

Scrutiny Paper - The Journey to Exclusion Through a Safeguarding Lens

Introduction

The Independent Scrutineer for the Kingston & Richmond SCP (KRSCP) was asked to consider the 'Journey to exclusion through a safeguarding lens' within the two boroughs. This was part of a wider 'deep dive' commissioned into the subject by KRSCP Senior Leadership Team. This report uses contributions from frontline professionals, audits of current cases, first hand views from children and parents and statistical information to highlight opportunities to improve practice and recognise some of the excellent work that is going on.

Exclusion remains high on the national agenda. In May the government published its response to the Timpson review of school exclusion. This report and its 30 recommendations were considered by a Task and Finish group in Kingston and Richmond. This group engaged with 9 school governors from across the boroughs, testing their understanding of the exclusion process. As a result, a number of recommendations were made. This paper should be considered alongside other pieces of commissioned work when considering appropriate strategic recommendations for improvement.

The impact of exclusion on children, families and those involved in the education of the individual is nearly always significant. To try and illustrate this within a short scrutiny paper poses real difficulties. What is apparent from the work completed is that the experience for all involved is often traumatic and causes very genuine anxiety.

One of the difficulties when considering how the Partnership can improve, learn lessons and highlight best practice when scrutinising a topic such as exclusion is the inevitability that one agency has a dominant part to play. Whilst there will be comment regarding practices in schools to provide context, the recommendations made are at a strategic, multi-agency level wherever possible.

Common sense would dictate that there is a clear but not exclusive link between children who are excluded and children who are vulnerable to safeguarding issues. There is also evidence that children who are excluded have often suffered trauma earlier in their lives. The current pandemic has highlighted the hugely significant part education establishments play in safeguarding. We have discussed at length and provided strategies recognising the risk to 'unseen children'. This risk will continue long after the pandemic has been resolved, with children who are excluded often being those that are unseen and therefore at greatest risk.

Purpose of the Scrutiny

Having been provided with Terms of Reference for this piece of work, I have taken the view that its main purpose is to support the wider quality assurance process which is aimed at improving practice and the quality of the service provided. This is done with the intention of improving outcomes for children and young people through a process of continuous learning and improvement.

This report will seek to assure strategic leaders from the Partnership regarding this key area of work, particularly highlighting any child safeguarding improvements that could be made. It will seek to highlight systemic findings and provide recommendations for improvement. Operational recommendations have already been provided through the November 2020 audit.

Methodology

To scrutinise current multi-agency practice and performance in terms of exclusion the following methodology was used:

Focus Groups with education professionals were held to seek practitioners' views.

Scrutiny of the draft report completed following multi-agency audit of excluded children November 2020.

Scrutiny of audit completed on children not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Engagement with parents and young people.

Scrutiny of local / national statistics.

Discussion with AD for Pupil Support.

Consideration of other reference documents including the report on the exclusions project with school governors.

Focus Groups

In November this year the KRSCP held two focus groups. Each was chaired by the Independent Scrutineer and Head of the Virtual School. An excellent cross section of staff at all levels attended and played an active part in discussions. The conversations were structured, following a series of pre-set questions aimed at eliciting the best possible engagement of all participants. The response was open, honest and on the whole reassuring. The significant information gleaned from the groups is bullet pointed below:

- It was clear that all of the schools attending felt they did everything within their powers to avoid exclusion. It was seen very much as 'the last resort'.
- There remains a culture where some teachers exclude pupils from lessons because of behaviour.
- There is some excellent innovative work taking place to reduce the journey to exclusion with cultures being challenged, interventions and engagement strategies being put in place to reduce the risk.
- Training is required for staff, particularly in terms of the impact of exclusion and how to avoid it.
- Transition between schools continues to pose challenges.
- Mental Health provision is difficult to access.
- Educational Psychologists are an exceptionally important but an incredibly scarce resource.
- The relationship with children and families is key to success.
- The Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) drew almost universal praise but concerns were raised about children being sent there 'too late', reducing the opportunity to return them to mainstream school once work had been completed.
- Whilst there was mention of seeking support from some voluntary sector providers there was little within the contributions that indicated schools were considering the multi-agency aspect of exclusion.

Whilst KRSCP can take significant assurance from many aspects of these focus groups there are some areas that would benefit from clear strategic, multi-agency direction and leadership. It is clear that those charged with educating our children are incredibly motivated to do so.

'I hate imposing exclusion, it's the worst thing to do to a pupil.'

'No-one wants to do an exclusion. I didn't join the profession to exclude a child.'

*'Exclusion itself will not change the behaviours it is the support around the child /family **reintroduction** that will make the difference.'*

Perhaps the most significant question asked in the focus groups was:

'What do you need to exclude less?'

I have bullet pointed the responses given, many of which were repeated across both groups.

