

Contact Officer: Helen Kilroy

KIRKLEES COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

Friday 14th March 2025

Present: Councillor Itrat Ali (Chair)
Councillor Ashleigh Robinson
Councillor Jane Rylah
Councillor Hannah McKerchar
Councillor Richard Smith
Councillor Tanisha Bramwell

In attendance: Tom Brailsford, Executive Director for Children and Families
Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director - Learning and Early Support
Jayne Whitton, Principal Educational Psychologist
Vicky Metherringham, Service Director - Child Protection and Family Support
Councillor Viv Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Children's Services

1 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on the 4th February 2025 be approved as a correct record.

2 Membership of the Panel

All Panel Members were in attendance.

3 Declaration of Interests

Councillor Tanisha Bramwell declared an interest regarding a member of the public who was present online to ask a question. Councillor Bramwell declared that the member of the public was a resident in her ward, who she had been supporting.

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

In accordance with Council Procedure rule 11, Sally Ellis read out questions on behalf of Laura Reich.

“My questions relate to Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Tribunal cases in Kirklees. Could the panel please provide:

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- The total number of active appeals currently lodged with the First-tier Tribunal (SEND) where Kirklees Council is the respondent
- A breakdown of these active appeals by the nature of the appeal (refusal to assess, refusal to issue an EHC plan, contents of an EHC plan, etc.)
- The number of tribunal orders from concluded hearings that remain outstanding (where the local authority has not yet fully implemented the required actions within the statutory timeframe)
- Supplementary question: For any outstanding tribunal orders, the length of time elapsed since the order was issued

This information will help provide transparency regarding SEND disputes and the authority's compliance with tribunal decisions, which impacts some of our most vulnerable children."

A response was provided on behalf of the Panel.

RESOLVED –

The Panel agreed that a meeting would take place with officers to discuss the areas of concern raised in the public questions, with a view to potentially widening the Panel's area of focus in relation to SEND and EHCPs.

7 New initiatives of schools working in clusters

The Panel considered a report providing an insight into the new initiative of schools working in clusters, presented by Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director for Learning and Early Support.

Jo-Anne Sanders highlighted the following key points -

- The report was presented in the early days of the cluster initiative to provide transparency on how the programme had originated and how it would support children and young people with additional needs, and their families. It informed the Panel how the clusters were operating and how checks and challenge were built in across the development.
- Cluster working involved bringing together geographical groups of mainstream Primary and Secondary Schools (and those in the three-tier system), so that school SENDCOs could meet to discuss the emerging needs of young people and receive help and support from the team around the cluster.
- Funding was provided to clusters to support individual children or groups of children, or to fund staff training.
- The cluster initiative had been suggested by Peter Gray, who had written a report for the Department for Education looking at innovative ways of using funding to support children with additional needs in schools. The Council and Kirklees Schools Forum commissioned Peter Gray to carry out a review of arrangements in Kirklees in Summer 2023. In the Autumn of 2023, the review was fed back to the stakeholder groups who had been consulted, including Headteachers, Parent and local officers.

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- The review concluded that there were opportunities to offer more consistency of provision across Kirklees, and to offer early funding and help to avoid waiting for the funding associated with an EHCP.
- Ways of working in clusters had been trialled successfully in other local authorities, however it was important to produce a model that would meet the needs of Kirklees.
- A task and finish group was set up in October 2023 and ran until March 2024, which consisted of SENDCOs and Headteachers from Primary and Secondary Schools, Educational Psychology Teams, Specialist Outreach, Early Years Support, and the Parent and Carer Forum.
- Key principles had driven the approach and were outlined in the report which provided detail on what a good funding system should look like, and the principles of cluster working.
- The initiative was piloted in Kirklees with a first cluster in Summer 2024, with the intention of a full roll-out in September 2024.
- 17 clusters were now operating across Kirklees, each formed from a mix of Primary and Secondary schools, providing opportunities for work on transition.
- Council teams “around the cluster” had been organised to fit with the 17 clusters.
- Two Cluster Area Leads had been appointed to have an overview of practice in their area and share best practice, working with the cluster leads (a designated SENCO in each cluster).

Jayne Whitton, Principal Educational Psychologist, further informed the Panel about how the clusters were working in practice. Jayne Whitton explained that:

- At each cluster meeting schools brought individual cases where there were concerns, cases around groups of children or young people, or school-wide issues.
- By bringing schools together, key challenges could be identified, expertise within the group could be capitalised on and positive solutions shared.
- Feedback from SENCOs indicated that even if they had not taken a case to a meeting, learning still took place, as issues and strategies discussed could often be related to pupils at their own schools.
- Each discussion had a clear structure, to enable solutions to be found.
- Schools could discuss and agree how resource could be used to meet shared challenges.
- Schools had visited other schools in the area to observe and support, and shared contact information for useful organisations.
- Shared training needs had been identified, and training organised across the cluster.

