



Open Report on behalf of Heather Sandy, Executive Director - Children's Services

Report to: **Lincolnshire Schools' Forum**

Date: **29 June 2023**

Subject: **Portage Service**

Summary:

The purpose of the report is to:

1. Provide an overview of the findings from the review of the Portage Service.
2. Seek support from the Lincolnshire Schools' Forum on the recommendation to re-commission a Portage Service and to continue its funding from the High Needs Block of the Designated Schools Grant.

Recommendation(s):

Lincolnshire Schools' Forum is asked to note the content of the report and to support the recommendation to the Executive Councillor for Children's Services, Community Safety, Procurement and Migration to continue to fund a Portage Service from the High Needs Block of the Designated Schools Grant.

Background

Since the 1990s, Lincolnshire County Council's Children's Services has commissioned a Portage Service; provided by Lincolnshire special schools who use their expertise to provide Portage support and prepare eligible children for school.

The Portage Service is predominantly a home visiting support service for children in their early years up to the age of five years with suspected or diagnosed special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and their families, where there is a learning difficulty, developmental delay or physical difficulty that is impacting on the child's educational development.

The Portage Service is delivered during term time and since 2015 has been commissioned through Memorandum of Understandings¹ (MOUs); these MOUs are renewed annually and currently include the following special schools:

¹ MOUs support close partnership working with schools and are agreements that formally set out what each partner is delivering, committed resources, governance and expected benefits. Whilst not legally binding the MOUs are statements of serious intent that are agreed voluntarily.

Special School Provider	Coverage	Annual Funding Allocation
Lincoln St Christopher's School	Lincoln	£35,258
Sandon School (Grantham)	North Kesteven	£35,258
Willoughby Academy (Bourne)	South Kesteven	£35,258
St Bernard's School (Louth)	East and West Lindsey	£70,516*
St Lawrence School (Horncastle)	East Lindsey	£35,258
Eresby Special School (Spilsby)	East Lindsey	£35,258
Boston Endeavour Academy (previously known as Boston John Fielding Special School)	Boston	£35,258
Tulip Academy (Spalding) (previously known as The Garth School)	South Holland	£35,258

*Higher funding as covers both East and West Lindsey.

The current combined overall annual value for Portage is currently £317,322 which is funded through the High Needs Block of the Designated schools Grant (DSG). The current MOU arrangements will end on 31st March 2024 and a review of the Portage Service has been undertaken in view of changes to other relevant early years services and new national and local priorities, e.g. Family Hubs, to determine how a Portage Service may best work in the future.

A review of the Portage Service has concluded and the Portage Service's interdependencies with other relevant services that support the educational development of children in their early years has also been considered. These include:

- The Health Visiting Service within the Children's Health Service 0-19;
- The Best Start Lincolnshire: Early Years and Family Service (which has recently been re-commissioned and includes greater partnership working with other relevant services to ensure a more inclusive offer for all children in their early years with SEND within children's centres / Family Hubs and wider community venues), and,
- Family Hubs (a government funded initiative to provide high-quality, joined up, whole family support services within local communities with a strong focus on a start for life offer).

Statutory Duties

The Council has no explicit statutory duty to provide a Portage Service, however, the Portage Service supports the Council's statutory duties outlined below:

- **Section 17 (1)** of the **Children Act 1989** imposes a general duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area, including providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs.
- The **Children and Families Act 2014** sets out the general principles and duties on local authorities and health bodies to work in partnership when commissioning provision for children, including children with SEND. This includes supporting children with their development and helping them to achieve the "best possible educational and other outcomes". **Part 3** of the Children and Families Act 2014 specifically relates to children with SEND.
- The **Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years, 2015** sets out the legal requirements that must be followed and explains the duties of

local authorities, health bodies, schools and colleges under Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014.

- **Section 5.13** states that some children need support for SEN and disabilities at home or in informal settings before, or as well as, the support they receive from an early years provider.
- **Section 5.16** identifies that support can take a number of forms, including home-based programmes such as Portage.
- The **Equality Act 2010** sets out the statutory duties for all public bodies to ensure they play their part in making society fairer by tackling discrimination, equality of opportunity for all and fostering good relations.
- **Section 3(2) of the Childcare Act 2006** sets out the Local Authority’s statutory responsibilities to make arrangements to secure integrated early childhood services and maximise the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young children. In addition, **Section 1** of the Childcare act 2006, places a duty on local authorities to improve the wellbeing of young children in their area and reduce inequalities between them.

