

Contact Officer: Helen Kilroy

KIRKLEES COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

Friday 11th October 2024

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

In attendance: Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director - Learning and Early Support
Rob Fordyce, Principal Social Worker for Kirklees and Head of Service - Quality Assurance and Practice Development
Vicky Metheringham, Service Director – Child Protection & Family Support
Cllr Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Children's Services

1 Membership of the Panel

No apologies were received.

2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

That the minutes of the meetings held on the 30th August 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

No public questions were received.

7 Quality Assurance Annual Report

The Panel considered the Children's Services Annual Quality Assurance report which was presented by Robert Fordyce, Principal Social Worker for Kirklees and Head of Service - Quality Assurance and Practice Development. The report was for information purposes and provided an overview of audit and learning processes for the last 12 months for consideration and discussion.

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Rob Fordyce advised the Panel that Quality Assurance in Children's Social Care was conducted through a number of strands. These took the form of:

- **Learning Conversations** - between managers and practitioners and involved looking at a single child's file to understand the quality of the work within that file. Managers who did not have line management responsibility for the practitioner were matched with them to ensure an independent eye on the quality of work. The results of the conversation were then recorded on a standard form which would then be analysed monthly by Rob Fordyce on a qualitative and quantitative basis to establish areas of strength and areas for improvement.
- **Practice Learning Days** - a Team or Area would meet to conduct a deep dive into one area of practice, for example, the quality of work addressing domestic abuse. This involved an element of peer auditing and a learning element to promote improvement.
- **Deep Dive Audits** - issues or themes arising from Learning Conversations would be discussed and considered by Senior Management and a plan for improvement put in place, eg: Life Story Work as mentioned in the report.

Rob Fordyce, highlighted the following key points from the report -

- Engagement – Quality engagement had improved from 50% being good in December 2024 to 88%, as a result of training and team development sessions for practitioners. Improvements had been made to evidence good practice in children's files.
- Quality Assurance Board – As it had been noted that some Teams were doing better than others in certain areas, a Quality Assurance Board of Service Managers met once a month to share good practice across Services.
- Management Oversight and Supervision – This was a longstanding area of development, highlighted in the previous Ofsted report. At the start of the timeframe 38% of children's files showed evidence of supervision taking place and this had risen to 65%. A survey for managers and practitioners to discover areas for learning had led to a training course being developed and delivered to managers throughout 2024. The training would continue into 2025 so improvements should continue to be seen.
- Partnership working – This had dipped, from 81% of children's files showing good partnership working in December 2024 to 61% in August. This was a concern to the service, and it could be due to auditors having a more nuanced understanding of what good partnership working looked like due to the Learning Conversations that had taken place. Rob Fordyce advised the Panel that this was an area that would be looked at by the Service.
- Assessments and Planning – 80% of assessments reviewed were addressing the risks in August, which was good, however the Youth Engagement Service failed to be consistently good and the Children Looked After and Care Leavers Services could be better. To address this, the language used to describe the concerns around children would be a focus over the next 12 months, and this work would cumulate at the Annual Social Care Conference in March 2025 to coincide with World Social Work Day.
- Quotes from Families – these had been gathered during the process of the Learning Conversations and used throughout the report. Feedback from

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parents about the service they had received from their social worker had largely been positive, at least 80%.

The Chair added that she looked forward to attending some of the forthcoming Practice Learning Days, along with other Panel Members.

Vicky Metheringham, Service Director for Child Protection and Family Support, advised that a plethora of auditing activities were planned over the next 12 months, and that it was very difficult to achieve the volume of Learning Conversations, due to the conflicting demands on Manager time, however there remained a commitment to ensuring they were completed. The Panel recognised the time pressures on Teams to complete the Learning Conversations but agreed that they were a very useful tool.

Questions and comments were invited from Panel Members, with the following issues being covered:

- How were Managers and staff being paired up and was this to promote best practice? Rob Fordyce advised that Managers and practitioners were matched randomly to complete the Learning Conversations, ensuring that there was no line management responsibility involved in the process. The process was cross-service to ensure the dissemination of good practice.
- Would Partnership working involve grass root organisations? Robert Fordyce advised that this should involve all professionals involved with a family should be consulted and included. Schools and health colleagues were often at meetings, however there may be other professionals such as probation workers or community organisations who could or should be included and this was an area for development.
- What would the approach be to young people and how would they be engaged and included in the conversation? Robert Fordyce advised that a key strand of the working group around the use of language was consultation with young people, by using the Children and Care Council, the Care Leaver's Forum and the Our Voice Team. The Panel was informed that there was currently a scoping exercise underway, to identify the jargon in assessments and any templates used. This language would then be shared with young people and their parents to gain their understanding. There was also a move towards removing acronyms wherever possible. Training would include the voice of young people about their responses to reading their own files.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the report be noted and Officers be thanked for their contributions.
- (2) That Members of the Panel would attend some of the forthcoming Practice Learning Days with Teams across the Children's Service and report back with updates to future Panel Meetings.

