

Contact Officer: Helen Kilroy

KIRKLEES COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

Friday 30th August 2024

Present: Councillor Itrat Ali (Chair)
Councillor Jane Rylah
Councillor Richard Smith

In attendance: Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director - Learning and Early Support
Joel Hanna, Head of Service – Corporate Parenting (representing Vicky Metheringham, Service Director – Child Protection & Family Support)
Anna Gledhill, Head of Service – Sufficiency (representing Kieran Lord, Service Director - Resources, Improvements and Partnerships)
Cllr Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Children’s Services

Apologies: Councillor Ashleigh Robinson
Councillor Hannah McKerchar
Councillor Tanisha Bramwell

1 Membership of the Panel

Apologies were received from Councillor Ashleigh Robinson, Councillor Hannah McKerchar and Councillor Tanisha Bramwell.

2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

That the minutes of the meetings held on the 26th March 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 Public Question Time

Suzanne Wright asked the following questions: 1. “Did the Council consider whether the Post 16 Transport provisions were lawful under the Equality Act, The Education Act and the Human Rights Act?” and 2. “How do the Council propose to deliver the education provision and in my son’s Education and Health Care Plan if he is unable to get to college?”

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The Chair advised that the Panel were unable to answer the questions as they did not have the specialist knowledge regarding this matter, and that the questions would be passed on to the relevant Cabinet Member to provide a written response.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Children, Councillor Kendrick, advised that any public questions regarding personal matters could not be responded to in a public meeting to protect the individual concerned but that the Cabinet Member with responsibility for this area would be able to respond direct.

The Chair read out the second set of public questions which had been submitted by Neil Clarkson who had not been able to attend the meeting.

Neil Clarkson asked the following questions – 1. “Was an impact assessment done by officers under the public sector equality duty?” and 2. “Of the four travel bands in transport provisions, band three and four are woefully inadequate and unaffordable for disabled young people and their parents. As these bands cover young people travelling long distances using public transport is often not an option as lots of young people are not able to travel independently due to their disabilities. Their parents face punitive and unaffordable taxi costs to enable them to access the educational provision specified in their Education and Health Care Plan. This means the allocated transport grant will prevent some from being able to attend college at all. How were these figures calculated and what assessment was made of how much parents would have to top up this figure to enable their children to participate in the educational provision prescribed in their EHCP?”

The Chair agreed to forward the questions onto the relevant Cabinet Member to provide a written response.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Members of the Public be thanked for their questions.
- 2) That the questions be forwarded to the relevant Cabinet Member for a written response.

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

The Panel considered a verbal update on the performance highlights from the latest Children's Services data report covering period ending 31st July 2024. The report provided a summary of consistent and improved areas of practice and a review of how data was helping with work improvements and challenges.

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

- Educational Outcomes - Further analysis would be undertaken of the previous academic year to July 2024 and reported to the Panel at a future meeting.
- Increase in take-up of Free Early Education for Eligible 2 year-olds - Those eligible for this offer were mainly from low-income families, families in receipt of benefits, Children Looked After or children with an Education, Health and Care Plan. There had been a focus on this as a route out of poverty, with the aim of narrowing the attainment gap, and encouraging parents to take up education or work.

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- At the end of the Summer term there was 87% take-up of the offer, which was the highest level it had ever been at that time of year, as the data often dipped between Spring and Summer Term. It was also the 7th term in a row where there was at least 80% take-up by eligible families. The national average take-up figure was significantly lower, at 74%.
- The Service had taken positive action to achieve this success. Since 2022 there had been increased targeted work to contact and support eligible families, particularly in areas of Kirklees where take-up had been below average. Six priority wards were identified, Batley East and Batley West, Dewsbury East and Dewsbury West, Crosland Moor and Greenhead.
- All eligible families had been contacted and of 1,491 children identified as eligible, 87% were accessing free early education, due to the work done to encourage take-up and highlight eligibility. It was recognised that take-up was not 100%, however some families had made a personal choice not to take up the offer.
- Increase of Education Health and Care Plans issued within statutory timescales - Progress was outlined regarding the SEND Transformation Programme, particularly in relation to statutory compliance in issuing Education Health and Care Plan (EHCPs). EHCPs identify additional educational, health or social care needs of children and young people aged 0 to 25, and set out the additional support that needs to be in place to meet those needs.
- There had been a significant rise in the number of EHCPs being maintained, from 4,146 at the end of December 2023 to 4,601 at the end of July 2024. Historically, performance had not been as good as it should be in this area, with statutory compliance at the end of 2023 being very poor.
- Figures now demonstrated that improvements had been made, with 38% of EHCPs issued within the statutory 20 week timescale, compared to January 2024 when no EHCPs were issued within the 20 weeks.
- There were a number of EHCP applications currently outside the statutory 20 weeks, and the Panel was assured that the service was working diligently to ensure these would be issued as soon as they could be.

