

Contact Officer: Helen Kilroy

KIRKLEES COUNCIL

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

Tuesday 4th February 2025

- Present: Councillor Itrat Ali (Chair)
Councillor Jane Rylah
Councillor Hannah McKerchar
Councillor Richard Smith
- In attendance: Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director - Learning and Early Support
Michelle Lister, Head of Service - Early Support and SENDACT
Emma Brayford, Senior Learning Partner - Kirklees Schools and Settings
Emma Salter, Kirklees SACRE
Ian Ross, Kirklees SACRE
Mark James, Kirklees SACRE
Joel Hanna, Head of Service - Corporate Parenting
Vicky Metherringham, Service Director - Child Protection and Family Support
- Apologies: Councillor Ashleigh Robinson
Councillor Tanisha Bramwell

- 1 Membership of the Panel**
Apologies were received from Cllr Tanisha Bramwell and Cllr Ashleigh Robinson.
- 2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting**
That the minutes of the meetings held on the 22nd November 2024 be approved as a correct record.
- 3 Declaration of Interests**
Cllr Hannah McKerchar declared an interest as Vice-Chair of SACRE.
- 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.

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7 **Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) Annual Report**

The Panel considered an Annual Report from the Kirklees Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) by Emma Brayford, Senior Learning Partner, and presented by Mark James, Chair of SACRE. The Panel were advised that the SACRE Panel was formed from members of faith communities, councillors and teachers.

SACRE's key responsibilities were:

- To produce an agreed Religious Education (RE) syllabus.
- To monitor the delivery of RE and collective worship in Kirklees.
- To support the teaching of RE through teacher conferences.
- Determination where a parent requests that their child is withdrawn from RE.

Priorities from the last year were:

- To revise the locally agreed syllabus and provide support for teachers. The syllabus was built around six "Big Ideas" in RE, pathways that children follow throughout their school education, exploring the ideas in relationship to faith. This approach was compliant with the new non-statutory guidance from the RE Council, the National Content Standard.
- Kirklees was represented at the locally agreed syllabus conference on 12th March 2024, by Council Officers, and the launch and training event was attended on 18th April 100 teachers and Headteachers.
- There had also been a focus on the introduction of the new inclusive, Collective Worship Award for schools, working with school improvement partners to identify schools in need of support. Honley School, Crossley Fields Primary School and Netherton Infants School were successful in completing the Kirklees SACRE Award and were presented with awards at the RE Network.
- SACRE also monitored data, to see how well children were engaging with RE. Data indicated that there was a variety of engagement levels within schools in Kirklees.

SACRE advised the Panel that they were grateful for the funding from Kirklees Council, which enabled RE to be delivered well in schools, contributing to community and cohesion, giving children the opportunity to understand and practice empathy for people different to them, and providing opportunity for imagination and exploration of the world they lived in.

Ian Ross advised the Panel that RE was locally determined and not part of the National Curriculum, and was the only subject that the Council had any control over. SACRE was pleased with the uptake of the locally agreed syllabus within all schools in the Local Authority, including the Academies which had mostly adopted the syllabus. The RE syllabus was shared between 4 local authorities in West Yorkshire, which contributed to the bigger picture of West Yorkshire and provided economies of scale.

The Panel was informed that SACRE's recommendations were to review the annual funding, at 2% of the Central School Services Block (CSSB) National Funding and to ask that the Council help SACRE to review its membership to be representative of the local area. There were currently vacancies for Muslim representatives on the

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Board. The Panel were asked to consider and accept the report presented. Ian Ross asked the Panel for permission to investigate with Secondary Learning Partners and Emma Brayford the position for RE for non-examined students at Key Stage 4. Data suggested that 70% of students did not take a GCSE exam in RE and may not be receiving their statutory requirement of RE teaching. Permission was also sought to investigate how SACRE could work with the Communities Team to look at, and be an active member in, work around community cohesion.

In response to a question regarding inclusivity on the Board of SACRE, Ian Ross advised that SACRE worked with the Faith and Belief Forum for North and South Kirklees to encourage a breadth of representation on the board. Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, Bahai and Humanist representative Board Members shared their understanding of their faiths and non-religious world beliefs. The Panel was informed that successes included an online Interfaith Conference with Primary Schools which would be extended to Secondary next year. An online Interfaith Autumn Festivals event was also held in November 2024, with 2,000 pupils taking part in a question and answer session with faith and world belief representatives. More work was needed to enable pupils to access community events and for community members to visit schools to share their lived experience and promote community cohesion.

