

Contact Officer: Helen Kilroy

## KIRKLEES COUNCIL

### CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

**Tuesday 26th March 2024**

Present: Councillor Andrew Cooper (Chair)  
Councillor John Lawson  
Councillor Eric Firth  
Oliver Gibson, Co-optee

In attendance: Martin Wood, Head of Public Protection  
Russell Williams, Operational Manager, Public Protection  
Kieran Lord, Service Director (Resources, Improvements  
and Partnerships)  
Tom Brailsford, Strategic Director for Children and  
Families  
Rob Fordyce, Principal Social Worker  
Cllr Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Children's Service

Apologies: Councillor Paul Moore  
Councillor Richard Smith

**1 Membership of the Panel**

Apologies were received from Councillor Richard Smith.

**2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

That the minutes of the meetings held on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 2024 be approved as a correct record.

**3 Declaration of 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 Post 16 Transport Statement 2024-25**

The Panel considered a report giving an update on the proposed changes to Kirklees Council's Post 16 Transport Statement for 2024/25 presented by Russell Williams, Operational Manager, Public Protection.

Russell Williams highlighted the following key points from a presentation entitled "Post 16 Transport Statement" –

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- The Home to School Transport Team ensured compliance with statutory duties under the Education Act 1996 and statutory guidance, arranging home to school transport for all eligible children, in the main for students between the ages of 16 and 19.
- Pre and Post 16 Statutory Duties were different, for Pre 16 alternatives to physical transport could only be provided with parental consent.
- For Post 16 home to school transport a "Transport Statement" must be produced and published by 31<sup>st</sup> May each year, which must consider what assistance will be provided to help facilitate attendance at further education. This did not need to be physical transport and parental consent was not required.
- The total cost of the service was £12.1m in 2022/23.
- The Service was seeing significant year on year cost increases, with the cost of Pre 16 transport up 33% in 2022/23 from 2021/22, and Post 16 up 26% in the same period.
- This was due to a number of factors including an increase in demand and the number of Educational Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), the number of routes increasing (especially single taxi routes), increasing costs from suppliers, supply and demand issues and cost of living/operating costs rising.
- As a result, the service was undergoing a number of service transformations, with a review of the use of single taxis, a contract review, and consideration of an in-house fleet, as well as publication of the Post 16 Transport Statement.
- Proposed changes to Post 16 Passenger Travel included a move to policy where a personal travel payment was the default, moving away from physical transport except where Special Educational Need necessitated Council arranged transport.
- Personal Travel Payments would be banded, based on the distance from home to the educational setting. The banding was to be consulted upon.
- Consultation on the proposed changes took place between 14<sup>th</sup> November 2023 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023 through face to face and virtual drop-in sessions. 130 responses were received from parents of children using the transport, PCAN, the public, ward councillors, schools/colleges and governors.
- The main themes of the consultation were financial impact and impact on the family/parents.
- The proposed changes to policy were due to be considered by Cabinet on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2024 and if adopted, the new Post 16 Transport Statement would come into effect in September 2024.
- If adopted, the application procedure would need amending and communicating to families, and the process of application would change, causing a greater administrative burden initially which had been planned for with temporary resources.
- Other Local Authorities regionally and nationally had adopted or were looking to move towards adopting a similar model of a personal travel payment.

In response to a question from the Panel asking if the new system was working well in other Local Authorities and if there had been any follow-up, Russell Williams advised that Wokingham Council had introduced a similar policy and had also

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experienced concerns from parents over the financial implications, and experienced the initial administrative burden on the service, however the process was now working and they were continuing with the approach which had been in place for a few years now.