Jo-Anne Sanders advised that cluster working gave some control to schools to utilise funding at an early stage, prior to children receiving an EHCP. The initiative was in its second term, and a review was planned for June to develop the model in line with feedback from all stakeholders. It had involved a huge system change and required everybody to work in a different way. The Panel was informed that there had been challenges around communication and anxiety over funding arrangements

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from schools and parents. This had been recognised and listened to, and the initiative would continue to be shaped by all involved.

The Panel noted that they could visit a cluster meeting to observe the process in action, and that this could be arranged in conjunction with Area Leads.

In answer to a question from the Panel relating to clarity regarding funding arrangements, Jo-Anne Sanders advised that there would be openness and transparency through a Cluster Audit Statement. There was a modest amount of money available to the clusters, and the support provided was not always financial. The Panel was assured that the EHCP top-up funding would not be removed. One of the key principles was the principle of equity, so funding would be based on need and allocated in the most fair, open and transparent way.

Tom Brailsford, Executive Director for Children and Families, advised the Panel that while the Department for Education (DfE) worked on reforms, Kirklees were at the forefront of taking managed risks to find creative solutions to the problems which existed nationally. The DfE and NHS England had recognised that Kirklees were an example of good practice locally. Cluster working was part of an overall approach to SEND provision for children, which also included increasing special school capacity and creating Additionally Resourced Provision within mainstream schools.

In answer to a question from the Panel, Jayne Whitton advised that the clusters were supporting children with varying levels of need, and that SENDCos were now working more collaboratively both with each other and with the team around the cluster.

The Panel asked how feedback from families would be used to inform the cluster model, and how the families of children with SEND were communicated with about the process.

Jo-Anne Sanders informed the Panel that schools would contact parents of children who were discussed at the meetings, that the children were anonymous within the meeting, and that after the meeting the schools would provide the parents with the outcomes of the cluster's conversation. The Parent and Carer Forum were working on parent engagement on a range of matters related to SEND and would be reporting their feedback. A full day's review in June would include parent feedback because it was vital that the system had the confidence of families. The Panel was informed that by understanding needs within communities, appropriate provision could be planned, eg: Speech and Language Therapy capacity or Alternative Provision.

In answer to a question from the Panel about the sharing of best practice between clusters, Jayne Whitton informed the Panel that it was critical for the clusters to share learning and that this was done in several ways:-

- Each cluster had a cluster lead, and all cluster and Area Leads met up half-termly to share successes and challenges and discuss next steps.
- Area leads attended cluster meetings to get to know the different areas and met with cluster leads individually.

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The Panel was advised that clusters were linking up as much as possible to share their learning and that the individual cluster leads were very interested in what was happening in other areas.

The Chair thanked the officers for their report and for the efforts that had been made to set up the cluster working.

RESOLVED:

- (1) The Panel noted the report and thanked Officers for their contributions.
- (2) The Panel agreed to arrange to visit a cluster meeting to observe the process in action, and that this would be arranged in conjunction with Area Leads.

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

Vicky Metheringham, Service Director for Child Protection and Family Support and Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director for Learning and Early Support, presented highlights from the Performance Data covering the period ending January 2025.

Vicky Metheringham highlighted the following key points:-

Care Leavers

There had been a deterioration in some areas of practice despite the focus on this area.

- There had been some recording issues regarding the number of care leavers in suitable accommodation and these figures were being amended. Housing colleagues were working on schemes that would better support care leavers and there was confidence that improvements were being made.
- A number of care leavers were unable to work due to disability, illness or parenting duties. If those unable to work were removed from the figures, there would be almost 65% of care leavers in education, training or employment, which was encouraging. Strong links existed with C&K Careers, Kirklees College and Huddersfield University, and there were opportunities within the Council for employment.
- The figures showed a drop in contact every 8 weeks with care leavers, and practice standards were being reconsidered to better meet the needs of care leavers. Sickness absence had contributed to the decline, but more PAs had been recruited and different ways of supporting additionality to the service were being investigated.