The Panel questioned how RE was taught in faith schools, whether the syllabus would ensure coverage of other religions and beliefs, and asked how RE was taught to children with no background of religious belief. Ian Ross advised that the syllabus had been revised from a traditional religious studies approach which centred on learning facts about each religion, to an approach of six conceptual pathways which are inclusive of all faiths and people of no faith. At each key stage, faiths and beliefs were recommended for each unit of work, which best demonstrated the concept, which gradually built a knowledge and understanding of a range of faiths and beliefs.

The Panel asked how the impact of inequality on community cohesion was addressed in the RE syllabus and Ian Ross advised that due to the range of world views across the 4 local authorities involved in creating the syllabus, all voices were represented in the syllabus, promoting equality. Lived experience was a key driver in the curriculum, with importance placed on children meeting people of faith and people of non-faith. Work had been done to quality assure visits and visitors, and this had now been passed on to RE Hubs, a national organisation.

RESOLVED –

- (1) The Panel noted the report and thanked Officers and the representatives of SACRE for their contributions.
- (2) The Panel gave their support to work which would be undertaken in the future, to investigate the position for RE for non-examined students at Key Stage 4, as those not taking an exam may not be receiving their statutory requirement of RE teaching.
- (3) The Panel also supported plans for SACRE to work with the Communities Team to be involved in work around community cohesion.

8 Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) Overview

The Panel considered a report which provided an insight into the national and local challenges relating to Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), presented by Michelle Lister, Head of Service Early Support and SENDACT.

The Panel were advised that:

- Kirklees had set out its inclusive ambitions in its 'Big Plan', the SEN Transformation Plan, which included performance data of initial assessment for EHCP and final plan compliance.
- Challenges were being seen nationally in this area of performance.
- The service recognised the challenges that had built up and actions had been taken to address these, including taking a partnership approach, with Health, and PCAN.
- It was recognised how difficult these challenges had been for the families of Kirklees, who had demonstrated patience while improvements were being made.
- In addition to improving compliance, there had been a focus on ensuring quality of planned support.
- SENDACT were working hard to support the Cluster arrangements which would help provide the right support as early as possible, and a report on this progress would be considered by the Children's Scrutiny Panel at the next meeting in March 2025.
- There was the opportunity for the Panel to meet the SENDACT team.

The Panel asked if there was an expectation that more SEN children would attend mainstream school, and was this driven by funding? Michelle Lister explained that the service wanted to ensure that children were included in the right environment for their needs. Currently 4800 Kirklees young people, from Early Years to age 25, had EHCPs, with a significantly larger number accessing SEN support. Comparing data with other authorities, Kirklees schools were successful in including students with SEND. Some children needed additional support within mainstream schools, and investments had been made to create Additionally Resourced Provisions where specialist teaching could take place. The Panel was informed that independent provision was also sometimes required. Funding had to be considered and was monitored within the safety valve agreement to ensure a sustainable approach, but the priority was to ensure youngsters accessed education in suitable provision.

In response to a question regarding the availability of support required and outlined in the EHCPs, Michelle Lister explained that the EHCP Team would co-ordinate professionals to deliver support (Speech and Language Therapists, Educational Psychologists etc) and recognised that additional numbers of EHCPs would put pressure on those professionals. The Panel noted that there were further pressures, including 4,800 annual reviews being required, but were assured that all these issues were in view. Ambitions had been shared with key partners such as the Integrated Care Board (ICB), on how best to commission the professionals needed.

The Panel asked how the voice of the parent was included within the EHCPs, and was advised by Michelle Lister that in wider terms, PCAN had been involved in the quality compliance group and had been involved with recruitment to the team.

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Communication with parents was an area for improvement, and changes had been made to the communication system, with calls being put through more effectively. Jo-Anne Sanders advised that EHCPs should be co-produced with parents, and the Service was committed to providing a better experience. Where parents and carers were not satisfied, they could ask to meet with Senior Officers or Cabinet Portfolio Holders, or contact Kirklees Information and Advice Service, who could advocate for parents. The Panel was informed that PCAN offered challenge as well as support and brought experiences of parents and carers to the attention of the service. Investment had been made in a new IT system with a parent and partner portal, where parents would be able to see progress made by logging in, also allowing the team to concentrate on casework.

The Chair of the Panel commented that nationally there were challenges due to the rise in EHCP numbers, but that it was evident from the report that the service was working in partnership, using a systems-based approach, and focusing on quality, and thanked the Officers for their work.

RESOLVED –

- (1) The Panel welcomed the opportunity to meet the SENDACT Team and noted that this visit would be arranged.
- (2) The Panel noted the report and thanked Officers for their contributions.

9 Review of Children's Residential Homes and Fostering Provision

The Panel considered a report, which provided assurance and information on Residential Children's Homes and Fostering Services in Kirklees presented by Joel Hanna, Head of Service for Corporate Parenting.