Joel Hanna, Head of Service for Corporate Parenting, highlighted the following key points -

- An Ofsted Inspection of the Children's Service was undertaken in July 2024 and had been judged by Ofsted as 'Good'.
- The detailed report had been published on 28th August and was available to view on the Ofsted website. There had been a move from 'Requires Improvement' to 'Good', which was a really positive outcome for the Local Authority, staff, children and families in Kirklees. The report also identified areas of improvement.
- The number of cases held by Children's Services had gone up slightly, having an impact on July's data in some aspects of timeliness.
- There had been an increase in response times from referrals to the Front Door after a focussed effort in this area and a review of systems and processes.
- The number of children in care had increased slightly but was still at a lesser rate than the national average. It was felt that this indicated good systems were in place for supporting children to remain in their families without the need to come into care, and it was noted that those children who did come into care were

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supported in a range of settings, with a significant number going into foster care settings or with members of their own family in kinship arrangements. This approach had been recognised as positive and was highlighted as such in the recent Ofsted inspection report.

- There had been focussed work on Corporate Parenting responsibility, specifically on the support of care leavers, which tied in with the Council recognising care leaving as a protected characteristic. There had been a positive increase in performance around pathway planning, involving more in-depth work with young people at the centre of their plans.

The Panel thanked the team for their hard work in contributing to the positive Ofsted inspection outcome, and recognised the Service's significant achievement of moving Children's Services from Requires Improvement to Good, for the benefit of children and young people in Kirklees.

The Panel asked about the measure of success in terms of the percentage of children in care and if Kirklees had a lower percentage of children in care than other authorities, was this a measure of success or could it indicate that children are not being taken into care when they perhaps should be. Joel Hanna explained that the data used to benchmark the performance of local authorities, was the rate of children aged 0 to 17 who were in care. During the inspection, Ofsted reviewed case work, and the work with families prior to children coming into care. From their critical measure, the Service was not either bringing children into care unnecessarily or leaving children outside of care where they should be coming into care. The Panel was informed that confidence was gained from the recent, very thorough scrutiny that was applied by Ofsted, and which was applied equally across all authorities. In Kirklees, the rate of children coming into care was lower due to a good early help family offer, and Special Guardianship Order arrangements were higher as these were well supported.

Cllr Kendrick added that when the number of children looked after, and children under Special Guardianship arrangements were added together, Kirklees figures were comparable to other local authorities.

Anna Gledhill, Head of Service for Sufficiency, highlighted the following key points -

- All 6 children's homes in Kirklees for looked after children were on a positive trajectory in terms of Ofsted inspections. Each home had a separate Ofsted inspection, and in each recent inspection every home had improved, apart from one home which was awaiting inspection.
- There was recognised to be a challenge in having enough homes to meet demand. There was more to do to make sure there were enough homes in the area and data and the Ofsted report indicated this challenge. There was oversight of this through the sufficiency strategy and governance of that strategy.
- Performance in health assessments for looked after children had improved, with the help of the Integrated Care Board (ICB) to fund extra clinics, and good partnership working to clear the backlog of children waiting for assessments. 90.7% of looked after children had an up-to-date health assessment.
- There were challenges with Neurodevelopmental assessments, which was a local and national issue. A lot of work had been done, in partnership with the ICB. There had been a service transformation in terms of a dedicated

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assessment clinic and an improved triage process, which had resulted in good feedback from families. There continued to be a high demand for the services and the waiting times continued to present a challenge.

In answer to a question from the Panel about potentially having representation from care leavers on the Panel, Joel Hanna advised that the Corporate Parenting Board, now called the Kirklees Parenting Board, had it written within its terms of reference that there would be care experienced representation on the Board. In addition and present at today's meeting, there was a member of the public present from the Care Leaver's Forum, who had been involved with developing training for Councillors and who would be delivering training to Members of the Children's Scrutiny Panel. The Panel noted that there would be care leaver representation on the Kirklees Parenting Board.

Jo-Anne Sanders agreed that the Children's Voice was a golden thread running through the work-plan of the Children's Scrutiny Panel and noted that the Panel were planning opportunities to undertake visits to meet children and families, to triangulate the evidence presented during more formal meetings. The Chair agreed and looked forward to the programme of in-person visits planned over the year to hear the voice of children in Kirklees.

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

The Panel noted that they would consider the outcome of the Ofsted Inspection of the Children's Service at the October meeting.

The Panel noted that recommendations from the Children's Scrutiny Panel could be submitted to Cabinet to be considered and discussed. Councillor Kendrick advised that recommendations to Cabinet from the Children's Scrutiny Panel had previously enhanced the direction of travel in relation to decisions made.

9 Feedback from Panel Members on issues considered by Kirklees Parenting Board

The Panel noted that there had been no meetings of the Kirklees Parenting Board since the start of the new municipal year.

10 Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2024/5

The Chair noted that the Work Programme for 2024/25 and Agenda Plan had been finalised and circulated, and thanked governance officers for their role in putting it together. The work programme had been approved by Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee, but it was noted that updates would be made to the work programme during the municipal year. The Chair had met with the Chair of Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel to discuss the immunisation of babies and children and children's dentistry, which were on the work programmes of both scrutiny panels. The Chair would attend the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel early in 2025, when these matters would be considered and Members from both Scrutiny Panels had been invited to attend the Joint meetings.

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The Chair noted that there was a full work programme and agenda plan for the 2024/25 municipal year which included a number of visits, and encouraged Members of the Panel to attend as many of the visits as possible to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced and of the issues that would be scrutinised by the Panel.

RESOLVED:

That the progress on the Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2024-25 be noted.