

Contact Officer: Helen Kilroy

## KIRKLEES COUNCIL

### CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

**Friday 22nd November 2024**

Present: Councillor Itrat Ali (Chair)  
Councillor Ashleigh Robinson  
Councillor Jane Rylah  
Councillor Hannah McKerchar

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  
Pam Allen, Interim Service Manager, Childrens Resources, Improvements and Partnerships  
Adrian Wisniewski, SEND Programme Manager  
Cllr Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Apologies: Councillor Richard Smith

**1 Membership of the Panel**

Apologies were received from Councillor Richard Smith.

**2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

That the minutes of the meetings held on the 11<sup>th</sup> October 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 The Kirklees Safety Valve agreement**

The Panel considered a report providing insight into the Council's "Safety Valve" agreement with the Department of Education (DfE) in relation to the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), presented by Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director for Learning and Early Support.

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Jo-Anne Sanders highlighted the following key points -

- **The Designated Schools Grant (DSG)** - was funding given by the government to local authorities, most of which was allocated to schools directly and was split into three parts: for mainstream schools, the early years and for children and young people with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND).
- **The Safety Valve Agreement** was an intervention programme from the Department for Education (DfE) which was introduced to assist local authorities with significant annual overspend on supporting the education of children and young people with SEND (the High Needs Block). Kirklees began the agreement in 2021/22 due to having a significant deficit in this area; many other local authorities were also affected.
- **Quarterly Returns** - were made on a quarterly basis, both financial and to report on the activity that had taken place, including where the authority was on or off track to meet delivery timescales.
- **Ambitious Transformation Plan** - The report detailed the ambitious transformation plan that was in place before the Safety Valve Agreement, and aligned with its aims.
- **SEND big plan** - Kirklees had co-produced the SEND Big Plan which clearly set out what would be done and when, to provide support for children and young people with SEND.
- **Additional funding** of £33.5 million in revenue would be provided by the DfE over the lifetime of the agreement, to clear the historic deficit caused by the overspend, in exchange for meeting financial and transformational targets and reaching a balanced in-year position on its Designated Schools Grant (DSG).
- **Capital funding** - £8.2 million capital funding had also been provided, which along with additional investment from the Council, was being used to rebuild Joseph Norton Academy and Woodley School and College.
- **Funding for ARPs** - Capital funding was also being used to fund Additionally Resourced Provisions (ARPs) at mainstream schools.

Jo-Anne Sanders referred to the Appendix where strategies with the biggest impact on children and young people had been outlined. These included:

- Rebuilding the two special schools and increasing the number of places.
- Ensure youngsters were included in mainstream schools.
- Creating more ARPs to support youngsters to be able to be educated locally.
- Commissioning services to wraparound the youngsters, such as therapies.
- Improving the quality and compliance of Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs), within the statutory 20 week timescale.
- Working with schools and social care and health professionals to identify need and provide children with the right support as soon as they need it.
- Creative strategies such as Assistive Technology

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The Panel was informed that there were challenges around funding, but that there was strength in the area partnerships such as the Parent/Carer Forum, Health and Education Partners to ensure value for money and the best possible outcomes.

The Panel asked for clarification on the deficit profile and were advised that:

- The agreement was signed in March 2022 and ran until 2029/2030.
- A positive in year balance would be in place by 2026/27 to ensure that the Council did not overspend.
- The table referred to the cumulative deficit, which in 2021/22 was £35.8m, and was predicted to increase over future years while strategies were put in place.
- Future years figures were forecasts, and it was forecast that by 2029/30 the historic deficit would be £33million.
- The government had committed to £33.5million which should mean that the deficit would be cleared.
- The forecasts included a council contribution.
- The revenue funding was being paid on a quarterly basis subject to satisfactory quarterly monitoring and the payments were incremental over the term of the agreement.

In answer to a question about how confident the Service was that the targets would be met, the Panel were advised that despite the challenges, the last payment had been secured and despite being off-track currently, there was no indication that future payments would not be made. Jo-Anne Sanders advised that there was continuing engagement with the DfE Advisors over rising costs due to inflation, a rise in demand for services and increased complexity of need, which all authorities were experiencing. More Alternative Provision (AP) was needed, and delays to the AP Free School that was planned had been built into the forecast. The Panel was informed that there was close monitoring of every aspect of the Transformation Plan and being open and transparent in terms of the reporting.