The Panel asked about how vulnerable children and young people would be safeguarded if parents were to change their child's mode of transport, especially when parents may be looking for the most financially viable options. Russell Williams acknowledged that this had been a concern that was highlighted during in the consultation and recognised that there was work to be done around the messaging on safeguarding. The Panel was informed that parents would have access to the same taxi drivers as the School Transport Team. Parents would be encouraged to use Kirklees licensed taxi drivers who were under the control of the Council's Licensing Service which was under the same Directorate as School Transport. Work had been undertaken to ensure that West Yorkshire licensed drivers had a unified convictions policy and training policy, so parents living on the border of Kirklees could have confidence in these West Yorkshire licensed drivers. Russell Williams reiterated that it was important to help parents understand the robust vetting and training procedures involved in the licensing of taxi drivers in the West Yorkshire region to offer them reassurance that their children would be safe in those vehicles. The Panel reiterated the importance of the safeguarding messages to parents and how essential it was to make sure parents fully understood how to help keep their children safe.

In response to a question from the Panel about parents being exposed to the risk of price hikes, for example, fuel increases, Russell Williams advised that the Council did not receive better terms from taxi operators than private individuals and added that Kirklees College were working with the School Transport Team to help parents co-ordinate the sharing of taxis and reduce costs. Within the policy significant discretion was given to Officers to provide transport where it would be more cost effective to do so. Tom Brailsford, Strategic Director for Children and Families, advised that other Local Authorities had reported that when a taxi was booked by the Council it would be a different price than if booked privately, so there could be some economies of scale to be achieved here in Kirklees.

The Panel noted that if young people were sharing taxis on a route, some children would have to be ready earlier than others on the same route, whereas this was not the case when there was a single pick-up point. Russell Williams explained that the Policy allowed for changes to be made, and that PCAN, Kirklees College, parents and the School Transport Team would work together to make improvements over time. Tom Brailsford added that quite a lot of young people who used the Post 16 service accessed the three sites of Kirklees College. Where children and young people access independent schools out of area this could become more complex and resulted in more single taxi routes, and that Colleges had said that they would be more than happy to broker services on behalf of parents. The Panel was informed that the majority of young people that used the service had social, emotional and mental health needs and this approach promoted their independence and control for their families.

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The Panel asked about the operation of the in-house fleet, the cost benefit of the proposal, how these vehicles might be utilised out of school time and what income might be raised. The Panel also asked whether low carbon transport had been considered and whether the inhouse fleet would be used for both pre and post 16 transport. Martin Wood, Head of Public Protection, advised that a range of options had been considered to transform School Transport to make it more efficient and cost effective, and one of these was an in-house fleet and a pilot of 20 vehicles was planned. The Panel was informed that the Team currently operated approximately 460 individual routes on Home to School Transport and these could not be operated by the in-house fleet due to the size of the operation. Martin Wood explained that officers had visited an in-house fleet at Calderdale to see how it was working in terms of how many vehicles it had compared to the number of routes and the challenges it was dealing with. A paper would be coming forward to an individual cabinet member for decision in mid-April and associated papers would soon be published in the public domain with more detail. The cost benefit analysis looked at the top 20 most expensive routes that were currently operated and projected those costs out over the next ten years. In the published paper, it was anticipated that there would be a modest Year 1 cost saving to the Council, however any price increases would be more within the Council's control. The Panel was informed that over the ten-year life span of the vehicles, significant savings would be realised year on year, creating a real invest-to-save prospect for the Council.

In response to the question from the Panel regarding low carbon alternatives, Martin Wood advised that for the initial pilot the Council would be purchasing new diesel vehicles, as they were easily available, purchase costs were significantly cheaper than electric or low carbon alternatives, no investment would be needed in storage, and they could be maintained within existing Council operations. Any future development of the fleet would look at low carbon or electric vehicles as their costs reduced relative to diesel or petrol vehicles. Martin Wood advised the Panel that electric minibuses were very expensive.

In response to the Panel's question on utilising the vehicles outside core business hours, Martin Wood explained that a future Policy would be coming through to advise how the existing Council fleet could be used by community groups and once that new policy was in place, officers could look at how this policy could be integrated into the Council's own fleet used by Home to School Transport.