8 Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services – outcome and recommendations

The Panel considered the overview of the Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services presented by Vicky Metheringham, Service Director for Family Support and Child Protection, advised the Panel that the inspection had taken place over a three week period, and was the first full inspection since 2019 when Children's Services had

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been judged as 'Requires Improvement'. The outcome of the inspection was that Children's Services were now judged to be 'Good'.

Vicky Metheringham highlighted the most important issues raised within the Ofsted report –

- **Areas for development** - identified by Ofsted had already been identified by the Service and plans for improvement were already in place and being addressed.
- **Leadership Team and staff** - The report noted that the leadership team were established and confident and staff were committed. Improvement was said to have been driven by strong corporate and political support. A range of effective bespoke services were meeting local need and making a tangible difference to children's experiences.
- **Areas judged to be good** were:
 - the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families; the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection; the experiences and progress of children in care; and
 - overall Effectiveness
- **The experiences and progress of care leavers** was judged to be 'requires improvement to be good', and this was an area the Service had been focussing on for the last year to make the necessary improvements.
- **Areas of strength identified** were that –
 - children were seen quickly and listened to, and kept within the family network where possible;
 - children at risk of exploitation were helped by a strong multi-agency response;
 - disabled children received comprehensive packages of support;
 - the Virtual School provided a focus on the academic and developmental needs of children;
 - social workers knew their children and families well;
 - stable foster placements were meeting children's needs;
 - care leavers spoke with warmth about their relationships with personal advisors;
 - there was a strong offer to newly qualified social workers; and
 - staff morale was high and staff felt valued.
- **Areas for improvement** – there were three areas for improvement, which the Service were already aware of -
 - to provide more choice and availability of homes for children and care leavers;
 - to improve the quality of written records, plans and minutes for the minority of children in care and care leavers where these documents were weak; and
 - to improve the effectiveness of practice with every child experiencing harm from neglect and/or domestic abuse.
- The National Director for Regulation of Social Care, Yvette Stanley, had written to the Director of Children's Services to personally congratulate the Service on the outcome of the inspection, recognising the significance of the achievement.
- **Kirklees Parenting Strategy** had been relaunched to improve services to care leavers, and the Care Leaver's Forum had co-authored and were co-

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delivering Kirklees Parenting Training to support this. Suitable accommodation continued to be a pressure within the authority and was a key priority of the Kirklees Parenting Strategy; work was taking place to build a broader collaboration with social housing providers.

- After the inspection, children in care and young care leavers had been written to with a summary of the key strands of the report's findings in a child-friendly language.

Questions and comments were invited from Panel Members, with the following issues being covered:

- A question was asked around the plan to improve the effectiveness of the practice of children experiencing harm from domestic abuse and whether it contained anything to focus on the preventative measures around engaging with children who had been affected, Vicky Metheringham advised the Panel that there was a plan that had been formulated with Ofsted based on detailed conversations with them throughout the inspection, and this included a focus on prevention of domestic abuse and early intervention.
- A question was asked regarding children and care leaves regarding sufficiency of homes and how long it would take to provide the accommodation that was needed, Vicky Metheringham advised that work was ongoing to recruit additional foster carers, and that this issue was on the agenda for consideration by the Panel in January. Nationally, local authorities, including Kirklees, were having to house children in semi-supported accommodation for emergency foster care as there were not always places available in foster homes. The Panel were advised that this accommodation was registered, and suitable staff were in place.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the report be noted and Officers be thanked for their contributions.
- (2) The Panel agreed that the Ofsted report was very positive and that it was encouraging to see the significant improvements that had been made since the last Ofsted report in 2019. The Panel asked that their thanks and congratulations be passed onto the Teams within Children's Services for their hard work and commitment to improving the delivery of services and support to children and young people in Kirklees.

9 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 August 2024 presented by the Service Directors. The Panel were informed that due to the data referring to August, some school information was not available.

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

- **Review of Permanent Exclusions 2023/24** – As part of the Kirklees Futures, Our Learning Strategy, there was an ambition is to have no permanent exclusions. In 2023/24 there were 121 notifications of permanent exclusions, which converted to 88 permanent exclusions, with 4 to still be decided. 91 children were excluded the previous academic year. There were 20 primary school exclusions, compared to 72 high school exclusion. The most frequent reason given for exclusion was persistent disruptive behaviour, and exclusions were more likely to occur among boys and in Key Stage 3. The local authority was working collaboratively with schools to avoid permanent exclusions.
- **Statutory compliance in issuing Education Health and Care Plan (EHCPs) -** Progress was outlined as 99 new plans were issued in August, of which 35% were within the statutory 20 week compliance period. This brought the total number of plans being maintained to 4,453. A number were issued outside the statutory timeframe, but work was underway to complete both new and older plans. The year to date average was 25% compliance, which was an improvement on the SEN2 return data taken at the end of the year. The drive for increased compliance was being balanced with the need for quality, and significant activity for improvement was taking place across the partnership. The Panel would have the opportunity to look at the data in more depth in the forthcoming months.

The Panel asked what happened to excluded children, and Jo-Anne Sanders advised that from day 6 after exclusion the local authority had a statutory duty to make an offer of education. Children were supported to return to full time education as soon as practicably possible. Last academic year only two pupils were excluded for a second time, meaning that most pathways identified were successful. There were challenges in providing enough suitable provision, and there would be a report on sufficiency coming to the Panel later in the municipal year.

