

MINUTES of the meeting of the **CHILDREN, FAMILIES, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE SELECT COMMITTEE** held at 1.00 pm on 15 December 2025 at Council Chamber, Woodhatch Place, 11 Cockshot Hill, Reigate, Surrey, RH2 8EF.

These minutes are subject to confirmation by the Committee at its meeting on Thursday, 26 February 2026.

Elected Members:

- * Catherine Powell (Chairman)
- * Jeremy Webster (Vice-Chairman)
- v Chris Townsend (Vice-Chairman)
- Fiona White
- * Jonathan Essex
- Rachael Lake BEM
- * Liz Townsend
- * Ashley Tilling
- * Bernie Muir
- v John O'Reilly
- * Robert Hughes
- * Lance Spencer

Co-opted Members:

Mr Alex Tear, Diocesan Representative for the Anglican Church, Diocese of Guildford
Mrs Julie Oldroyd, Diocesan Representative for the Catholic Church

- * *present*
- v *present, virtual*

46/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS [Item 1]

Apologies were received from Councillor Fiona White (substituted by Councillor Lance Spencer) and Mrs Julie Oldroyd.

Councillors John O'Reilly and Chris Townsend were unable to attend in person but participated virtually.

47/25 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST [Item 2]

There were no declarations of interest.

48/25 SARA SHARIF CHILD SAFEGUARDING PRACTICE REVIEW [Item 3]

Witnesses

Tim Oliver, Leader of the Council
Jonathan Hulley, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning
Helyn Clack, Deputy Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning

Clare Curran, Deputy Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning

Terence Herbert, Chief Executive Officer

Rachael Wardell, Executive Director for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning

Matt Ansell, Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding

Julia Katherine, Director for Education and Lifelong Learning

Patricia Denney, Director for Quality Practice, Relationships and Support (QPRS)

Asmat Hussain, Director for Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer)

Key Lines of Discussion

1. The Chairman of the Select Committee expressed deep regret over the findings of the Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPR) into Sara Sharif's murder, which revealed serious institutional failures across the safeguarding partnership, including Surrey County Council, and concluded there had been multiple missed opportunities to protect Sara. The Chair emphasised that the committee's role was scrutiny, with the aim of supporting cultural and systemic changes strengthening child protection in Surrey; it was not reinvestigation or blame. The Committee would make recommendations for the areas to include in both the Terms of Reference for a review by independent expert Jenny Coles and a letter to the Secretary of State and local MPs prompting urgent national action.
2. The Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning welcomed the extraordinary meeting, noting it followed a unanimously agreed cross-party motion. He explained a SCC action plan had been drafted and will be integrated into the Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership's (SSCP) overarching action plan before being shared. The SSCP oversees multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and the Directorate would continue to engage with it. He described the LCSPR as thorough and fair, highlighting institutional challenges and human factors in decision-making. He noted Ofsted had since graded children's social services as Good, and work was ongoing to strengthen multi-agency decision-making, oversight of elective home education, and quality assurance.
3. The Executive Director for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning explained service improvements in Surrey's children's social care were driven by a general need to raise service standards, not solely by Sara's case, although further steps were taken immediately after the tragedy to strengthen safeguarding practices in partnership with other agencies. Social care involvement with Sara's family occurred from before her birth until 2017, and briefly in 2019, at which time service quality was poor: rated Inadequate in 2014 and again in 2018. By 2022, Ofsted judged the service as Requires improvement and lifted Department for Education intervention. In March 2023, the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) focused on early help and the Children's Single Point of Access (C-SPA), around the time of renewed contact with Sara's family. Improvements suggested by JTAI were implemented immediately, but sadly too late for Sara. Following her murder in August 2023, Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership (SSCP) conducted a rapid review that identified urgent actions,

especially around elective home education. Actions included policy reviews, prioritising face-to-face visits for vulnerable children, additional resources, and staff training. Ofsted's 2025 ILACS inspection report noted leaders' commitment to learning, implementing actions, and supporting staff during media scrutiny. In response to the LCSPR, the SSCP action plan includes clear sponsors, owners, and timeframes for all recommendations and is due to be formally reviewed in February 2026. The Executive Director concluded that when a child "slips through the cracks," it is not due to systemic collapse but rare circumstances aligning. Their goal was not only to address specific findings from the LCSPR and rapid review, but to reduce opportunities for errors across the entire system.

