

Scrutiny Lead Member Report

Lead Member: Cllr Andrew Marchington : Children's Scrutiny Panel

Period of Update : From January to March 2023

Panel Highlights

Bi-monthly Lead member briefings with:

Senior Officers in Children's Services

- Service Director – Learning and Early Support
- Service Director – Resources Improvement and Partnerships
- Service Director – Family Support and Child Protection
- Strategic Director for Children's Services

Cabinet Members

- Children (Statutory responsibility for Children)
- Learning, Aspiration and Communities

Panel Activity and meetings -

- Panel meeting on 23rd January 2023 – Budget process for Children's Services
- Panel meeting on 20th March 2023 – Stable homes built on love, Exclusions and Suspensions in Kirklees Schools, Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health provision for Children & Young People in Kirklees
- Visits to –
 - Educational Outcomes Committee on 10th January 2023
 - Quality Assurance Panel on 17th January 2023
 - Child Protection Team on 19th January 2023
 - Mental Health in School's Team at Lowerhouses Children's Centre and Hillside Primary School (Newsome) on 21st February 2023
 - Weekly Referral and Review meeting on 27th March 2023

Outcomes:

Budget Process for Children's Services

In January 2023, the Panel considered a verbal report from Mel Meggs, Director of Children's Services, on the proposals of the budget for the Council and Children's Services, which was being prepared for 2023/24. The key issues highlighted were –

- There were some significant gaps in the amount of money Kirklees had to spend, versus the amount of money Kirklees had planned to spend.
- The Council had imposed an overall recruitment freeze where a People Panel had been set up to decide upon requests to recruit. The focus in children's services was that front line staff services could keep going, and to a high standard, and in certain roles, where possible recruitment should be

delayed.

- There had also been changes around buildings used, and how staff were deployed.
- The priority for savings and investment was around growth and demand, for example SEND. There was an increase in demand and costs in school transport. The aim was to ensure that there were no barriers for youngsters attending school, therefore a proposed uplift into school transport had been put forward.

Mel Meggs advised the Panel on the saving proposals for 2024, which focused on prioritising front line services ensuring there was early help. There were proposals on how things could be done differently, including different ways of working, integrating work within teams, and identifying funding streams and investing to save, for example providing sufficient homes for children where they needed to go into care or children with special education needs.

The Panel agreed that a report on budget proposals for the Children's Service would be presented to a future Panel meeting post publication.

Stable homes built with love

In March 2023, the Panel considered a report providing an update on the Government's response in February 2023 to the McCallister, National Care Review which was published in May 2022.

Vicky Metheringham, Service Director for Child Protection and Family Support explained that on 2nd February 2023, the Department for Education (DfE) issued its response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's inquiry into the murders of two children and the Competition and Markets Authority's study of the children's social care market in three consultation documents. The consultations closed on 11th May 2023 and the outcome would inform future planning within Children's Services at both a Local and National level.

In response to the McCallister report of 2022, the DfE set out an initial response for addressing a range of issues that impacted children's Social Care Services. The key areas covered as part of the consultation period were outlined in the report.

Exclusions and Suspensions in Kirklees Schools

In March 2023, the Panel considered a report on the current context around exclusions and suspensions in Kirklees and planned actions to support work in reducing these.

There had been an increase in permanent exclusions and suspensions across Kirklees which applied mainly to boys and secondary schools. The main reason for exclusion and suspensions was around persistent disruptive behaviour. Reducing exclusions and suspensions in Kirklees was a priority, with both the SEND transformation plan and the 'Our Kirklees future learning strategy' outline a number of key actions underway. There was a need to refresh the approach to identify and support the needs of children and young people at a much earlier stage. Projects were being implemented to develop specialist placements across the alternative

provisions sector and wider special educational needs and disabilities sector along with training, learning and upskilling.

The Panel asked for further information on the proportion of schools that were primary academies compared to secondary academies and agreed to consider a future report on how progress is measured on the cultural change towards supporting schools in developing a trauma informed approach.

Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health provision for children and young people in Kirklees

In March 2023, the Panel considered a report describing currently commissioned emotional wellbeing and mental health services, including recent developments, and outlined challenges currently being faced.