- Training, including ACE awareness, attachment, regulation, trauma informed practice, working with trauma, regulation of my emotions.
- Whole school training to assist with change in culture.
- Increase in MH support and quicker access to MH support.
- EP time for staff.
- Funding for executive skills training.
- Access to more PRU time space, support, joint working.
- Understanding empathy & what that means.
- Developing partnerships with parents earlier.

The lack of requests for assistance from other partners (with the exception of mental health professionals) highlights the fact that schools are often dealing with the issue in isolation.

It is equally clear that there is a significant gap in perceived support for schools and consideration of any multi-agency approach. Whilst individuals did acknowledge the important part mental health providers could play and talked about Social Care in some safeguarding cases there was little evidence of professionals considering a multi-agency approach to the issue. This appears to be driven by a culture that exclusion is a 'school issue' which primarily focusses on engagement with the family and child. Like many other agencies, schools have limited resources and time to invest in multi-agency planning and interventions. Such actions would require real support from the Partnership and senior leaders if they were to become common and best practice.

Scrutiny of the draft report completed following multi-agency audit of excluded children November 2020

In September 2020 KRSCP Senior Leadership Group (SLG) commissioned a multi-agency audit as part of a wider assurance process regarding exclusion. Eight children, four from each borough who had episodes of school exclusion were selected and their cases considered by a multi-agency panel.

A report then followed that detailed themes, recommendations and features of individual cases. Whilst I do not intend to reproduce the report in this document, I do recommend that it is read in conjunction with this paper. The precis of cases shows the complexity and gives real context to the issues the Partnership is trying to address. Many of the recommendations and themes mirror concerns raised within the focus group.

The report highlights the following themes:

- Impact of lockdown on education and attendance.
- The experience of children varies according to school - some schools will make more reasonable adjustments to avoid School Exclusions- what supports a school to continue to be inclusive and nurturing despite professional fatigue?
- Learning about non-verbal children, they are the most vulnerable.
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Understanding of trauma informed practice - attachment, separation.
- Voice, position, identity of the child in large sibling groups; the lived experience of the child must not be lost in a focus on parental difficulties.
- Some families had been known to services for many years and there had been several previous plans and interventions.
- Parental and environmental vulnerabilities and risks - complex needs of children with a number of vulnerabilities in their families - including parental mental health concerns, Domestic Abuse, extra familial harm.
- Disproportionality and identity - out of the randomly chosen group, 5 of the children were not from a White British background (BAME borough proportions Richmond 17%, Kingston 39%).
- Wider Information sharing, including MARVE information with schools and GPs.

The report goes on to make six recommendations that are specific to how services can engage differently with families to support them to make changes and protect the child. These recommendations deal with operational improvements but point to strategic changes that could improve practice.

Themed areas including training, EHCPs, hearing the child's voice and greater multi-agency practice have recommendations made. This report, as stated in the introduction, will seek to make findings with recommendations for improvement. Those areas highlighted in the Audit recommendations will feature within these findings.

Scrutiny of audit completed on children not in education, employment or training (NEET)

A multi-agency audit of four children not in education, employment or training was commissioned as part of this process. I have had an opportunity to read a precis of each case and the comments made by those conducting the audit.

Rather than deal with each case individually I would highlight the following issues that were identified by the auditors:

- Multiple school placements contributed to a 'broken school background' and reinforcing dis-attachment.
- Virtual School engagement earlier in cases could have offered support to the school earlier. This would provide better opportunities to engage with the child.
- Early intervention can be cost effective for the Partnership.
- Extend Virtual School attachment awareness & emotional coaching for all schools in K& R.
- Provide emotional coaching at an earlier age throughout the school.
- Parents should be supported through the process. More schools-based training sessions for parents.
- Where children are at risk of exclusion there is a need to develop a network for parents to engage & support families.
- A preventative strategy needs to be developed. Financially this would be cost effective when the cost of crisis care is considered.
- Adapt the Pause model <https://www.pause.org.uk/why-pause/> *The purpose of **Pause** is to prevent the damaging consequences of children being taken into care. ... On average, they are significantly more likely to require **interventions** from public services throughout their lives and have their children removed from their care too.*
- Role of the current children centres could be explored to widen ~~form~~ from the 0-5yr agenda and EYFS, could work more with vulnerable families of older children bigger ages.

Again, as with the November audit, many of the observations made are specific to operational issues. There is however, some excellent evidence to support systemic change and strategic recommendations.

Engagement with parents and young people

I am extremely grateful to the parents and young people who engaged with us and contributed to this report. It is of note that those that did, especially the young people, spoke to individuals they could relate to, professionals who have specific skills and training. This links to previous scrutiny completed regarding 'missing'. One of the key messages from that work and this is that children and families need to develop trusting relationships before they will engage fully. This was reflected in my interactions with education professionals who acknowledge the need to engage with families early and support each other.