Needs Summary

- The Lincolnshire early years population is decreasing, however, of this population there is a rise in children with an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) (6% in 2021; above the national average of 4%).
- There are high numbers of children presenting with social, language and communication needs (SLCN) (SLCN is the third highest primary need for Lincolnshire children with SEND).
- 207 children aged 0 to six were referred by Health Visitors for Speech and Language Therapy (SALT) (July to September 2022). There was a 64% increase in referrals to SALT in 2022 (5,254 referrals) compared to 2019. 76% of referrals were for children aged 0 to five years.
- Of Lincolnshire’s population 6.5% live in the 10% most deprived areas in the county.
- Lincolnshire is below the regional and national averages for Good Level of Development (GLD) of all foundation stage pupils, including pupils with SEN.

		2016	2017	2018	2019
GLD Foundation Stage FSM Eligible Children	England	54%	56%	56.6%	57%
	East Midlands	52%	52%	54%	55%
	Statistical Neighbours	52.6%	52.8%	54.2%	53%
	Lincolnshire	54.1%	52.8%	52.4%	56%
	GLD Foundation Stage All Other Children	England	72%	73%	73.8%
	East Midlands	67.6%	68.8%	69.8%	70.3%
	Statistical Neighbours	71.8%	72.6%	73.1%	74%
	Lincolnshire	73.3%	72.6%	72.1%	72%
GLD Foundation Stage SEN Pupils without EHCP	England	26%	27%	28%	29%
	East Midlands	26%	26%	26%	26%
	Statistical Neighbours	26.56%	26%	26%	26.89%
	Lincolnshire	27%	25%	24%	25%
GLD Foundation Stage SEN	England	4%	4%	5%	5%

Pupils with an EHCP	East Midlands	4%	3%	4%	4%
	Statistical Neighbours	7.25%	5.4%	4.56%	4.11%
	Lincolnshire	6%	Not available	5%	2%

*Performance: red- worse than all or majority of comparators, amber- on a par with all or majority comparators, green- better than all or majority of comparators.

Evidence Summary

- Evidence is clear that good parenting during the first 1001 days of a child's life can have a significant positive impact on their life chances.
- It is important to increase parents knowledge of the importance of early childhood development.
- Children doing less well at age five are more likely to be excluded from school.
- Integrated working between professionals has many benefits including reducing the word gap for children, improving cognitive development, physical health and behaviour, supporting parent/child interactions and reducing duplication and costs.
- Co-ordinated multi-agency early support for young children with SEND, and their parents/carers, can improve their outcomes and life chances.

Portage Service Performance September 2021 to end of July 2022

- The intention of the Service is to build the resilience and skills of families, empowering them to meet their child's needs without the need for more specialist provision.
- Referrals go directly to each of the different Portage providers based on where the child lives and come from a wide range of professionals. There are different referral forms for each of the Portage providers.
- All providers follow the National Portage Association² (NPA) framework (recommends that a full-time Portage Worker holds a maximum caseload of c. 16 to 17 cases at any one time). Some Portage Workers in Lincolnshire are trained to NPA standards and offer accredited NPA workshops to other early years professionals and settings (not part of the MOU arrangement and is a traded offer from those providers that have NPA trained Portage Workers).
- There is an inequity of provision across the county, with variations of delivery across the providers. Since 2021 the MOU has sought to standardise the offer as far as possible.
- Demand for Portage varies across the county, but in areas where demand is high, caseloads are above the NPA recommendation for Portage Workers.

School	Coverage	Average FTE of Portage Worker	Number of referrals carried over from end of 20/21 AY	Number on caseload at start of 21/22 AY
Boston Endeavour Academy	Boston	1 FTE	0	11
Eresby Special School	East Lindsey	1 FTE	4	26

² The National Portage Association is a registered national charity which supports Portage services, families and professionals and provides a Code of Practice and framework for Portage services to work to. The NPA framework states that each home visit must include structured teaching for the child with clear goals and time to support the parent/carer.