4. A Member asked about actions taken to ensure the Children's Single Point of Access (C-SPA) – the "front door" to Surrey's Children's Services, where referrals are received – is adequately staffed during periods of high demand, such as the end of term. The Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding reported that the C-SPA increased resources between 2023 to 2024 and has continued to transition from agency staff to permanent social workers. The Service used referral data, about 5,000 contacts per month, to identify peaks and troughs and reallocate resources with partner agencies to address peak periods. A board set up in 2023, which has good engagement from schools, probation, police, health and the voluntary sector, has driven improvements within the C-SPA. Different approaches to working were implemented in busy times before Easter and summer holidays. C-SPA had become more proactive, holding open events for schools to keep lines of communication open, and providing feedback on quality of referrals.
5. A Member asked how the Council ensures frontline staff challenge implausible parental narratives. The Executive Director noted that the report did not suggest staff were accepting of implausible narratives but highlighted the challenge when plausible parental narratives concealed issues. The Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding reported a great deal of professional curiosity deployed on a daily basis and experienced team managers being available to talk to. Improvements since 2023 were also said to include stronger oversight and audit processes and enhanced partnership working. Capacity had increased at both senior and practitioner levels, with calls to the consultation line always taken by an experienced social worker.
6. The Chairman asked about whether recent improvements in the triangulation of information would address cross-boundary issues, particularly in light of local government reorganisation dividing the county into two areas. The Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding noted that cross-boundary issues remained a challenge as accurate information from other authorities is essential. He said there was now a C-SPA management focus on prioritising proper triangulation of information over speed. Although timeliness is still considered important, it is not prioritised over requesting further details if information is incomplete. Asked how triangulation and data robustness are monitored, the Director informed Members of monthly audits that review management decisions and focus on areas of

potential vulnerability. It was noted that motivational interview training had been provided to C-SPA staff which supported them to be more inquiring. Revised paperwork was said to support staff in gathering informal information, such as hunches.

7. A Member asked about the support provided to social work practitioners, beyond supervision, to help them manage the psychological impact of distressing circumstances involving harm to children. The Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding reported that support for social work practitioners begins with pre-boarding and onboarding, induction packs, and guidance for managers. Staff were said to have access to approximately 100 training courses, monthly bulletins, an online practitioner hub, and one-to-one support. Newly qualified social workers receive a structured induction, protected caseloads, and tailored support, while all staff benefit from mentoring, coaching, and career progression pathways. Group supervision, team development days, and corporate initiatives such as wellbeing hubs and workplace adjustments were also noted as measures supporting staff wellbeing.
8. A question was asked about whether the missed opportunities to protect Sara from harm were considered to be mainly due to failures of judgement, systems, capacity, culture, or supervision, and which element(s) carried the highest risk currently. The Executive Director noted that past issues reflected failures in all those elements, reflecting the inadequacy of the service at that time, although the review also observed some examples of strong practice, even in that period. The decision-making issues in the C-SPA during 2023 were due to the organisational structures in place and the staffing availability, which have both been addressed since the JTAI. It was reported that incorrect advice on elective home education was an individual error compounded by poor supervision and has now been corrected. Staff turnover was identified as the highest current risk, as it prevents the embedding of good practice and sustaining of improvements. The Director for Education and Lifelong Learning added that staffing in elective home education had doubled since 2023 to 8FTE, and the 2025 restructure had strengthened supervision and oversight by creating a Children Not In School team. Asked if staff turnover had contributed to the events under review, the Executive Director explained that it was not identified as a particular issue by the review, nevertheless staff turnover was now considerably lower than in 2023. The Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding said permanent social workers now make up 74% of the workforce, compared to below 50% in 2023, and retention had improved. Staff were said to stay longer due to strong support and professional training delivered through the Social Work Academy, which is highly valued by staff.
9. A Member asked if current budgets allowed for the increased volume of visits, checks, training, and audits recommended by the review. The Executive Director explained recommendations would affect the focus and timing of visits, checks, and audits rather than their volume, and the Council expects to deliver these within existing budgets. Changes in volume were said to be linked to demand pressures, which are