The Panel were also advised, in answer to a question, that the DfE had previously placed the service under enhanced monitoring and had provided suitable support and challenge. Schools and Early Years had been supportive by transferring funding to the High Needs Block, and the DfE recognised that every effort was being made to adhere to the plan.

### **RESOLVED:**

The Panel gave their support for the report and asked that officers consider and take on board any questions and comments raised by the Panel in future reports.

### **8 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 30<sup>th</sup> September 2024.

Robert Fordyce, Principal Social Worker for Kirklees and Head of Service - Quality Assurance and Practice Development gave a presentation on behalf of Vicky

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Metheringham (Service Director for Children and Families) and highlighted the following key points –

- **Front Door** – There had been an increase in the timeliness of screening compared to last year's figures, at 78%. Further improvements were planned to track the progress, to help strike the balance between dealing efficiently with legitimate referrals and those contacts which need to be referred elsewhere.
- **Re-referrals** were at 21%, and although this was below the national figure of 22%, the figure was still higher than the Service would like, so a deep dive was taking place to look at the data and assess the reasons why.
- **Child Protection Plans** - The number of children on a Child Protection Plan had remained stable at 430. The percentage of children who were on a second or subsequent plan was 11%, lower than the national figure of 23%. This was positive, as when children were on plans multiple times it may indicate that the first plan had not been as good as it could be.
- **Children Going Missing** - There was a further rise in children going missing episodes, which might be due to a change in the recording policy by the Police. The rate of "return interviews" had increased.
- **Children Subject to Care Proceedings** – The average length of time it took to apply for a court order and have the case concluded was now 34 weeks, compared to the national average of 42 weeks. This was a reduction of 9 weeks from last month.
- **Children in Care** - The number of Children in Care had reduced slightly, in part because of the reduction in the length of time children were subject to care proceedings. Health performance against all indicators was improving, although there were improvements to be made in dental assessments. Placement stability was still a concern, especially those children with three placements or more in the last 12 months, and improvements were being considered
- **Care Leavers** - The service was in touch with 96% of Care Leavers which was in line with national and regional data. The number of Care Leavers in Education, Training or Employment had decreased, and additional support such as mentoring had been offered, along with support for job applications and communication with educational institutions.
- **Assessment and Intervention Teams** – caseloads for social workers were increasing due to staff vacancies in the social work teams. Strategies in places to address this included enhanced oversight of caseloads, providing student placements and apprenticeships, and being part of the Frontline and Step-Up programmes which enabled graduates of other subjects to qualify in social work.
- **Initial Child Protection Conference timeliness** – this had previously reduced to 73%, but after an improvement plan had been put in place, had recently increased to 100%.
- **Children in care Placements** - stability of placements was still an area of concern and work was underway to increase placement stability.
- **Care Leavers** – number of children in educational, training or employment had slightly reduced and as much additional support as possible was being given to care leavers, such as mentoring support from partners in the local area, updating CVs, applying for jobs and preparing for interviews. The

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service also worked closely with colleges and universities where concerns had been raised regarding a young person's engagement.

In answer to a question about the retention of Social Workers, Robert Fordyce advised that a focus on a programme for Newly Qualified Social Workers had been prompted by a survey which had been taken across the region to look at retention rates and incentive offers and look at best practice. The programme offered additional support and training for newly qualified social workers, along with a reduced caseload and a greater variety of training packages, recognising that the first two years of social work practice were the most difficult.

Councillor Viv Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, advised that C and K Careers provided individualised support to Care Leavers to support them with training and employment opportunities. In response to the question about retention, Cllr Kendrick added that vacancies within social services often arose because staff were promoted internally.

The Panel welcomed the varied initiatives in place to support the methods of recruiting social workers to the service and commended the continued multi-disciplinary approach around Care Leavers, including health services, mental health services, and housing, all of which contributed to their overall stability.