Tulip Academy	South Holland	1 FTE	10	22
Lincoln St Christopher's	Lincoln	1 FTE	39	22
Sandon Special School	North Kesteven	1 FTE	5	20
St Bernard's School	East and West Lindsey	1 FTE	23 (7 for East Lindsey and 16 for West Lindsey)	41 (24 for East Lindsey and 17 for West Lindsey)
St Lawrence School	East Lindsey	1 FTE	3	12
Willoughby Academy	South Kesteven	0.7 FTE*	13	17
Total			97	171

*0.3 FTE is attributed to portage coordination support through senior leadership within the academy.

Red – more than the recommended NPA caseload, amber – on par with recommended NPA caseload, green – less than the recommended NPA caseload

- Across all Portage providers, referrals between 2018/19 and 2021/22 academic years were as follows:

2018/19 AY	2019/20 AY	2020/21 AY	2021/22 AY
213	189 (-11%)	284 (+50%)	270 (-4%)
% Accepted n/a	94% accepted	82% accepted	94% accepted

- Suspected autism, social communication and interaction and suspected global developmental delay are the top three reasons for referral.
- There is an inequity of provision across the county; for some families where demand is high, they are having to wait six months or more before Portage support commences. In Lincoln, where demand is the highest, a small number of children did not receive any support before commencing nursery or their Reception Year.
- More children who are in receipt of Portage support are being discharged sooner, with the large majority accessing mainstream school, nursery settings or no further support required.
- There is an inequity of service provision across the county, with some children and their families offered weekly visits whereas others are offered fortnightly.
- The total number of children supported, on the caseload and still waiting for support at the end of the 2021/22 academic year differs in each area of the county, depending upon demand.

School	Coverage	Total number of children supported	Number on caseload at end of 21/22 AY	Number of referrals waiting for support as at end of AY
Boston Endeavour Academy	Boston	26	7	3
Eresby Special School	East Lindsey	31	17	7
Tulip Academy	South Holland	45	23	12
Lincoln St Christopher's	Lincoln	65	21	50
Sandon Special School	North Kesteven	79	23	1
St Bernard's School	East and West Lindsey	81 (36 for East Lindsey and 45 for West Lindsey)	35 (17 for East Lindsey and 18 for West Lindsey)	4
St Lawrence School	East Lindsey	36	13	6
Willoughby Academy	South Kesteven	36	14	2
Total		399*	153*	85

*NB: children and families can be added onto the caseload throughout an academic year.

- All providers are rated at least good for performance.
- 48% of children on the caseload were ages three to five years, all of whom will have been entitled to access their three and four year old early years entitlement funding.

Stakeholder Engagement

- Case mapping and stakeholder engagement identified that service users that accessed the Service highly valued the support provided, especially families who found it difficult to travel.
- There were some examples of positive multi-agency working.
- There was evidence of some inappropriate referrals, including referrals where there was not an identified SEND need. There needs to be a more integrated approach between the Portage Service and the Council's in-house and commissioned early years services to ensure there is a more seamless pathway between services for families.
- Evidence of inconsistencies across the different providers in the processing of referrals, meaning waiting times varied across Portage providers; some families who really needed support were not able to access it in a timely manner.
- There were some inconsistencies in the type and level of support provided, especially where there were high levels of demand for Portage Support. There was some evidence of holding onto cases, even though ongoing support was not needed.
- Many families felt their child was able to engage better with support because this was being provided in the home.
- Many families who were able to access support felt that Portage had improved their child's development and had supported families to better understand their child's developmental needs and how to support their needs within the home.
- Families commented that Portage Workers were one of the few consistent professionals within their lives.
- A stronger and more inclusive offer within the local community, e.g. children's centres/Family Hubs is needed so that more young children with SEND where there is a learning difficulty, developmental delay or physical difficulty, and their families, can be supported sooner with their educational development, thus reducing the need for home visiting support.
- More partnership working is needed between any future Portage Service, the Council's early years teams and commissioned early years services, e.g. Best Start Lincolnshire.
- The need for a more equitable Portage offer across the county was highlighted by a wide range of professionals.
- There is a perceived duplication between the Portage Worker role and some other roles within the Council, e.g. Early Years Specialist Teachers.

Recommended Model

A future Portage Service would benefit from being led by a single provider to deliver a consistent countywide service that ensures staffing and funding resources are needs-led with a single point of access for referrals.