The Panel were advised that:

- The majority of children in care in Kirklees were in family settings, with Foster Carers or Kinship/Connected Carers. A small number of children lived in residential, small group homes.
- Placements were also commissioned from independent fostering agencies and independent care homes where necessary.
- There was a national deficit in placements available for children; local and national campaigns had been launched to recruit foster carers.
- The report set out the position for recruiting Foster Carers.
- A team was working to recruit Foster Carers, and advertising on Kirklees vehicles was planned.
- All independent Care Homes and the six Kirklees Care Homes were subject to Ofsted inspections, regulations and standards.
- At the time of writing the report, 34 young people were living in externally commissioned provision, and 16 in Kirklees Care Homes.
- Some young people living in Care Homes could have been suited to Foster Care, however suitable provision had not been available. Placements may be short-term while foster provision was found for these young people, however they may settle and the residential placement may then become the most suitable placement for them.

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- The Service had sought to expand provision and last year opened a sixth Children's Home which had not yet been assessed by Ofsted but was settled and stable and would be inspected by the end of March 2025.
- Existing Children's Homes were in the process of being refurbished as the young people living there moved on.

In answer to a question about the decrease of Foster Carers, and whether there was a shift toward carers choosing to work for private fostering agencies, Joel Hanna explained that the ten year low in the number of Foster Carers applied to both private agencies and local authorities. The trend in recent years had been that more Foster Carers were leaving than joining. As a result, the DfE were working with local authorities on regional campaigns. Foster Carers in Kirklees received remuneration for their work, and received a skills level payment, which allowed Foster Caring to be an alternative to other paid work. The Panel was informed that there was a drive to increase the number of Kirklees Foster Carers, as agency fees doubled the cost of placing children through a private fostering agency.

The Panel asked how confident the Service was that the residential homes would improve their Ofsted judgements on the next cycle of inspection, and whether good practice was shared across the homes. Joel Hanna advised that several activities had led to improvements, including:

- Creating a progression route and enhanced leadership capacity for residential practitioners.
- Recruiting residential practitioners internally from Family Time Team.
- Moving residential staff around homes to share good practice.
- Making improvements to the building at a home currently at Requires Improvement.
- Monitoring visits ensuring that the other home at Requires Improvement is on a positive trajectory.

The Chair advised that she had visited the Kirklees Fostering Network in September 2024, where she had met with Foster Carers to hear their first-hand experiences and challenges and also to meet a number of foster babies.

RESOLVED –

The Panel noted the report and thanked the Officers for their contributions.

10

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.

Vicky Metheringham highlighted the following key points:-

Assessment and Intervention Teams

- High caseloads were being experienced for Social Work Practitioners and Personal Advisors, and this, as well as vacancies, was impacting on data reporting, meaning that the some of the data presented was showing a position worse than the reality.

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- There was weekly oversight of Social Work Practitioner and Personal Advisor caseloads and they were being offered management support.
- Checks were made to ensure children's visits were being undertaken and risk was being appropriately managed.
- There were currently vacancies for new Social Workers, but there was confidence that if retention was to remain strong, the vacancy situation would be much improved by late summer.
- 10 Frontline Practitioners were due to move to permanent Social Work posts later this year; this had been a successful recruitment strategy as all were indicating their intention to remain at Kirklees.
- Student Social Workers, apprenticeship and Step-Up to Social Work students would also qualify later in the year.

Children in Care

- Checks were made to ensure Looked After Children's plans were reviewed, that they were seen frequently and that they were optimising their health opportunities.
- Looked After Children's dental check data looked lower than the reality. Dental checks for children in care was currently 90%, meaning that 90% of children in care had seen a dentist in the last year.
- Through the Kirklees Parenting Board, a positive relationship had been built with the designated nurse for safeguarding children and there was the opportunity for a multi-agency data performance meeting to ensure the data aligned.

Child Protection

- Social worker assessments should take place within 45 days for Children in Need, however this had been impacted by caseloads and vacancies. It had been identified that some cases should be closed because families were not in agreement for the assessment to continue.
- Child Protection Plan assessments were completed in a timely manner.
- The number of children at risk of exploitation increased in November, which could be due to a rise in reporting as partners worked with Social Workers to share information. All children at risk of exploitation's plans were reviewed weekly to ensure timely intervention.
- Re-referrals – there had been a small rise in the number of children who have been on a Child Protection Plan in the previous 2 years. A deep dive was planned in March 2025 to ensure an understanding of the reasons why children were on repeat plans.
- Visits to children on a Child Protection Plan – data suggested visits within 15 days had dropped, however this was a reporting issue and did not reflect the actual picture.