Children Going Missing

- Data suggested that there had been more missing children episodes, however the change in the way the Police recorded data had impacted on these figures.
- The number of children going missing in the last twelve months had increased, after a previous significant reduction, and work including partnership auditing continued, in order to better understand the impact of the recent changes in policies and protocols.

Children at Risk of Criminal Exploitation

- The number of children at risk had risen; this was seen as positive as it was a result of an earlier intervention approach.

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- The information sharing portal was being well used, as partners worked together to share information on vulnerable children.
- A multi-agency group met weekly to scrutinise individuals' circumstances.
- Risk reduction was a priority, and bespoke and targeted work was taking place with vulnerable young people through plans which had been developed to reduce risk.
- The Kirklees Youth Engagement Service were integral to the plans to support young people and shared valuable intelligence about targeting perpetrators and potential perpetrators.

In answer to a question from the Panel about the rising numbers of children being electively home educated and the ways in which those children were safeguarded, Jo-Anne Sanders advised that:-

- There were officers dedicated to Elective Home Education (EHE) as part of the Access to Education function, who were notified of children becoming EHE.
- Each child registered as EHE was screened for vulnerabilities and each notification was RAG rated to prioritise the next steps for support.
- If the child had been on the school roll, then the school would be contacted, to ensure all background information was known and so that the family could be supported appropriately.
- Reasons for the parental decision were explored with the family to determine the appropriate approach.
- Families were offered support to understand what was involved in Home Education and what support they were entitled to and any safety and wellbeing concerns were also discussed.
- The service valued the engagement with parents and understood that there were different reasons for deciding to home educate, from those who had made a positive choice to do so, to those who wished to see their child back in school.
- Support was given by the wider team to help children get back onto a school roll where appropriate.
- If there was social care involvement with a home educated child, there was a multi-agency approach, and services would work with the family to help the child return to school.
- If there were concerns, there was a robust process in place and if necessary formal action would be taken.

In answer to a question from the Panel about how children who had never been on a school roll, could access the Healthy Child Programme, Jo-Anne Sanders advised that the Healthy Child Programme looked after all children and there was a statutory requirement that included mandated visits. The service worked with the provider to look at all children, who were tracked through information received by government. Public Health colleagues who commissioned the Healthy Child Programme were looking for opportunities to strengthen this, however families did not always wish to take up the provision they were entitled to. It was important that every child was accounted for, and under the Access to Education function there was a Child Missing in Education Team. The Panel noted that contact made by the service with families due to the expansion of the entitlement to free early education, meant that

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parents were aware of their opportunities and gave the service an understanding of reasons why opportunities were not always taken up.

RESOLVED:

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

9 Pre-decision scrutiny - Cabinet decisions on the horizon

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

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

Tom Brailsford gave an update on the key highlights discussed at the last meeting of the Kirklees Parenting Board Meeting:-

- Mark Riddell, the Government appointed Advisor for Care Leavers, had attended, to observe and give advice.
- An update was provided on the overall offer for Care Leavers, eg: free prescriptions agreed with the Integrated Care Board (ICB).
- The Family Firm was discussed, whereby employment opportunities and work placements within the Council would be available to Care Leavers.
- Wider improvements for Care Leavers, including a better Housing offer, were also discussed, to ensure accommodation was suitable.
- Care Leaver representation continued and their first-hand experience was making a positive contribution to the Board; a third Care Leaver representative had joined.
- Senior Officers were undertaking formal mentoring for Care Leavers, which had two-way benefits, with leaders gaining understanding of individual's experiences and for Care Leavers to receive one to one support.
- Further volunteers were wanted to become mentors, information about how to volunteer would become available in due course on the website.
- The Council's fleet of vehicles would soon be advertising for Foster Carers in Kirklees.

RESOLVED:

That the updates from the Kirklees Parenting Board be noted.

11 Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2024/25

The Chair of the Panel had visited the Front Door Team at Civic Centre 3 on 11th February 2025 and seen first-hand the complexity and volume of their work, how they worked physically alongside the Policing Team and liaised with Social Work and Health and Housing Teams.

Cllr McKerchar, Panel Member, had visited the Children with Disabilities Team on the 25th February to learn more about how that team fitted in with the other services such as the adaptations team.

There had been a joint discussion between the Adult Health and Social Care Scrutiny Panel and the Children's Scrutiny Panel on the 26th February to consider a report giving an overview of the Healthy Child Programme (HCP) and the

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background and vision of the contract which will be effective from April 2026. The Panel was updated with key milestones for the competitive tender process and the governance flight path was outlined. Improvements around statutory contact points with children aged 0-5 were also discussed.

RESOLVED:

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