

Contact Officer: Helen Kilroy

KIRKLEES COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

Friday 1st December 2023

Present: Councillor Andrew Cooper (Chair)
Councillor Richard Smith
Councillor Ebrahim Dockrat

In attendance: Kieran Lord, Service Director
Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director
Martin Wood, Head of Public Protection
Councillor Viv Kendrick
Councillor Elizabeth Reynolds
Councillor Elizabeth Smaje

Apologies: Councillor Ammar Anwar
Councillor John Lawson
Oliver Gibson (Co-Optee)

1 Membership of the Panel

Apologies were received from Councillor Anwar, Councillor Lawson and Oliver Gibson (Co-optee).

2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

That the minutes of the meeting on the 22nd September 2023 be approved at the next Panel meeting on the 26th January 2024.

3 Interests

No interests were declared.

4 Admission of the Public

All items were considered in public session.

5 Deputations/Petitions

No deputations or petitions were received.

6 Public Question Time

No questions were received from members of the public.

7 Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2023/24

The Panel considered the work programme and agenda plan for the 2023/24 municipal year.

RESOLVED

1. That the Work Programme and agenda plan for 2023/24 be noted.

Children's Scrutiny Panel - 1 December 2023

2. That a report on Post 16 Home to School Travel would be considered by the Panel in January 2024.

8 **Performance Data (Children's Services) - verbal update on highlights**

The Panel received a verbal update on the performance data for period ending September 2023, provided by Jo-Anne Sanders and Kieran Lord, Service Directors in Children's Services.

Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director for Learning and Early Support, highlighted the following key issues –

- Officers were focusing on school attendance and making improvements but it was acknowledged that some students found it harder than others to attend school and that schools and partners were working with pupils and parents to remove barriers by building trusting relationships and working together to put the right support in place
- Barriers to education was wide and complex and securing good attendance could not be seen in isolation and effective plans for improvement would involve closer interaction with schools and settings and efforts on curriculum, behaviour, bullying; special educational needs and pastoral support and wellbeing of youngsters were really key;
- Effort across teaching and non-teaching in schools, trust bodies, workers in the Local Authority and partner agencies were all coming together to help unlock the barriers
- Attendance did impact on academic outcomes and nationally overall absence rate of pupils not achieving grade 9 to 4 was over twice as high as those achieving grades 9 to 5, 8.8% nationally compared to 3.7% and 90% of young offenders have been persistently absent
- Kirklees have been assigned an Independent Education Advisor from the Department for Education who would spend 5 days with the Learning Service and Schools looking at what could be done to improve attendance and the first visit took place in November where Kirklees data was shared and how the Service was being measured within Kirklees
- Feeding back to the DfE on children who were classed as persistently absent and how to get a shared understanding around the more vulnerable groups; looking at trends in terms of illnesses and what could be done together with public health colleagues
- Engaging with children and families to instill good habits and routines from the start, working with the Council's youngest children as part of Families Together
- Take up for eligible 2 year olds of free early entitlement within early years settings was 80% as at September 2023, which was really positive and helped the Council to build strong relationships from the early stages which would have a positive impact on children's more formal schooling career
- In September 2023, absence in primary schools was 4% with an increase in October to 4.8%, secondary was 4.6% in September and an increase in October to 6.7%, the increase during September to October had been mirrored nationally and the half term holidays could often influence absences
- DfE were releasing fortnightly data showing school type and absence rates across the academic year – national figures showed 4.8% absence rates in state

Children's Scrutiny Panel - 1 December 2023

funded primary schools, 3.3% authorised absence, 1.5% unauthorised absence, state funded secondary schools was 3.8% and Kirklees 5.6%

- Children who were persistently absent was a safeguarding concern and a forensic look was being undertaken around attendance which involved other partners such as virtual school
- More stable picture on exclusions and suspensions, but this was being closely monitored and there were concerns for those with Special Needs and an Education Health and Care Plan
- A dialogue had commenced with Secondary and Primary Schools on attendance underpinned by the data, a further session was planned with Secondary Headteachers to share data, intelligence and good practice

The Panel noted a previous report which had been considered giving an update on early attainment outcomes and Jo-Anne Sanders advised that a further report would be brought back to the Panel in the new year prior to Cabinet, to celebrate the achievements of youngsters.

In response to a question asking why the absence figures had significantly increased from 2021 to 2022 both nationally and locally, Jo-Anne Sanders advised that as a result of the pandemic, the most vulnerable had to be educated at home and since then schools had to re-establish routines with young people and were working constructively with parents to establish expectations and routines in a supportive way, including the health and wellbeing of youngsters. The Panel was advised that the Department for Education had published information regarding the disruption to education that had been seen as a nation as a result of the pandemic. Jo-Anne Sanders further explained that strong relationships needed to be fostered between families and schools to improve attendance.

In response to a question from the panel asking what work would be undertaken across the school system to ensure that exclusions would continue to reduce throughout the year, Jo-Anne Sanders advised that focused conversations had taken place at the Education and Learning Partnership Board and that even though data looked more promising in terms of suspensions, further work would be carried out to assess what was being done differently and what was suitable in terms of provision, for example finding an alternative route to avoid exclusion. The Panel was informed that secondary and primary headteachers were focussed on sharing best practice and that there would be an opportunity to celebrate some of the successes and offer support to practitioners from outreach teams.