Pam Allen, Interim Service Manager – Children's Resources, Improvements and Partnerships, highlighted the following key points on foster care and placement stability:-

- **Children in foster placements** - 70% of the 608 children in care in Kirklees were in foster placements, compared to a 68% national average. Foster placements were with in-house foster carers, placements supplied through fostering agencies or family and friends.
- **Recruitment of foster carers** - More foster carers were needed for the remaining 30% of children in care, who were currently living in residential placements in Kirklees or in care external to Kirklees.
- **External placements** – these were not the best option for children, and were a drain on financial resources.
- **Placement stability figures** - related to children who have had three or more placements in a year. The trauma caused to children from having to move home more than once, significantly affected their wellbeing so the service was trying to recruit more foster carers.
- **Strategy for recruiting Foster Carers** – this was being refreshed to meet the challenge of finding appropriate foster placements and using modern techniques to recruit. This was a national challenge and not specific to Kirklees.
- **Ofsted Inspections at Children's Residential Homes** - The Ofsted Inspection ratings for children's homes which had been recently updated and the results were positive. Work was continuing to get ratings in place which were 'Good' at the children's homes.

In answer to a question about how more Foster Carers would be recruited, Pam Allen advised that:

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- Segmentation was to be used as a strategy, which meant targeting people who were more likely to become Foster Carers, such as those working in public services.
- To attract Foster Carers, Kirklees Council was working hard to operate as a fostering friendly employer, giving staff the time off for reviews, medical appointments and other statutory requirements relating to the child, and allowing staff to do this in their working time.
- Councillors were being encouraged to raise the issue of foster carers within their constituencies and signpost those interested to where to go for initial discussions.
- Awareness was being raised through social media and digital communications.
- The position of a salaried Foster Carer had been introduced at some other local authorities for children with complex care needs and this was being looked at.
- Where redundancies had occurred, staff had been told about fostering as an option to consider.
- As the strategy was being updated, ideas from the community and Councillors were welcome.

Councillor Kendrick advised that Foster Carers for children in Kirklees could live in surrounding areas such as Bradford, Calderdale, and Wakefield and that foster carers from these areas would be welcomed.

The Panel asked if figures were available for children who were placed in locations that were further away from the surrounding areas in the region, and what was being done to ensure the children could be brought closer to home. Pam Allen advised the Panel that there were a number of children placed both outside the 20 mile boundary and other places beyond that, such as Cumbria, Shropshire and Wales, and that information was available to assist with monitoring these placements. Weekly meetings took place to monitor all the children in external placements, and their plans were reviewed to see how they could be brought back to Kirklees. Complex plans were in place for each child and those children in unregulated placements were monitored weekly. Officers were constantly looking at different ways to bring the child back in area, such as any changes in circumstances which might mean the child could be placed with family or friends. Children placed out of area were a priority for the service, although a small number were purposely placed out of area, for example if they were placed near to a family member who lived in a different part of the UK. Relationships with private children's homes in Kirklees which were currently housing children from other areas, were being built to try to utilise the places for local children.

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

### **Compliance with issuing Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) within 20 weeks -**

- In September 2024, the service was maintaining 4745 EHCPs, compared to September 2023 at 4046, an increase of almost 700, demonstrating the additional demand.

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- The 20 week compliance was being closely monitored and there had been a decrease in compliance since August 2024. The reason for this reduction in compliance was a focus on issuing the EHCPs which had taken longer, and making progress on clearing the backlog in order to get back on track.
- In September 2024, 110 EHCPs had been issued, 26% within 20 weeks.
- Cumulative compliance, measured by the SEN2 return to the Department for Education which measured performance, was up on this time last year, and though not at national levels, the trajectory upwards was steady. A further update would be provided early in 2025.

The Panel were informed that government changes to funding and reporting on Whole Family Working under the Strengthening Families Programme meant that funding was now guaranteed, and although returns were still a requirement, there was an opportunity to review the data systems to enhance the work and demonstrate the impact it had on families.

### **Attendance, Exclusions and Suspensions in September -**

- Attendance in Kirklees was 94.7% overall, with 95.2% in Primary and 92.8% in Secondary, which was in line with National average figures.
- This success could be attributed to several initiatives including Attendance Matters workshops and Headteacher Forums.
- Suspensions and permanent exclusions were higher than expected but it had been a positive start to the year, as numbers were significantly down from the same period last year.
- A range of strategies had been put in place to support schools with advice and support.

In answer to a question about good practice regarding attendance strategies in schools, Ms Sanders advised that whole family working and tackling emotionally based school avoidance through confidence building and alternative provision were part of the strategy, along with schools working together to share ideas at an Inclusion Multi-Agency Panel. Feedback from parents had been really positive in some cases where children had been successfully helped to return to school. Jo-Anne Sanders suggested that case studies could be brought to another meeting so that schools could present their approaches in their own words.

