

Kirklees Council

Scrutiny Lead Member Report

Lead Member: Cllr Andrew Cooper, Children's Scrutiny Panel

Period of Update: From July 2023 – August 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 28th July 2022 – Performance Data; and Cabinet Member Priorities for Children's Services
- Visits to PCAN Social events in September 2022
- SEND Transformation and Commissioning Team meeting on the 8th September 2022

Outcomes:

PERFORMANCE DATA

In July 2023, the Panel received verbal updates from Senior Officers in Children's Services on the key performance issues for the service for period ending May 2023. The following key issues were considered by the Panel:-

- There had been an ongoing reduction in the number of contacts through the front door and that re-referral numbers had reduced with an understanding of the reason for re-referrals,
- The timeliness of initial child protection case conferences had risen to the highest it had been throughout the year, resulting in children subject to a repeat child protection plan reducing,
- The number of children going missing had declined with the number of children entering care remaining stable, ensuring that children and young people who did not need to be looked after lived with family members in Special Guardianship Order arrangements,
- 98% of care leavers had a pathway plan, with 92% of them being in suitable accommodation
- Caseloads for workers had increased, there was work in the team taking place to improve the number of assessments that needed to be completed on time,
- The number of children on a Child Protection Plan had risen in Kirklees, this was lower than neighbouring Local Authorities and across England

- 90% of children who were looked after were seen on time, work was ongoing to ensure that health checks were completed in time, particular dental checks.
- Ofsted judgements for some of the residential children's homes had declined which had been impacted by sufficiency and a national capacity crisis that developed throughout the pandemic. As a result, identifying and securing safe living environments for children and teenagers had been increasingly challenging. Children's homes had identified that risk management needs for children in the homes had grown significantly, with the issues in the homes being related to demands in staffing skills.
- Recruiting and retaining social workers was a national issue. Through government reforms there had been a national agreement that the use of agency workers would not be a possibility anymore, and there was a consultation around the parameters of agency workers. Kirklees was clear that they would not breach the memorandum of understanding which was an agreement with Local Authorities and the Yorkshire & Humber region on how much agency workers were paid. Caseloads were higher for some social workers than the service would like them to be. A weekly case load meeting took place with Head of Services considering the workload of all teams and the cases allocated to them. Directors and Managers were doing everything they could to ensure that staff felt supported and that their work was recognised.
- The Panel were informed that Housing staff would go into homes on a regular basis where concerns would arise, a question was asked what training those staff had received in relation to safeguarding. The service had a very close relationship with housing colleagues through the front door, and housing colleagues did understand what their responsibilities were with regards to safeguarding. This was an area for the service to look at to assure themselves that safeguarding concerns were recognised and referred into the front door. Through the children's safeguarding partnerships, safeguarding training was reviewed across all partner agencies, which any colleague across the council would be involved with and the service would approach the partnership to ensure that there was take up of the training sessions and explore what was done to record concerns around safeguarding.
- A report on the educational outcomes would be provided for consideration to the September 2023 Panel meeting. The Virtual School for children that were looked after had worked hard with colleagues in children's social care, the looked after children's team, to ensure there was robust planning, and looked after children's education was secure. One challenge was suspensions and exclusions across the district within different groups. There was an increase in suspensions which was a key theme in 'Our Kirklees Futures', Our Learning Strategy, and it was agreed with the educational learning partnership board would be a key priority from September 2023. Too many suspensions took place, particularly in Secondary Schools but there was good partnership working in place with schools on how suspensions and exclusions could be reduced.
- The number of Health and Care Plans were stabilising, although quite high, Kirklees had a higher than national average number of youngsters with special educational needs, which provided an opportunity for youngsters to be supported in the right place to receive their education. There was a sufficiency challenge with the re-build of two specialist schools, and that there were 5 new additionally resourced provisions opening in September.

