holder for Children and Education)

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

APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN AND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN

It was noted that at the Annual General Meeting of the Council held on 21st May 2026, Councillor Downes had been appointed the Chair and Councillor Goodwin the Deputy Chair of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel for the ensuing Municipal Year.

SPCLL.1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Beasant , Goodwin and Lindley.

SPCLL.2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

SPCLL.3 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 2nd March 2026 be agreed as a correct record.

SPCLL.4 QUESTION TIME

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

SPCLL.5 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.

RESOLVED – That the forward plan be noted.

SPCLL.6 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.

RESOLVED - That the tracking report be noted.

SPCLL.7 2025/26 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE REPORT - QUARTER 4

The panel considered a report from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets providing information and analysis of the Council's performance and financial position at the end of quarter 4 2025-26 (January to March 2026)

A member asked how young people leave the youth justice system. Ms Sykes explained that individuals left the system once their intervention was complete, unless they were repeat offenders.

Referring to the Children's Services finance overspend, a member questioned the £988,000 budget pressure due to unmet savings. Ms

Matson explained this was linked to the external market, delays in opening a new children's home and the slower than anticipated decline in the children in care population. She also added that the original savings target was a stretch.

A member asked about the delay to opening the new children's home. Ms Matson confirmed the delayed children's home was now expected to complete works in September 2026, followed by the Ofsted registration process. She noted a national backlog for registrations but committed to making the strongest case for prompt inspection.

Referring to children in care a member noted a slight increase this quarter in the numbers but acknowledged the overall reduction trend and stability in re-entering care. Ms Matson confirmed the numbers were stabilising as predicted, with some children safely returning home while others remained in long term care. She stated the local authority's care population was still too high nationally but emphasised a safe and careful reduction. Ms Malkin added that numbers entering care were now more aligned with statistical neighbours, indicating a stable care population that was slowly decreasing.

A member questioned if the persistent overspend indicated a need for a larger budget envelope. Ms Matson reiterated the ambition to reduce spend through efficiencies and sufficient local placements. Regarding SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), Ms Matson explained the complexity of national reform and the long-term nature of significant budget reduction, despite efforts to open more local specialist provisions. She cautioned against expecting significant reductions in 12 months.

A member expressed concern that only 43% of 17-18 year old care leavers were accessing education training and employment (ETE). Ms Matson shared the concern, highlighting the complex needs of this group. She outlined plans including the family business initiative, Council employment commitments, and a new task force. She also noted improved educational outcomes for children currently in care due to better stability.

The Chair asked if suitable accommodation impacted ETE outcomes. Ms Matson confirmed that while suitability had improved, more choice was needed to better match young people to employment and improve their experience.

With regard to permanent exclusion a member asked for updated figures for the current academic year. Ms Steel stated it was slightly premature due to the validation processes and ongoing appeals but expressed optimism.

Concern was raised about four consecutive years of over 50 permanent exclusions. Ms Steel attributed this to post pandemic impacts on children's mental health and learning environments.

Ms Matson explained the focus had shifted from attendance (which had improved significantly) to belonging and inclusion, with a commitment from multi-academy trust leaders to reduce exclusions. She also confirmed that a belonging charter was planned.

A member highlighted the elective home education (EHE) as a blind spot due to lack of powers to check education quality. The Chair highlighted that the panel had previously written to the Department for Education (DfE) on this but received no response.

Ms Steel assured members that for children on child protection plans, local authority agreement was needed for EHE. She also mentioned issuing school attendance orders where home education was deemed unsuitable. Ms Matson confirmed EHE numbers had stabilised following strategic work and would be part of the wider belonging charter.

The Chair noted that all performance metrics were rated green while all finance metrics were rated red, suggesting this be a focus for future reports.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.8 CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT AND TRANSFORMATION JOURNEY AND UPDATE

The panel considered a report that updated the panel on the Children's Services improvement and transformation journey, and to demonstrate the breadth and depth of our key activities, impacts and outcomes, as well as key headlines pertaining our current position and self - assessment including key performance comparators

A member praised the report as a useful overview for new members. They highlighted the transformation as the fastest nationally and commended the role of the democratic process, including universal councillor training, critical scrutiny, and political leadership in securing resources and guiding the transformation. Ms Matson confirmed the Children's Commissioner offered condensed training sessions for new elected members.

The Chair commended the achievements in recruitment, workforce stability, budget reduction, and improved Ofsted rating. She raised concerns about SEND capacity and asked about the longest waiting times and increased complaints, identifying it as a high-risk area for scrutiny.

The Chair also raised concerns about ongoing issues with the new system (parent access, reporting accuracy, user confidence). Ms Steel acknowledged the disappointment and challenges of migration, outlining steps taken including appointing three specific parent contacts, online

training videos, and context sheets to improve communication and support.

Referring to average caseloads for social workers a member asked if the average caseload figure excluded those without assigned caseloads. Ms Matson confirmed it included all qualified social workers, with newly qualified staff having capped caseloads. Ms Sykes stated the highest individual caseload was 38, with those over 30 being assessing social workers. Ms Matson noted that while recruitment had been successful (down to 6 vacancies), many new recruits were newly qualified, contributing to caseload disparity.

The Chair noted an increase in child protection from 191 to 245 and asked if this was due to improved safeguarding, increased need, or a combination. Ms Matson confirmed it was predominantly due to domestic abuse and neglect, offering a deep dive into this cohort for future scrutiny which the panel welcomed.

SEND Reform Plan contingency was raised by a member who queried about contingency plans if the Department for Education (DfE) funding was delayed or differed from expectations due to government changes. Ms Steel stated that the local area was already undertaking much of the transformation work e.g., alternative provision, special school development and had strong partnerships, placing them in a good position to leverage the plan regardless of funding specifics.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That at a future meeting the panel deep dive into the cohort of children in child protection due to domestic violence and neglect.

SPCLL.9 CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL - WORK PROGRAMME 2026/27

The panel approved the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel the work programme for 2026-27.

RESOLVED – That the work programme for 2026/27 be approved.

SPCLL.10 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

There was question for the Portfolio Holder for Children and Education at this meeting from Councillor Bonner.

In light of the concerns circulating in the community, can you give a clear and unequivocal assurance that the council was not minimising,

obscuring or selectively presenting the scale of child and youth exploitation, and that all relevant information, risks and actions were being handled with full transparency?

Furthermore, would the portfolio holder commit to hearing any cases where the council could be perceived as having 'covered up' exploitation, and to commissioning a review wherever such concerns were substantiated?"

Councillor Grice, Portfolio Holder for Children and Education confirmed that he was not aware of any cases that were covered up and he was happy for Councillor Bonner to raise any cases to be investigated further with him if required.

SPCLL.11 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 5.51 p.m.