The Panel questioned whether any consideration had been given to schools with minibuses operating routes and Martin Wood advised that this had been considered and conversations had been had with a number of schools, however, it was not deemed to be a practical solution as a group of drivers would be needed. The Panel was informed that this would be revisited in the future, with the possibility that there could be other alternatives provided for schools, such as drivers or the use of school minibuses. Martin Wood explained that schools may not need their own minibuses in future if the Council could make vehicles available from the Council's fleet for use by the community.

In answer to a question from the Panel on whether the vehicle engines would be to the Euro 6 standard, Martin Wood assured the Panel that the vehicles purchased

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would be the most modern and to the highest Euro standard available at the time of purchase.

The Panel noted that the changes made to the policy could present inconvenience to some parents, but more significant challenges to others, and asked how it had been made as fair as possible for all parents. Martin Wood acknowledged that there would be different experiences for the different people who accessed the policy and advised that there was a government led bursary scheme available to families and that Colleges could also look at supporting young people individually with transport costs and this would have to be looked at in more detail over the first and subsequent years of implementation. The Panel were advised that that responsibility was being shifted more from the Council to parents and Colleges, but that discretion remained within the policy to support individuals with the arrangement for transport where there were exceptional circumstances. The Panel commented that the Council needed to be aware of the changes that some families might have to make in view of the changes to the Post 16 Home to School Transport Policy.

The Panel noted that there was £1.6 m of savings which had been identified within the report and asked when this would be reported on to ensure that this projection was reflected in reality. Russell Williams advised that the projected savings would be monitored on a monthly basis through budgetary monitoring processes within the service and that overall savings would be seen in July 2025 at the end of the academic year.

### **RESOLVED:**

That the update on the Post 16 Transport Statement be noted and Service Directors be thanked for their contributions.

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

Kieran Lord, Service Director for Resources, Improvements and Partnerships provided an update on the highlights of Children's Services performance data. The Panel were provided with a summary of consistent and improved areas of practice and a review of how data was helping with work improvements and challenges.

Kieran Lord highlighted the following key points –

- Child Protection Case Conferences (Section 47 enquiries) - following a reduction of timeliness in this area, directorates had worked closely together, with oversight provided regularly to Executive Directors and Service Directors, resulting in levels consistently in the 95%+ range of being on target. Individual reports were provided on any areas where there was a dip below that level; these were usually down to individual children's circumstances. This was a good example of how directorates were working together in close partnership, alongside senior level oversight, to improve data.
- Looked After Children's (LAC) Health - there had been a consistent and high percentage (97.5%) of reviews of Looked After Children's health held within timeframes. Nearly three quarters of LAC lived in a family type setting, consistently above national figures. Long term stability, where children placed away from the family setting, continued to improve, with 71% remaining in their placement for at least two years. The percentage of children who had moved two or three times within two years had also increased. This was an area of focus but

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not of concern as action was being taken in the form of enhanced oversight by leadership, with Vicky Metheringham, Tom Brailsford and Kieran Lord now having weekly oversight of all children's placements.

- Initial Health Assessments for LAC - there had been a decrease of timeliness in this area initial health assessments for LAC and it was the lowest it had been in the rolling twelve month period. The service was aware and had been working with health colleagues to gain an understanding of the reasons behind this decrease, and to identify what resources were needed to ensure these statistics were turned around. Initial health assessment timeliness had reduced to 22%, however within a further month of the deadline, the figure increased to 70%. The service was working closely with health colleagues to address this in a different way going forward.
- Neurodevelopmental Assessments - there continued to be an increase in waiting times. A new process had been implemented by health colleagues in relation to Waiting Well, where children and young people waiting for assessment were being given access at the earliest opportunity to support suitable for them.
- Placement breakdown - over the last six months, the percentage of children in internal foster care provision had been higher than the percentage fostered through independent fostering agencies. Close links with independent fostering agencies were acknowledged to still be vital, however this was a trend that should continue. The Panel would be updated with changes made to the fostering recruitment strategy in the coming months.