The Service should continue to be delivered during term time, and continue to support children in their early years up to the age of five years with suspected or diagnosed special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and their families, where there is a learning difficulty, developmental delay or physical difficulty that is impacting on the child's educational development.

There will be a strong emphasis on Portage capacity being aligned to areas of demand; this may mean more workers in some areas and less in others, but this will ensure an equitable offer for all eligible families across the county.

The Service should continue to align to the NPA Code of Practice (child-led play, family focused; structured teaching) in relation to the delivery of home-based support and criteria for accessing Portage support. The Service will also be better aligned to local priorities and will be expected to adapt its offer accordingly as relevant priorities for the Council develop and embed, e.g. Early Childhood Strategy, Family Hubs.

The Service will be expected to work in partnership with the Council to help develop pathways with other in-house and commissioned services to ensure eligible children, and their parents/carers, access the right support, at the right time and by the right professional.

Referrals will be via a single point of access managed by the lead provider, with robust consistent criteria for referral and robust partnership working between the Service, Health Visitors and other relevant services (where appropriate) to ensure eligible children receive the right support at the right time and by the right professional.

Group Support/Workshops/One to One support

Group support/workshops and bookable one to one support will be a strong focus for the Service offer delivered in partnership with the Best Start Lincolnshire: Early Years and Family Service and Early Support Learning Provision (where appropriate) within local children's centres/Family Hubs or other outreach venues.

Portage Home-based Support

Portage home-based support will remain a core offer but will only be accessible where there is an identified need and once the group support and workshop offer has been fully exhausted (unless there is an escalation of need) and/or where a family is unable to travel to a local children's centre or other community venue to access one to one support sooner. Home-based support will follow the NPA Framework and will be time-limited of no more than six months, with a clear exit strategy agreed with families and other relevant professionals. For children in receipt of active home-based support either transitioning into early years settings or their Reception Year, the Portage Worker will offer in setting transition support to an allocated key worker within the setting, alongside the Early Years Specialist Teacher. Where a child is transitioning into their Reception Year this may also include the Autism and Learning Difficulties (ALD) Service (also known as Working Together Team) where relevant and appropriate. Transition support will only be

available for a maximum of six weeks as part of the exit strategy and the frequency of support will be dependent on the needs of the child.

Funding recommendations for a future Portage Service offer

The current funding for a Portage Service is £317,322 per annum and staffing currently includes 8.7FTE of Portage Workers (9 workers) who are employed by the individual Portage providers on different salary scales and different terms and conditions of employment. Funding also includes leadership, management and administration costs associated with Portage. As at end of August 2022, salary costs accounted for approximately 82% of the overall value of the MOUs across all providers.

The average cost for mid-band EHCPs in mainstream schools in 2022/23 was £4,694 and the average cost of a special school placement was £17,265. As evidenced from the IMPOWER review, earlier support for families with young children may prevent, reduce or delay the need for an EHCP.

The assumption for the financial costings for the future recommended Portage Service model has been based on the current cost of the provision, including current pay scales of Portage Workers, but taking into consideration increasing staffing costs and the following:

- The Council’s current Portage Worker job description is evaluated at a GLEA Grade 5 (c. £29,374 to £32,932 full time equivalent including national insurance and pension).
- Portage Worker salary costs currently range from a GLEA Grade 5 to a Grade 8 or equivalent depending on the length of service of the workers (GLEA equivalent £29,374 to £44,656 full time equivalent including national insurance and pension).
- The increase in NJC Local Government pay scales and staffing costs (staffing costs are anticipated to increase to 87% of the overall current funding).
- The Government’s consultation on the fixed 52-week reference point (if this is implemented current staffing costs could increase to 91% of the current funding),
- Some Portage providers are anticipating a small cost pressure of c.£5,000 at the end of August 2023 (work is taking place with the relevant providers to determine whether efficiency savings can be made in order to reduce the cost pressure).
- The need for management and non-staffing costs to be kept to a minimum in order to ensure as much of the budget as possible is attributed to delivery costs.
- To deliver the recommended model there will need to be a level of Portage co-ordination in addition to sufficient Portage Workers to deliver the model.

