CHILDREN AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

10th September 2026 at 4.30pm

Present:

Councillor Downes (in the Chair)
Councillors Augusta, Beasant, Goodwin, Lindley,
I. Oliver, Patrick (sub for Clough) and Russell.

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)
- Zoe Grindle (Service Lead – Youth Justice)
- Julie Poole (Head of Service, Practice, Performance, Quality and Assurance)
- Jo Robinson (Assistant Director of Policy, Strategy and Resources)
- Eve Richardson-Smith (Head of Law and Assurance)
- Jenni Steel (Service Director Education, Inclusion and Integration)
- Charlene Sykes (Service Director – Safeguarding and Early Help)

Others in attendance:

- Councillor Grice (Portfolio Holder for Children and Education)

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

SPCLL.12 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K. Batson, Clough and Shreeve.

SPCLL.13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

SPCLL.14 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 21st July 2026 be agreed as a correct record.

SPCLL.15 QUESTION TIME

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

SPCLL.16 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.17 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.18 2026/27 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE REPORT - QUARTER 1

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 1 2026-27 (April to June 2026)

In terms of budget pressures**,** members discussed the drivers of the current budget overspend. It was noted that while "low-hanging fruit" and fundamental service-level drivers had been addressed, significant structural and external pressures remained. Unforeseen replacement costs and high-cost, specialised placements for small numbers of children continued to represent a major financial risk.

A member queried the Children's Homes infrastructure, Mr Cowling reported that the council's second new children's home was nearing completion. Keys were due to be received the following day to allow furnishing to commence. Despite minor delays caused by unforeseen works, the home was expected to help bring placement costs down significantly. Currently, care in the council's own homes cost approximately £3,000 less per child, per week, compared to external placements. Officers were continuously analysing whether opening

further internal homes would be financially viable, balancing capital outlay and staffing costs against long-term asset value.

Regarding out of area placements, members expressed concern regarding potential service cuts and emphasised that financial savings must not be made to the detriment of vulnerable children. Councillor Grice reassured the Panel that the best interests of the children and families remained the paramount consideration. Reducing out of area placements was viewed as both a financial mitigation and a positive outcome for children, as long distance travel was often not in their best interest. Ms Sykes confirmed that settled children, thriving in out of area placements would not be disrupted and returns to the local authority were only executed if they aligned with the child's long-term care plan.

A member queried the long term strategies and early intervention. Mr Cowling highlighted that long-term strategies, such as the foster carer recruitment programme and the implementation of the Family Hub review focusing on early help and supporting families to prevent children from entering care were beginning to yield positive results. As of the meeting date, the number of children in care had reached a four year low of 398.

The Panel discussed factors outside the local authority's direct control, including rising placement market costs, transport fees, staff salaries, and the increasing complexity of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).

A member queried the social worker staff retention rates. Ms Skyes confirmed that the proportion of permanent qualified social work staff stood at 92%, reflecting a positive balance of directly employed versus agency staff. The authority's social worker turnover rate was approximately 4.7%, significantly lower than the national average of 15.8%.

With regard to re-entrance into care a member queried how many children re-entered into care. Ms Skyes confirmed that re-entrance rates were actively tracked and remained very low, demonstrating the sustainability of reunifications.

A member was concerned about the EHCP timeliness referring to a drop in the percentage of EHCPs issued within 20 weeks, Ms Steel explained this was attributed to reporting anomalies during transition to a new recording system and she confirmed the data was now accurate. The member requested that future reports include absolute numbers alongside percentages to help contextualise fluctuations.

A member queried when the Progress 8 scores would be available, Ms Steet explained that validation of Key Stage 4 figures from the Department for Education (DfE) was delayed due to an issue with a specific exam board. She confirmed that validated reporting was expected to be presented to Scrutiny around January 2027.

A member referred Elective Home Education (EHE) and noted that quarter one saw a significant reduction in EHE numbers compared to quarter four of the previous year. Ms Steel explained that this was partly due to the standard exit of the Year 11 cohort in June, alongside the successful launch of the partnership strategy supporting young people to return to school.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.

2. That future reports includes the absolute numbers alongside percentages to help contextualise fluctuations for EHCP's.

SPCLL.19 YOUTH JUSTICE PLAN

The panel considered a report (prior to it going to Cabinet on the 16th September 2026) from the Portfolio Holder for Children and Education of the Youth Justice Plan, in line with statutory requirements, which set out the shared ambitions and priorities which supports children and young people to be diverted from youth justice services.

The Chair welcomed the inclusion of key recommendations from previous scrutiny feedback, specifically making offending reduction a strategic priority, implementing a graduated response to repeat offending, and strengthening corporate parenting responsibilities.

A member highlighted the data timeliness and local tracking of national re-offending data lags by approximately two years. Ms Sykes explained that it relied on statutory outcomes (cautions or court orders) tracked over a 12-month period, excluding out of court disposals. To address this, officers were working to digitise a local, manual tracking tool into the main system to provide live, accurate local data to help assess the impact of new strategies.

With regards to prevention and community programmes a member suggested expanding the strategy to explicitly reference external preventative programmes, such as local cadet units, which had proven highly successful in diverting young people away from negative lifestyles. Officers agreed that a tiered approach linking targeted youth justice work with universal community offers was central to the emerging wider youth strategy.