Care Leavers

- Care Leavers seen within 8 weeks and Care Leavers with an updated pathway plan – these numbers had dropped according to data. This was related to the number of Care Leavers increasing, due to the drive for contact with care leavers aged 21 -25, and a number of unaccompanied asylum seekers making contact. There were 2 Hubs, in Dewsbury and in Huddersfield, where Care Leavers were supported, however attendance at the Hubs was not recorded as contact.

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- Pathway Plans – Completion rates had dropped as the new My Pathway Plan had been introduced. Training was being rolled out and the quality of plans, co-produced and owned by Care Leavers, was improving.

Children and Adolescent Mental Health services

- Waiting list for CAMHS – there was a rise in November which was within the normal range and was not anticipated to be an ongoing trend.

Children Going Missing

- Return interviews – the drop of 10% after missing children episodes was due to a small but significant number of young people having multiple episodes of going missing, covered by one interview, which impacted on the data. There was an ongoing review of the quality of those interviews.

In response to a question by the Panel as to whether there was a method to record visits by Care Leavers to the Hubs, Joel Hanna advised that after an increase in services offered at the Hubs, specifically work on isolation and loneliness carried out in partnership with Fresh Futures, footfall at the Hubs had increased. Visitors to the Hubs were encouraged to sign in, however not all visits were being captured. The 8 week measure was being reviewed, as Care Leavers might have contact with a wider variety of support than Personal Advisors only.

The Chair of the Panel advised that the Panel had visited the No 12 Dewsbury Hub on the 12th December 2024 following a meeting with the Children in Care and Care Leavers Team and seen how successfully it was set up, and acknowledged that there was still potential work to be done to ensure Care Leavers knew how to access the offer.

Jo-Anne Sanders, Service Director, Learning and Early Support highlighted the following key points, focusing on exclusions and performance:

- In November 2024 there was an increase in the number of permanent exclusions. This was typical of the trend for spikes in exclusions during November and January.
- The number of children excluded permanently this academic year to date was 21, 0.3% of the school population.
- The same figure last year was 34 exclusions at 0.5% of the school population, which meant that numbers were moving in the right direction, with the ambition of a 0% exclusion rate.
- The hard work of schools to be inclusive, and the increase in access to services was having a positive impact.
- The Inclusion Multi-Agency Panel was available to support schools and parents and was seeing a huge take-up of people asking for help and support.
- The largest year group for exclusion was Year 10, followed by Year 9 and Year 11. There was a need to support these older children to ensure there was a post-16 pathway for them into Year 12.
- There were a number of children with EHCPs who had been permanently excluded in November.

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- Work was ongoing in the SEND assessment and commissioning team (soon to be renamed the EHCP team) to ensure a smooth transition into alternative provision.
- Work had been undertaken to join services together however there was still more to do.

RESOLVED –

The Panel noted the report and thanked the Officers for their contributions.

11 Pre-decision scrutiny - Cabinet decisions on the horizon

Jo-Anne Sanders advised that in the November Scrutiny meeting it had been brought to the Panel's attention that a report regarding school admission arrangements would be brought to Cabinet in early 2025. The report entitled 'Determination of School Admission Arrangements for 2025/2026' was scheduled for Cabinet on 11th February and had been circulated to members of the Panel for information. Questions and comments were invited from the Panel, which Jo-Anne Sanders would respond to.

RESOLVED -

That the pre-scrutiny updates be noted and that Members of the Panel submit any questions and comments to officers for response.

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

Joel Hanna provided feedback from the last meeting of the Kirklees Parenting Board as Members of the Panel who attended the Board meetings had been unable to attend. The January meeting had focused on health priorities for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, including the recording of and reporting of dental health checks. The Panel was informed that it was a positive meeting with the partnership being extended to include representatives from Kirklees College and Huddersfield University. This had led to links being made between their services and the emotional health and wellbeing teams to see how access to counselling services could be increased. The Board had also welcomed two new Care-experienced Board Members with another due to join in March, to provide valuable input and lived experience to the Board.

The Chair of the Panel remarked on the efforts she had observed at previous meetings of the Kirklees Parenting Board to engage with young people, using their language and putting young people at the heart of the conversation.

RESOLVED -

That the updates from the Kirklees Parenting Board be noted.

13 Work Programme and Agenda Plan for 2024/25

The Panel had attended a joint meeting with the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel on the 16th January 2025 and considered a report on the work on the children and adults immunisation programme.

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The Panel was informed that there would be an additional Joint Panel meeting in May 2025 between the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel and the Children's Scrutiny Panel to consider Children's Dentistry.

Panel Members had attended the Youth Engagement Team Practice Learning Day on 10th January 2025 in Dewsbury and met with the team to find out more about their role and challenges.

The Panel were advised that a summary of all the visits which had so far taken place had been included in the work programme.

RESOLVED -

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