In answer to a question regarding school funding, Jo-Anne Sanders advised that schools were tackling funding challenges in a number of ways and that strong partnerships, especially those between home and school, were the factor making the biggest difference. The Panel were assured that schools were working hard to make children feel included and comfortable despite the challenges facing communities such as the pandemic and cost of living crisis. In answer to a question about trends in exclusions by ward, Jo-Anne Sanders advised that the statistics were based on such a small number, and therefore there was no clear pattern and there were no outliers in terms of permanent exclusions. This was being reviewed and schools were sharing good practise and supporting one another, with a focus on the children and their families.

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The Panel asked about the order in which the backlog of EHCP applications were being processed and were informed that it was only Looked After Children that may be prioritised. Jo-Anne Sanders advised that the process of working through the backlog was fair and equitable and the service had a forensic oversight of each stage of the process. Sometimes waiting times were influenced by a delay in receiving advice from professionals, but those waiting the longest were being processed as a priority.

In response to a question from the Panel about a possible correlation between children waiting for their EHCP, and school exclusion, Jo-Anne Sanders advised the Panel that analysis was undertaken of children on SEN support and suspensions, as suspensions for persistent disruptive behaviour were likely prior to exclusion. The Panel was offered an in-depth analysis of the data on suspensions at a further meeting if required.

Vicky Metherringham, Service Director for Family Support and Child Protection, highlighted the following key points -

- **Front Door** – There had been an increase in the timeliness of contacts being screened in one day, to 90%, which meant that families were receiving intervention as soon as concerns were raised.
- **Re-referrals** had reduced in August to 21%, indicating that children's cases were not being closed too soon. A deep dive had been carried out to understand previous data which showed a spike in the number of re-referrals.
- **Child Protection Plans** - The number of children on a Child Protection Plan had remained stable at 426.
- **Child Protection Conferences** - 86% of Children's Protection Conferences took place within 15 working days of the Strategy meeting; the reasons were known for those which had not and a multi-agency safety plan was in place for those children.
- **Children going missing** - There was a rise in Children Going Missing in August, with 84 episodes involving 56 young people. An independent interview was offered to all of them, with 74% take up, which helped provide strategies to prevent further missing episodes.
- **Children in Care** - The number of Children in Care peaked in July, reduced in August and continue to reduce. This indicates that the service was recognising when children need to come into care was but also making sure they left care in a planned and timely way. Children in care's health is a priority, indicators show that their health needs are being met.
- **Care Leavers** - The service was in touch with 96% of Care Leavers and 92% lived in suitable accommodation. Those not living in suitable accommodation had clear plans in place and there were increased visits to those young people.
- **Number of Contacts** - there was a concern about the number of contacts from other professionals not resulting in a referral. Only 19% of contacts had resulted in a referral, indicating that too many were coming through the front door that could be dealt with differently. Conversations with colleagues and partners about how to improve that were ongoing.
- **Performance around assessments** - There was decline in some areas of performance around assessments, with the time they were taking being too long despite putting in enhanced oversight of practice. Some of this could be

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due to August being a very busy period, and staff taking time back after the Ofsted inspection in July, but there was a clear plan in place for activity to drive improvement.

- **Foster placements** - The number of children living in a foster placements reduced to 69% from 74%. This was related to the age of the children but also because the right kind of placements for those young people were not available.
- **Pathway plans for Care Leavers** - It was recognised that pathway plans for our Care Leavers are not high quality in terms of the language used, so a new way of doing the plans had been introduced. This involved engaging the young people to assist in writing the plans so that they can be invested in them.
- **Accommodation for Care Leavers** - the service was also working hard to make sure that our Care Leavers were provided with the right accommodation at the right time.

The Panel asked about the reduction of contacts in August and Vicky Metheringham advised that August was significantly quieter due to school holidays, with schools being a major source of referrals. There was usually an influx before school holidays, this was a trend which could be seen in most LA data sets.

In answer to a question about the low rate of conversion of contacts to referrals, Vicky Metheringham advised that multi-agency training had taken place and the issue had been raised at weekly referral and review meetings, chaired by the Head of Service. The Panel was advised that a reduction in inappropriate referrals was necessary and that conversations were ongoing.

RESOLVED:

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

8 Pre-decision scrutiny - Cabinet decisions on the horizon

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

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 last meeting.

Viv Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, advised the Panel that the issues and challenges of Care Leavers would be a future focus of the Board.

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10 **Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2024/25**

Panel Members gave updates on visits which had been recently attended and key points from the visits would be included in the work programme for 2024/25 and in future Scrutiny Annual Reports. The visits which had been undertaken were –

- Kirklees Fostering Network Support Group meeting at Mirfield Community Centre (26th September 2024)
- HomeStart AGM and 25 Year Celebration (26th September 2024)
- SEND Transformation and Commissioning Group (3rd October 2024)
- National Kinship Week, Connected Persons Support Team drop-in session at the Greenwood Centre (9th October 2024)

RESOLVED:

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