

CHILDREN, FAMILIES, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE (CFLLC) SELECT COMMITTEE

Item under consideration: Sara Sharif Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPR)

Date Considered: 15 December 2025

1. Following a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review commissioned after the death of Sara Sharif in 2023, an extraordinary meeting was held, at the request of the CFLLC Select Committee and endorsed by full Council, to receive a public update on learning and actions taken by the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning (CFLL) Directorate since the review's findings were published in November 2025.
2. An unanimously agreed motion to Council on 9 December 2025, proposed by Councillor Lance Spencer, asked the Council Leader and the Cabinet Member for CFLL to appoint an independent expert to undertake a formal review into the existing culture, systems and processes in the CFLL Directorate, and for Select Committee to provide input into the Independent Review Terms of Reference. At its 15 December meeting, Select Committee agreed its recommendations for inclusion in the Terms of Reference, and these are presented in Section One below.
3. Members questioned the Cabinet Member and Executive Director on areas including staffing at the "front door" to Surrey's Children's Services (C-SPA), professional curiosity in challenging parental narratives, cultural competence training, cross-boundary data-sharing and triangulation of information, safeguarding in elective home education, IT system capabilities for family mapping, and protocols for flagging historic incidents during new referrals. More details of the discussion are provided in the [minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting](#).
4. In addition, the agreed Council motion asked the Council Leader to write to the Secretary of State and local MPs seeking urgent national action on the national review recommendations, and for Select Committee to develop further recommendations to be included in this letter. These were also duly agreed in its 15 December meeting and are set out in Section Two below.

Recommendations

Section One: Recommendations for Independent Review Terms of Reference

The Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee recommends that the independent review specifically reviews culture, systems and processes associated with the issues identified in the review and listed

below in order to provide assurance that appropriate changes have been made or are planned to be made and, if only partial assurance is possible, that recommendations are made on how to address any vulnerabilities identified.

1. Training provided to staff ensures that a child's "voice" would be heard through a change in demeanour, dress and other forms of nonverbal communication (Finding One).
2. The C-SPA is always appropriately staffed, including with adequate senior supervision including in periods of high demand and periods when less staff are likely to be available e.g. school holidays and winter due to illness (Finding One).
3. Triangulation of information is embedded and working (Finding One).
4. Children's accounts, behaviour or physical signs are recognised and professional curiosity is evidenced (Finding One).
5. Training provided to staff ensures they are prepared to handle coercive, aggressive behaviours and inconsistent explanations and represents good practice in working with children and families, and levels of need and S31 thresholds for significant harm are clearly understood (Finding One).
6. A social worker or member of the CFLL Directorate can easily view data / records to identify all those with parental responsibilities for a child so that no one is missed (Finding Two).
7. Where timelines are defined in procedures for home visits, there are flags when these timelines are not met and appropriate escalation is initiated (Finding Two).
8. There is good knowledge of the "modus operandi" of domestic abuse perpetrators including training from those with lived experience, and what is in place represents good practice and is embedded (Finding Three).
9. Those working in the C-SPA, a social worker or member of the CFLL Directorate are supported to easily view data / records of a child and their extended family, to identify anyone who has a history which includes domestic abuse or other behaviour that may represent any risk to a child (Finding Three).
10. Ensure the right balance between Family Group Decision Making and identify / recognise coercive control / signs of domestic abuse to support

safeguarding children as the priority, with GDPR not being a barrier to safeguarding (Finding Three).