In response to a request from the Panel, Kieran Lord provided an update on Children's Residential Homes and explained that no names of homes could be provided to ensure that children's identities were protected. Kieran Lord advised that following a dip in performance in Ofsted outcomes between 2021 and 2023 there had been an incremental improvement journey for a number of the homes and highlighted the following key points:-

- One of the homes had maintained Outstanding in all areas for the last three years, even with a change of manager last year. The previous manager was now a service manager for Kirklees, and was disseminating good practice, resulting in the incremental improvement in other homes during that period.
- Within the last six months, one home had improved from Requires Improvement to Good.
- Two homes had moved from Inadequate to Requires Improvement, with those improvements being worked on.
- A home rated as Inadequate had recently undergone an internal audit/mock assessment utilising the experience of a previous Ofsted Inspector, feedback from the report and the Regulation 44 assessments.
- One new home was due to open soon.
- There had been changes in staff with oversight of this area and stability in senior staff since last summer. This, combined with the skills of leaders within other areas of children's services, was providing an optimistic outlook for Children's Residential Services.

In response to a question from the Panel about the financial resources and support provided when a Residential Home received a poor Ofsted rating, Kieran Lord explained that financial resources may not always be the solution and advised that it may be leadership or plans relating to individual children that needed attention, and

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that by working in a consistent and strategic way the necessary improvements were being made. Tom Brailsford advised that outcomes of Ofsted inspections for Children's Residential Homes could be based on aspects that could change very quickly and offered to set up a separate informal session with the Panel to explain the inspection framework. The Panel was informed that Ofsted were setting up a series of events called 'The Big Listen' and one aspect will be to look at different inspection regimes.

Rob Fordyce, Principal Social Worker, deputising for Vicky Metheringham (Service Director, Child Protection & Family Support) highlighted the following key points –

- Contacts to Front Door - the number of contacts had decreased, and referrals had also decreased from 353 to 253. A Front Door health check had taken place in February 2024 to check the quality of service and the effectiveness of the service had been confirmed. The decline in contacts could continue due to ongoing work with partner agencies on the quality and appropriateness of their referrals. Weekly referral and review meetings provided assurance on the quality of decision making around Front Door contacts. Re-referral rates at 17.4% were lower than national figures of 22% which indicated that the right decisions were being made for children and young people at the first point of contact.
- Children in Need Plans - the rate was 225 per 10,000 children, lower than statistical neighbours and the national average for England. The low re-referral rates suggested that this did not mean there were too few children on Child in Needs Plans, but rather that the plans in place were progressing well and that effective decisions were being made about children and the support they needed. The service was focused on the oversight of children on Child in Need Plans, which was provided by regular meetings with social workers and other practitioners, as well as on providing support to practitioners on how to set up and carry out an effective Child in Need Plan.
- Child Protection Plans - there had been a reduction in the number of children on a Child Protection Plan, 16 less than last month, increase in numbers from the same time last year. There had also been a decrease in the number of Section 47 investigations, which may lead to fewer children on Child Protection Plans over the next six months.
- Child and family assessments - there had been a decrease in the timeliness of child and family assessments, bringing the service figures below statistical neighbours and national comparators. The timeliness of core groups (the meetings for children on Child Protection Plans) had also deteriorated, and there had been an increase in the number of Child in Need meetings that were overdue. To address this, a new structure would be introduced within social worker teams, with a practice supervisor for every five practitioners, and a team manager for every ten practitioners and two practice supervisors. The team managers would make decisions, providing more consistency in decision making, and the implementation of the practice supervisor role would have the capacity to drive standards and make improvements on the quality and timeliness of the work.

The Panel noted that the interpretation and commentary on the Children's Service's data gave them confidence.