In response to a question from the Panel about the possibility of teaching mental health strategies at school to enable structures to be in place to help young people deal with their anxieties and emotions, Jo-Anne Sanders advised that schools had a huge range of strategies in place which were supported by educational psychologists and mental health in schools' teams. The Panel agreed to consider a future update on the range of strategies currently being implemented and resources available within schools to provide mental health support to young people. The Panel also suggested that it may be useful for Panel Members to contribute their ideas to the National Curriculum and Assessment Review that was taking place nationally.

Councillor Kendrick advised the Panel that the Children's Service had recently hosted a Conference for Headteachers and SENCOs on health and wellbeing and good mental health in schools of both pupils and teachers and the feedback had

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been really positive. The Panel was informed that some Headteachers had taken away new ideas and initiatives to build on current practices.

In answer to a question on the expected timescale for catching up with issuing the outstanding EHCPs so that the service could focus on meeting the 20-week statutory timescales consistently, the Panel were advised that all the outstanding cases had been allocated and 90% had now been finalised. Jo-Anne Sanders was confident that the completion of EHCPs within timescales would be back on track by the end of the year and that work would include the improvement of the timeliness of completion of annual reviews. Jo-Anne Sanders advised that a further update on Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) Overview of volume process – quality and compliance would be considered by the Panel in February 2025.

### **RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the verbal updates on performance data be noted and Officers be thanked for their presentations.
- (2) The Panel agreed to consider a future update on the range of strategies currently being implemented and resources available within schools to provide mental health support to young people.
- (3) That Panel Members could contribute their ideas on supporting the mental health of young people in schools to the National Curriculum and Assessment Review that was taking place nationally.
- (4) That a further update on Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) Overview of volume process – quality and compliance would be considered by the Panel in February 2025.

### **9 Pre-decision scrutiny - Cabinet decisions on the horizon**

The Panel was informed that an Annual report on School Funding would be submitted to Cabinet in January 2025. Jo-Anne Sanders advised that in February 2025 an annual report would be submitted to Cabinet on the determination of school admission arrangements and policies for community and voluntary controlled schools. The Panel was informed that both Cabinet reports would be shared with the Scrutiny Panel Members for information.

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

### **RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the Annual reports being submitted to Cabinet in February 2025 on School Funding and Admission arrangements be shared with the Panel for information.

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

The Panel discussed the Kirklees Parenting Board meeting, held on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2024, which had been a take-over event organised and led by Care Leavers, as part of Care Leavers' Month. Cllr Itrat Ali, Chair of the Children's Scrutiny Panel, and Cllr Viv Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, attended and provided a summary of the event, which they described as interactive, inspirational and



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enjoyable. The meeting was attended by providers of children's services and representatives from the healthcare, education and housing, as well as cabinet members.

Care Leavers presented at the event and showed videos that had they had produced about their experiences. The young people also facilitated small group discussions, inviting delegates to provide solutions to challenges faced by Care Leavers. It was hoped that two of the young people would join Kirklees Parenting Board as members in future meetings of the Board to represent the voice of the Care Leaver.

Items on the agenda included:

- Homes for children
- Health and wellbeing
- Voice, influence and participation
- Learning

The event was successful in bringing together Care Leavers with those who provided a variety of their services, and it was hoped that the event would be repeated next year.

### **RESOLVED:**

That the updates from the Kirklees Parenting Board be noted.

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

The Panel noted that there were further visits planned over the next few months.

The Panel received an update from Councillor Rylah on a visit to the Care Leavers' Achievement Awards on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2024 at Huddersfield Town Hall which was a celebratory event held for Care Leavers. The evening was inspirational, with speeches from the Mayor, Councillor Viv Kendrick (Cabinet Member for Children) and contributions from some of the young people. The atmosphere was warm and supportive throughout, particularly as the students came on stage to receive their awards. The awards ceremony was followed by a buffet, a magician and an unplanned performance of Kurdish dancing.

Councillor Kendrick raised a concern about young carers and the impact on them of caring responsibilities on their lives. The Panel agreed that this matter could be considered in a future Work Programme.

### **RESOLVED:**

- (1) That the progress on the Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2024-25 and the updates on recent visits be noted.
- (2) That the issue relating to young carers and the impact on them of caring responsibilities, be considered in a future work programme.