11. Work done to support private law proceedings puts the child(ren) at the centre of what is done and represents good practice (Finding Four).
12. Where a child / parent / carer does not have English as their first language, they ensure that this is not a barrier to effective safeguarding (Finding Four).
13. Support a social worker preparing papers for a private law proceeding to easily view the data / records of a child / children and their extended family, to identify anyone who has a history including domestic abuse or other behaviour that may represent and risk to a child / children, and a red flag would be raised (Finding Four).
14. The preparation of Section 7 reports represents good practice (Finding Four).
15. CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) safeguarding letters are received by Surrey County Council and their use represents good practice (Finding Four).
16. There is always a clear and accurate closing summary to help interrogation of past history, particularly where Surrey County Council entered care proceedings recommending that a child is removed from their parents, but the final care plan is for a supervision order (Finding Five).
17. It is clear that there should be no professional hesitancy linked to cultural and religious sensitivities and emphasis is always put on the priority of safeguarding the child(ren) (Finding Six).
18. There are sufficient resources available to address language barriers that may exist and impact on the authority's ability to safeguard a child / children (Finding Six).
19. GDPR concerns are never seen as a barrier to sharing information when it comes to safeguarding (Finding Seven).
20. "Joining the dots" and using flags to quickly and easily identify historic issues is embedded and understood to be critical when safeguarding concerns are raised (Finding Seven).

21. Complex case work, recognising that many children and the families they live with have increasingly complex lives and can often face multiple challenges (Finding Eight).
22. Given that Recommendation 15 of the LCSPR is a key element of the Terms of Reference for the Independent Review, the Committee further recommends that the Terms of Reference specifically include a review of the findings set out in paragraphs 6.38 to 6.41, with particular emphasis on paragraph 6.41 which states:

“On each occasion there were other factors at play including staff sickness, workload pressures and practitioner knowledge and experience. These factors were significant and needed a compassionate and sensitive response. However, this cannot be as an alternative to a system which both supports practitioners to be the best that they can be alongside structured audits and quality assurance activity that maintains a focus on the outcomes for children and their families.”

23. Provide reassurance and evidence that plans are underway to improve culture so that all staff working with families feel empowered to report safeguarding practice cross-department and across multiple agencies within the safeguarding partnership, with senior management supporting the curiosity needed to make connections and see the full picture (Finding Eight).

Section Two: Recommendations for inclusion in Council Leader’s letter to the Secretary of State and MPs

1. Finding One: The Department for Education should ensure concerns about changes in dress, even if there are potential concerns around culture, should not be a barrier to safeguarding children and young people. This should include working with key stakeholders, such as the Muslim Council of Britain and others as appropriate, to issue best practice guidance.
2. Finding Two: The Department for Education should ensure that the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill fully addresses the safeguarding concerns associated with all children who are not regularly attending a school or alternative setting, not just those who are registered as Electively Home Educated. This must include ensuring that they are regularly seen by someone from the Local Education Authority, their school, or a designated agency on a regular basis, and that when timelines are not met and systems and processes initiate appropriate escalation, including for children who are on a school roll but are identified as severely or persistently absent or EBSNA.

3. Finding Three: The Department for Education should, in rolling out the Families First Partnership Programme and strengthening Family Group Decision Making, also ensure that the model supports identification of coercive control / signs of domestic abuse to support safeguarding children as the priority and the “voice” of the child is heard.
4. Finding Four: No additional recommendations but must emphasise that it is vital that the potential for safeguarding risks not being recognised or addressed in private law proceedings is eradicated; it is critical that the threshold for request of Section 37 reports ensures that whenever there is any concern whatsoever about the welfare of the child / children one is requested and Section 7 report requests are only made where there are no concerns and no history.
5. Finding Six: The Department for Education should ensure that the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill is clear, that concerns regarding cultural and religious sensitivities should never be a barrier to safeguarding a child, and professional curiosity should be encouraged to look beyond these sensitivities to assess the risks and support their professional judgement.
6. Finding Seven: The Department for Education should ensure that the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill is clear that concerns regarding GDPR and data sharing should never be a barrier to safeguarding a child, and professional curiosity should be encouraged along with in joining dots within families and communities.

Catherine Powell, Chairman - Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee

Background papers

[Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review](#)

[Minutes of December 2025 Council meeting](#)

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