The Panel agreed to consider a future report on the sufficiency of Children's residential homes and would arrange some support visits to the homes; a report be would be considered at future meeting providing data on the take up of training from front line housing staff, and systematically, what was done to record concerns around safeguarding. The Panel also agreed to arrange some supported visits to schools to look at a range of practices regarding exclusions and the good work that was being undertaken.

CABINET PRIORITIES FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

In July 2023, the Panel received an update on the Cabinet priorities for Children's Services from Councillor Kendrick, Portfolio Holder for Children and Councillor Pattison, Portfolio Holder for Learning, Aspiration and Communities.

Councillor Kendrick advised that her cabinet priorities were:

- To achieve a good outcome from the Inspection of Local area Children's Services reflecting improved outcomes for our children, young people and families
- Providing high quality, stable, loving homes for our children and young people locally
- Ensuring our children and young people and families with additional needs were supported as early as possible and were provided with a new financial support system to meet their needs in their learning environment.
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Councillor Pattison advised that her cabinet priorities were:

- Ensuring the number of school places matched need and that schools were supported to meet changing needs
- Reviewing Our Kirklees Futures, Our Learning Strategy, and its delivery over the next 5 years
- Working with women and local organisations and understanding their lived experiences to drive culture change and ensure services respond appropriately.

The Panel agreed to consider a future report giving an update on Exclusions and Suspensions at Kirklees Schools.

Partnership Visits

Our Kirklees Futures Learning Summit and Joint Headteacher Session on 27th June 2023

Cllrs Cooper and Reynolds attended the Our Kirklees Futures Learning Summit on the 27th June 2023. The event centred around the theme of transition in a child's school journey. It looked at the critical challenges and opportunities that students face during their educational transitions. Coming together as a system provided an invaluable platform for education professionals to exchange ideas, share best practices, and explore innovative approaches to supporting students through these significant milestones.

The workshop sessions allowed attendees to delve into areas such as seamless transitions between schools, effective collaboration between educational institutions, emotional well-being during transition periods, and the role of parents in supporting their child's educational journey.



Looking Ahead

At the meeting scheduled for the 22nd September 2023, the Panel will consider a report on the Sufficiency of Children's Residential Homes.

An Informal Session of the Panel on the 22nd September 2023 will consider a report on Headlines of KS1, KS2 and GCSE and A Level Outcomes (to include an early synopsis of achievement overall); Emerging Risks; and a Briefing Note on Post 16 Home to School Transport as well as performance data.

The Panel have been invited to attend the Education Learning and Partnership Board (ELPB) on the 27th September 2023 as part of the Panel's focus on exclusions and suspensions in Kirklees' schools.

General Comments

It has been good to have in depth discussions with Cllr Kendrick and Cllr Pattison regarding their priorities for the coming year. High on the agenda is the forthcoming inspection of Childrens Services by OFSTED. Having observed a staff briefing on the subject I am clear that senior officers are well informed about the service that they deliver and that the outcomes for children are paramount to them. Recruiting and retaining staff is clearly an issue nationally and I have been impressed at how the Council has ensured so much of the service is being delivered in house. What is clearly understood is that good systems of record keeping and monitoring are essential to demonstrate that Managers have a strong handle on how the service is operating to help ensure children are safeguarded and that no one falls through the cracks.

The panel will look in more detail about why there are few referrals to Childrens Services from Kirklees Homes and Neighbourhoods staff to reassure ourselves that opportunities to report safeguarding concerns are being taken and the training needed for frontline staff carrying out home visits is being systematically taken up.

The panel will be carrying out several supportive visits to see first-hand how exclusions in schools are being managed in different settings and how Childrens Homes are providing safe and happy environments for young people.

We will also be examining the experience of children with disabilities who transition from children's services to adult services.

I would like to thank Kirklees staff, panel members and Cabinet Members for their positive contributions in our initial meetings. I am confident that we all have the same aim of ensuring that the council provides good outcomes for children and that they grow in a safe, secure, and supportive communities.

Cllr Andrew Cooper
Lead Member for Children's Scrutiny Panel