Poverty and Deprivation was raised as a concern by a member in particular that the words "poverty" and "deprivation" were underrepresented in the report despite being major drivers of youth vulnerability. Officers accepted that this connexion could be made more explicit. Ms Poole highlighted that ongoing collaborative work between Children's Services, Public Health, and other partners on the back of the

national Child Poverty Strategy would help strengthen these links in future documents.

Ms Grindle clarified that the inclusion of knife crime as a focus area was a mandatory national requirement for this year's plan. While serious violent crime numbers locally remained low, preventative educational work continued in schools.

A member raised concerns regarding long waiting lists for mental health and neurodiversity assessments (often up to two years with Young Minds Matter). Ms Grindle acknowledged these national challenges, noting that the Youth Justice team attempted to bridge the gap using CBT-trained practitioners, access to the low-level Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JEF) project, and monthly clinical supervision from Young Minds Matter staff.

The Chair referred to the ‘violence to the person’ key performance indicator and suggested that the panel would like to see how well the council were performing against that rather than a statement.

The Chair highlighted the clear link between SEND and youth offending. Following a visit to SENDIAS, she proposed greater partnership working between SENDIAS and local police teams to improve officers’ understanding of SEN, thereby preventing the unnecessary criminalisation of vulnerable young people.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and Young Minds Matter be invited to a future Scrutiny Panel meeting to discuss the actions being taken to reduce waiting times for mental health and neurodiversity assessments.

2. That it be recommended to Cabinet to ensure future iterations of the Youth Justice Plan more clearly identify the links between poverty and deprivation and youth offending, and detail how collaborative strategies were being deployed to combat this issue.

3. That it be recommended to Cabinet to incorporate smarter Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and clear operational thresholds into the plan, particularly concerning repeat offending and clarifying the trigger points for the graduated response with performance data regularly brought back to Scrutiny to monitor effectiveness.

4. The Panel formally endorsed the Youth Justice Plan to proceed to Cabinet for consideration.

SPCLL.20 YOUTH DIVERSION/YOUTH CLUB PROVISION

The Panel received a high-level overview report on youth diversion and youth club provision across North East Lincolnshire. Ms Poole outlined the current position, noting that a local strategy was emerging following extensive public consultation to respond to the national youth strategy and diversify the local offer.

Members celebrated the opening of the Horizon Youth Zone as a major development, but noted it must operate as part of a wider ecosystem. Smaller, localised satellite hubs (such as Centre 4, the Grange Community Centre, and Shalom) remained vital because some young people found the Horizon facility too large or were unable or unwilling to travel outside their immediate wards.

Ms Poole explained that the Youth Alliance was being relaunched at the end of September 2026 under a new, independent chair to bring together local providers on a level playing field.

A member queried how local sports teams (such as football, hockey, and netball clubs) were integrated into the plan. Ms Poole confirmed that sport and play strategies were linked via Sport England initiatives and the "move together, play together, healthy together" workstream, ensuring sports clubs were connected to the Youth Alliance.

The Chair raised concerns about quiet, less confident, or non-sporty children who may fall under the radar and fail to access major youth clubs. Ms Poole agreed that identifying these "seldom heard" voices was a key area of development. The council was working closely with schools who held the best intelligence on these cohorts using outreach, targeted communications, and the Adolescent Lifestyle Survey to ensure they were aware of and supported to access local activities.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

SPCLL.21 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE STATUTORY COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS ANNUAL REPORT 2025/26

The panel received the Children's Social Care Statutory Complaints and Compliments Annual Report for 2025/26 that was considered by Cabinet their meeting on the 19th August 2026.

A member queried all six Stage 2 complaints and 60% of Stage 1 complaints were responded to out of time. Ms Poole explained that Stage 2 delays were primarily due to the high complexity of the cases. Closer monitoring and tracking processes had since been established between Children's Services and the Information Governance team to address these delays. Councillor Grice added that, as Deputy Leader, he was working across all council portfolios to improve complaint response times.

Members expressed disappointment that only one formal compliment was captured in the report, noting that this did not reflect the excellent work of the authority's social work team. Ms Poole explained that while informal compliments and staff "shout-outs" were celebrated weekly via an internal newsletters and events, they were not captured in this statutory report. Officers agreed to find ways to weave these softer positive feedback metrics into future annual reports and to actively prompt stakeholders for formal compliments.

The Chair stressed the importance of demonstrating how complaints lead to tangible service improvements. Officers agreed that while complaints were reviewed quarterly by senior management and linked to monthly case audits, the written report should be strengthened in future to clearly articulate the thematic actions and improvements implemented as a result of feedback.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

SPCLL.22 QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER

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

SPCLL.23 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.24 OTHER BUSINESS

Reverend Cannon asked the Chair if he could say thank you on behalf of the Diocese of Lincoln Education board. When he first joined, things were not very good but that he was thrilled to read that Children’s Services had been nominated for awards and which was a really incredible result and a result of hard work by elected members, officers and their teams, who had all worked together to put children first. He explained that he attended a recent Diocese of Lincoln Education board meeting looking at key stage two results and North East Lincolnshire Council was doing really well with educational attainment and on behalf of the Diocese of Lincoln Board of Education, they expressed their thanks.

There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed at 5.45 p.m.