Whilst staffing models would be at the discretion of the successful provider, it is anticipated that to deliver the new model would initially require 8 Portage Workers and 1 Portage Coordinator, working full-time, term-time only. To provide the recommended model for a future Portage Service the anticipated required funding for each financial year is as follows:

Annual Cost at 39 weeks a year if no change to the annual leave entitlement calculation	Annual cost at 39 weeks a year if Government’s 52-week reference point implemented for part year workers
£356,015	£362,750

Although there is a potential cost pressure of £38,693 per annum (if no change to the annual leave entitlement calculation) against the current funding for Portage, the recommended model is anticipated to improve pathways between relevant services and ensure more children in their early years, and their families, access the right support, at the right time and by the right professional. Thus ensuring only eligible children, and their families, who really need Portage home-visiting support are able to access it, which in time should reduce demand on the Portage Service. Furthermore, there is a need for an equity of pay across all of the Portage Workers, and therefore as vacancies arise from Portage Workers who are currently on a higher pay grade there will be an expectation that vacancies will be reviewed with the Council as the recommended model is embedded and if there is a need to recruit to vacancies, these are advertised and filled at a Grade 5 or equivalent. Therefore, in time, it is anticipated that the cost pressure against the current funding for Portage would reduce as the recommended model is developed and fully embedded.

Conclusion

The Portage Service is a highly regarded Service by those who are able to access it and there is a high demand for Portage support. The financial challenges facing the Council in its management of High Needs budgets mean it is imperative that the right support offer is provided to children in their early years in order to ensure their educational development needs are met reducing the need for more specialist provision. It is anticipated that the recommended future model for a Portage Service will achieve this through the robust partnership working with Health Visitors, the Best Start Lincolnshire: Early Years and Family Service and other relevant services, thus reducing escalating needs and delivering a cost avoidance.

Although the recommended budget for a future Portage Service is higher than the current budget available for Portage, it is anticipated that in time, there will be a reduced demand on the Portage Service home visiting support and more children in their early years will have their educational development needs met through services available within local children's centres/Family Hubs and other community outreach venues.

A recommendation is being made to the Executive Councillor for Children's Services, Community Safety, Procurement and Migration to re-commission a one-provider led Portage Service via an expression of interest process to Lincolnshire special schools within the Lincolnshire SEND Alliance. This could be either an expression of interest from one single provider delivering Portage or a partnership bid with a collaboration of schools working together to deliver Portage, with one provider acting as the lead provider. This will ensure that special school expertise can continue to be utilised to provide Portage support for eligible children in their early years up to the age of five years, and their families, and be ready for school. This will also mean that there can be a strong emphasis on Portage capacity being aligned to areas of demand, ensuring an equitable offer for all eligible families across the county as well as also ensuring eligible young children, and their parents/carers, access the right support.

This would be via a Public-to-Public arrangement via a one provider-led model either through an MOU (if a local authority maintained special school) or a Public-to-Public Collaboration Agreement (if an academy). Public-to-Public Collaboration Agreements are allowed for under Regulation 12(7) of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and as such do not need to be subject to a competitive procurement process. The Agreement would be in place from 1st April 2024 for three years initially, with the option to extend for a further two years.

Lincolnshire Schools' Forum is asked to support the recommendation to continue to fund a Portage Service from the High Needs Block of the DSG. The key findings from the review to support the recommendation are summarised below.

Consultation

a) Risks and Impact Analysis

Despite significant financial pressure on the High Needs Block of the Designated Schools Grant, the evidence is clear that not to re-commission a Portage Service would likely result in a significant gap in provision and put more pressure on existing services, as well as increased pressure on the High Needs Block of the DSG. In addition, it would likely mean:

- A longer term impact on specialist provision due to the lack of available provision for young children with special educational needs and their families.
- A higher risk of increased pressure on the Council (reputational and financial) in relation to meeting some of its statutory duties outlined in this report.
- Not supporting national and local priorities across health, education and social care to ensure even more young children, and their families, access the right support at the right time.
- More young children being excluded from school due to the risk of them doing less well at age five.
- Even higher numbers of young children starting school with SLCN, putting more pressure on schools and speech and language therapy services in order to meet the needs of young children with SLCN.

Given that the recommended model for a future Portage Service offer is not to reduce the Portage Service offer and to have a greater collaboration between the Portage Service and other relevant services, it is not anticipated that there will be persons negatively impacted on with protected characteristics.

Background Papers

No background papers within Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972 were used in the preparation of this report.

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