monitored and managed adaptively, with additional capacity such as elective home education officers already embedded. The Council had been notified of 2,673 children currently being electively home educated. The Director for Education and Lifelong Learning noted that current legislation requires the Council to offer annual visits, although families are not required to accept. Visits are offered at deregistration, within six to eight weeks, and annually. In the previous year, 34% took up the offer of a visit, 28% agreed but did not attend, and 38% declined. Safeguarding concerns are followed up with social care, following established safeguarding processes. Police do not become involved when parents refuse visits unless safeguarding risks require intervention. A new Bill is expected to introduce a duty for a register and mandatory visits. Any new duties were said to be treated as a new burden and as such should be accompanied by additional funding.

10. The Chairman asked about whether the current Liquidlogic IT system ensures full family visibility and allows quick access to family mapping under time pressure. The Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding reported that the system relies on individual input to ensure it is up-to-date, but provides whole-family visibility and connects relationships for children. Social workers are expected to complete a genogram as part of the child and family assessment, which offers a pictorial view of family relationships. The system was said to allow quick and easy access to family mapping, even under time pressure, and audits were reported to regularly check compliance with this requirement.
11. Members asked about protocols in place to ensure historic incidents are highlighted during new contacts or referrals, and about changes being made to enable earlier and more assertive intervention in known domestic abuse cases. The Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding reported that the Service has introduced the Safer Together Programme to improve responses to domestic abuse and coercive control, with a shift towards holding perpetrators accountable. The family safeguarding model includes adult practitioners trained in domestic abuse supporting the social workers in the children's social work teams and assessing risk. Domestic abuse remains the highest category of referrals into the front door, and the Safeguarding Executive has confirmed the programme's roll-out and future funding, with impact monitored by a national organisation. The Director for Quality Practice, Relationships and Support (QPRS) added that training on the Safer Together Programme will be rolled out to all social work staff and Family Group Conference (FGC) coordinators, who work with families to create plans and ensure transparency about concerns such as coercive control and domestic abuse. It was noted that any plan presented to the local authority would not be accepted if considered unsafe.
12. A Member asked about how the User Voice and Participation Team supports children to raise their voice, and whether children are aware of this avenue and can access it easily. The Director for QPRS reported that the User Voice and Participation Team sits within the Quality, Performance and Review Service and offers various ways to gather children's views in child in need, child protection, and looked-

after situations. The Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding said social workers are expected to see and speak to children alone during assessment and throughout child in need and child protection work, and this is audited regularly.

13. The Chairman asked about the steps taken to ensure that the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is not seen as a barrier to safeguarding, and how concerns raised in meetings should be escalated. The Director for Family Resilience and Safeguarding reported that GDPR should not prevent safeguarding and that professionals are expected to share information if they are concerned about a child. The Council was said to run open events to explain GDPR and parental consent, including circumstances where obtaining consent is not appropriate. Concerns raised in meetings should follow the FAST escalation process, which is designed to resolve issues quickly and reach senior level within a week.
14. A Member asked about the support provided to workers to overcome cultural barriers. The Director for QPRS reported that staff receive a wide range of support and training, with particular emphasis on cultural competence. The Social Work Academy delivers training on working with families from diverse backgrounds, identifying and challenging behaviours, and understanding family culture while addressing harmful practices.
15. The Chairman asked if any additional recommendations to the Secretary of State regarding supervision orders should be added beyond those included in the review. The Executive Director said the review had drawn on all available evidence, including material not referenced in the published document for confidentiality reasons. Oversight was provided by a multi-agency panel, and recommendations were shaped through advice from the national panel to ensure they were appropriate and effective, therefore no additional recommendations were being sought.

Recommendations for the Independent Review Terms of Reference

RESOLVED, That 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).

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.

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.

49/25 DATE OF THE NEXT SCHEDULED MEETING [Item 4]

The Committee noted its next meeting would be held on Thursday, 26 February 2026.

Meeting ended at: 3.02 pm

Addendum

AGENDA ITEM 3 SARA SHARIF LOCAL CHILD SAFEGUARDING PRACTICE REVIEW

Subsequent to the meeting, the Committee amended its first recommendation for inclusion in Council Leader's letter to the Secretary of State and MPs, to the following:

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 appropriate key stakeholders to issue best practice guidance.

Chairman