Following the Covid pandemic there have been effects on Children's Emotional Health and Wellbeing. Early years provisions, education, schools, colleges and activities were disrupted, leaving them without their usual support networks and social contact. Some children thrived in the home learning environment, particularly where going to school contributed to anxiety, but many suffered from isolation and loneliness. The youngest children lived through the pandemic at a vital time in their development, missing out on important learning and social experiences, which for some have had a significant impact upon speech, language and communication skills, as well as socialisation and regulation. Schools and early years settings are reporting that some children are less well prepared for school than in previous years. In common with other areas, in Kirklees there has been rising demand for all mental health, learning disability and autism services. This demand is extremely challenging to address, due to the current financial situation and workforce availability. The report introduced proposed developments for services and gave the current waiting list figures for each service area.

The Panel fed back on their visit to the Mental Health in School's Team and had witnessed some really good partnership working between South West Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, Kirklees Council Educational Psychology and Northorpe Hall Trust. The Panel also visited Hillside Primary School and had found it interesting to hear some of the anxieties from year 6 children about their transition to year 7 at secondary school.

The Panel agreed to receive future information regarding the fluctuation in the waiting times and trends for children's emotional health and wellbeing.

Partnership Visits:

Child Protection Team

On the 19th January 2023, the Panel visited the Child Protection Team at Civic Centre 3, Huddersfield and met with staff and Team Managers and asked questions around caseloads and recruitment, data collection, partnership working, voice of the young person, delivery of quality services and good practice and learning points.

The Panel agreed to investigate the following actions –

- Lack of rooms and meeting space in Civic 3 to hold staff meetings and places to assess and meet with families;
- Special guardianships which have ended because they can no longer look after

the child and unsuccessful adoptions which has meant more children coming back into care. The Panel agreed to raise at Corporate Parenting Board.

- Working relationship barriers between Child Protection and Safer Kirklees and how these could be strengthened.
- The relationship between Child Protection and the police and use of police powers which could sometimes conflict against the processes of the child protection team and impact significantly on the child when decisions were made by the police which the social care team do not agree with and which do not meet the social care threshold.

Mental Health in School's Team

On the 21st February 2023, the Panel visited the Mental Health in School's Team (MHST) at Lowerhouses Children's Centre and met with staff and Team Managers from the three key partners which were South West Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, Kirklees Council Educational Psychology and Northorpe Hall Trust. The Panel were given a presentation and taken through a resume of the work undertaken by the key partners and handed an information pack. The MHST service has 3 core functions –

- To deliver evidence based interventions for children and young people with mild to moderate mental health problems;
- Supporting the senior mental health lead in each school or college to introduce or develop their whole school or college approach;
- Offering timely advice to school and college staff and liaise with external specialist services to help children and young people to get the right support and stay in education

The Panel also visited the Hillside Primary School at Newsome and observed an emotional wellbeing session run by a colleague from the MHST service for a group of year 6 children. The Theme of the session was around “do you worry?”.

Weekly Referral and Review meeting (Child Protection)

The Panel visited and observed the meeting held on the 27th March 2023 where officers from Children's Service, Health and Education looked in detail at a number of individual cases to review the history, key elements of the case and the decisions taken. In some cases further action was agreed to follow up on individual cases.

Looking Ahead

The Panel will meet in June 2023 to hold a workshop with Senior Officers and Cabinet Members for Learning Children (Statutory responsibility for Children) and Learning, Aspiration and Communities to discuss the potential key areas of focus for their work programme during the 2023/24 municipal year.

A number of visits and areas of work which are not yet complete may be carried forward into the new municipal year.

General Comments

We continue to see those working with and for young people scrutinising the work that they undertake to ensure the best outcomes possible. Partners continue to open up their professional judgements to the view of others to make sure that the right decisions are being made.

It is a concern that in some areas of children's work recruitment is an issue, which is leading to increased workloads. This is being carefully managed but needs constant monitoring.

It was a pleasure to visit the Mental Health Support Team to talk about and observe some of the things that they do to improve and support children and young people's wellbeing. It was great to be able to participate in a session at a local primary school where some year 6 pupils explored potential anxieties around the transition to high school.

Once again, I extend the thanks of the panel for everyone's conscientious work and for the warm welcome we have received and openness in our discussions, in particular I would like to thank Cllr Paul White for his contributions over that last four years as a member of the panel as he retires from the Council.

Cllr Andrew Marchington
Lead Member for Children's Scrutiny Panel