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Tom Brailsford, Strategic Director Children and Families, highlighted the following key points on Education –

- 45 day assessments were below the national average, but had increased from earlier in the year by over 10%.
- Exclusions - there had been a decrease year to date in some exclusions after the one-to-one work that had been done with schools and educational settings, and through the Educational Learning Partnership Board looking at how the Board could improve a number of areas, for example, persistently poor behaviour. There were still concerns about the number of children with SEND needs and SEND support, and a number of LAC, with one or more episode of permanent and temporary exclusions and work was ongoing with the virtual school to address that. This was an ongoing focus of the Kirklees Learning Strategy and would be helped by the positive relationships within the Kirklees Education system. The Panel would be updated with final figures on exclusions and suspensions later in the year.

The Panel noted that the figures on suspensions and exclusions had been a concern earlier in the year with particular schools, and action had been taken to improve the situation which was positive and welcome.

In response to a question from the panel regarding the rise in elective home education and the reasons for this, Tom Brailsford explained that this was a national trend that the Department for Education would be looking through data sets to be carried out three times a year. The Panel was informed that within Kirklees there were potentially three main reasons for home education: parents' personal conscious choice, children's poor mental health, including social and school anxiety post Covid, and parents educating children at home because they felt their child's SEND needs were not being met. Tom Brailsford gave assurance that the Children Missing in Education and the Elective Home Education teams had "eyes on" the children and young people and advised that they were being educated and safeguarded effectively. The Panel was informed that a RAG rating was in place to focus on those children who were more at risk. Tom Brailsford welcomed the suggestion by the Panel that a closer look at the rise in Elective Home Education and a more detailed breakdown would be looked at in more detail in the next municipal year.

### **RESOLVED:**

That the verbal updates on performance data be noted and Officers be thanked for their contributions.

### **8 Pre-decision scrutiny - Cabinet decisions on the horizon**

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

### **9 Feedback from Panel Members on issues considered by Corporate Parenting Board**

Cllr Lawson advised that at the last meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board he had received some useful information from the Virtual School regarding the occasions of missing person investigations (mispers) and the lateness reporting, were linked, in that a child arriving over a certain number of minutes late would cause an absence to be recorded as opposed to a late mark. Cllr Lawson further

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advised that there may scope for this fact to skew the figures and would welcome further investigation into this data by the Board.

Cllr Cooper noted that although there was some duplication of data between the different meetings where it was considered, but that he found this to be beneficial in order to have information reinforced.

The Panel was informed that there had been a motion at Council regarding LAC being recognised as a protected characteristic and as this had been brought up by a number of other Local Authorities, this was now a priority for the new leader of the Local Government Association (LGA). Cllr Cooper suggested that the Board should look at what best practice would look like in this area and how the protected characteristic would be applied. The Board had also discussed Childrens Homes and Standards.

Tom Brailsford advised that the Service had welcomed the motion to Council regarding LAC being recognised as a protected characteristic and that a lot of progress had been made recently by Corporate Parenting Board to widen the membership and reach of the Board to involve the third sector to make sure that the Police and health commissioners were better represented. The Panel was informed that an Ambassadors Event had recently been held where local businesses, the university and colleges got together regarding their offer and corporate parenting responsibilities to children and care leavers.

### **RESOLVED:**

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

### **10 Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2023/24**

The Panel noted the end of the Work Programme for 2023/24 and the agenda items which may be carried over into the new municipal year 2024/25 which could include the Emotional Wellbeing Provision in Kirklees "Keeping Children in Mind".

The Panel also noted how complex the service was and expressed their appreciation for the, sometimes unnoticed, work done by everyone in the Children and Education services.

The Panel also thanked the officers, the Cabinet Member, Oliver Gibson (co-optee), and officers from the Governance Team for their contributions to the Panel this year. The Panel also noted that Oliver Gibson was standing down this time.

### **RESOLVED:**

That the progress on the Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2023-24 be noted.