Kieran Lord, Service Director for Learning and Early Support, highlighted the following key issues –

- Increase in open social care cases to 2219, monthly average was 2365
- Rate of children in need was lower than statistical neighbours in England and lower than 12 month average so progress was being made
- Assurance was given that Caseloads were being looked at on a weekly basis by Managers and Senior Leaders to make sure the levels for individual social workers was safe and that we were getting the best outcomes for children
- Social Worker caseloads were currently reported at 19.2 which varied depending on the stage of career and factors such as multiple children within families

Children's Scrutiny Panel - 1 December 2023

- Contacts within one working day was currently at 70% and there was management oversight over all these children to ensure they were safe
- Small increase to 24% in re-referrals of children referred back into the service and audit assurance work had been undertaken to ensure that cases were closed if appropriate in the first instance
- Assessment performance was up to 71% and this time last year was 63% so positive trajectory
- Initial Child Protection Conference timeliness was at 91% at end of September and as of last week was at 100% due to a piece of work taking place across the directorates within social work teams and independent reviewing officers
- Number of children on Child Protection Plans had reduced to 495 and the service were capturing children correctly; seen a slight increase in children on plan for a second time but officers were confident that the visits to children were happening as quickly as they needed them
- Children looked after numbers had increased to 622 but had since reduced, this figure was highly variable and fluctuated dramatically depending on factors eg cases closed as reached 18 years old and multiple admissions, but the figure was far lower than our statistical and local neighbours, the service was trying to keep children with close family members and within environments close to home where possible before looking at other provision, eg foster carers, residential facilities
- Increasing residential options and recently re-opened a children's home; in December hoping to open another 4 bedroomed Children's Home which would give the opportunity to place children in homes closer to home rather than placing out of area.

In response to a question from the Panel relating to the new residential homes and where they located in areas close to where they were needed, Kieran Lord advised that he could not give postcodes or addresses in a public meeting in order to protect the identities of children, but Kirklees was a diverse area in terms of demographic and had a mix of children's homes in built up and rural areas, some were located closer to schools and transport routes and some were further away with space for children who required less contact with inner city life, options were available to match the child with the right setting.

In response to a question from the Panel relating to looked after children and how much it would cost to look after a child in Kirklees or place out of area, Kieran Lord advised that the cost of care placements across the country had been in the national news in recent weeks and that some of the independent placements had experienced a cost increase of over 30%. The Panel was informed that within Kirklees the Council was paying for a number of external placements at under £6800 per week. In Kirklees, the cost was more expensive and was having a significant demand on the budget and the Service continued to invest in services at the earliest opportunity in terms of education and support to keep families together. Kieran Lord advised that they were maximising options for internal foster carers and that there had been a change in their demographic. The service made sure that they matched foster carers with the needs of children and ensured that the offer to foster carers was attractive with the right rates of pay and packages of support. The Panel was informed that Kirklees sometimes had to look at unregulated placements

Children's Scrutiny Panel - 1 December 2023

in the absence of legally regulated placements and the cost of these varied from £10,000 to £16,000 per week.

In response to a question from the Panel relating to risks and vulnerabilities and concerns around exploitation, Kieran Lord advised that the Service had a responsibility for this area. The Service had tightened the process for referrals and engagement with schools and the way the police were recording incidents. The Panel was informed that the Service was getting more of an opportunity to get the information about children to ensure they received the right service at the right time.

In response to a question relating to any areas of concern that the Panel needed to be made aware of, Kieran Lord advised that the Children's Service and partners were acutely aware of areas of concern. The Panel was informed that Kirklees was the greatest contributor to the West Yorkshire portal where information was shared regarding particular areas of concern so that resources could be targeted as required, for example youth service and intervention. Kieran Lord advised that additional information was available on this if required by the Panel.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the verbal updates on performance data be noted and Service Directors be thanked for their contributions.
- 2) That a report be considered by the Panel early in 2024 on Attainment Outcomes.

9 Pre-decision scrutiny - Cabinet decisions on the horizon

No items of pre-decision scrutiny on Cabinet decisions were reported.

10 Feedback from Panel Members on issues considered by Corporate Parenting Board

Councillor Kendrick advised that the last meeting of the Board was held on the 24th October 2023 and there had been issues around quoracy due to the numbers of Board Members joining the meeting online. The Panel was informed that on the 31st October 2023, Mark Redell came and talked about care leavers and the Corporate Parenting Board and advised on some key issues for the Board to address, one of which was to have future representation at the meetings from the police, health and decision makers as well as third sector and young people. Cllr Kendrick advised that it had been informally agreed to ascertain if Board Members could provide substitutes to ensure future meetings were quorate. The Panel was informed that feedback from Mark Redell would be given at a future meeting of the Board. Councillor Cooper advised that the next Board meeting would take place on Tuesday 5th December.

Kieran Lord advised that the Head of Service for Sufficiency, Joel Hanna, would be taking on responsibility for Corporate Parenting in Kirklees.

RESOLVED:

The Panel noted the updates from the Corporate Parenting Board and thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for their contributions.