Contributions varied and it is clear that each family experience is different. Factors that were common amongst those spoken to included:

- Perceived lack of communication / engagement prior to exclusion.
- Lack of a trusted individual for the child or parent to speak to.

- Shame and anger at the exclusion.
- Frustration at the lack of specialist support.
- Positive feedback where alternative provisions were found.

Early engagement and joint strategies with the family are key to prevention of exclusion.

Scrutiny of local / national statistics

I have been provided with a breakdown of fixed period and permanent exclusions across Kingston and Richmond between 20017 and March 2020. I have also been given details of excludees as a percentage of ethnic group in secondary school.

This information shows pupil numbers for exclusions across different year groups (3 – 11) and whilst there are a few significant variations between years it is extremely difficult to draw any conclusions from them.

To gain a greater insight into safeguarding and its connection prior to or post exclusion far greater statistical analysis and expertise would be required.

Discussion with AD Pupil Support

Having been supplied with a brief paper detailing current pupil support initiatives I consulted with the AD for Pupil Support. Again, the professionalism, openness and enthusiasm to reduce exclusions was apparent from the outset of our conversation.

Part of my role and purpose of this paper is to assure the strategic leads for the Partnership regarding good practice. My conversation with this individual delivered assurance around culture at senior management level, innovation and recognition that more could be done in terms of multi-agency work.

It is not possible to highlight all of the work being done to try and develop multi-agency working but the following highlights are worthy of mention:

- Early Advice and Intervention Panel sits to seek resolutions for pupils who are recognised at being in the early stages of behaviours that will lead to exclusion.
- Cause for concern meetings allow professionals to discuss interventions and strategies. These have included contributions from partners.
- A pilot scheme for children who have been the subject of more than one fixed term exclusion is being explored with a focus on more bespoke restorative work being completed with individuals.

It is clear that all three of the above pieces of work could be developed across a multi-agency forum, giving greater depth, knowledge and opportunities for support to children and families. This in turn would reduce the associated safeguarding risks.

Findings and recommendations

Finding 1. Despite an overriding culture that accepts exclusion should be avoided and only used as a last resort, there is evidence that the impact on children and families is not fully understood by professionals.

Recommendation – KRSCP review its multi-agency training offer, specifically considering the effect of trauma both pre, and post exclusion.

Finding 2. There is no evidence of a multi-agency strategy that deals with exclusion prevention. Whilst individual pockets of good practice across agencies exist, they do not follow any specific Partnership guidance.

Recommendation – KRSCP to develop multi-agency strategies and guidance on exclusion prevention. This strategy should consider existing service offers that could be provided and / or adapted to support schools, children and families who are at risk.

Finding 3. Agencies work in silos, primarily as a result of competing demands, when dealing with children at risk of exclusion. Early intervention opportunities are sometimes lost reducing opportunities to prevent exclusion.

Recommendation – KRSCP develop Partnership interventions for these children, increasing awareness across professionals, children and families. This partnership intervention should consider the role and associated cost of the Pupil Referral Unit, of whom it was said almost unanimously should receive children earlier in their journey to exclusion.

Finding 4. Data held does not give sufficient detail to fully understand the extent of the problem, particularly in terms of exclusion through a safeguarding lens.

Recommendation - To understand the extent of exclusion through a safeguarding lens the Partnership should commission a bespoke piece of analytical work that will afford strategic leaders the opportunity to understand the issue, identify threats and consider strategies to minimise risk.

Finding 5. There is evidence of disproportionality amongst children who are excluded, not only in terms of BAME communities but also those on EHCPs

Recommendation - KRSCP should conduct further statistical analysis of factors that indicate disproportionality. If there is evidence that disproportionality exists then specific multi-agency strategies should be developed to reduce it.

Finding 6. Children and parents' engagement are often difficult if left 'too late'. Schools are seen as the focal point by the family and this can lead to a breakdown in relationships, increasing the risk of exclusion.

Recommendation – KRSCP should consider offering alternative communication and advisory pathways for families with a child at risk of exclusion. This offer should be extended to the child, offering the school, family and child a partnership alternative to resolve issues.

Finding 7. Existing work and pilots show a commitment to greater emphasis and value being attached to a multi-agency approach to preventing exclusion. This innovation is positive and could provide additional support to children and families.

Recommendation – KRSCP should consider the value of forming a Task and Finish group to engage staff from different disciplines to consider innovation in this area.

Conclusion

There are many positives to be taken from this piece of scrutiny. The dedication of staff and their genuine will to avoid exclusion is clear. I would like to offer my own personal thanks to those people who assisted me in this work, their openness and passion has made me confident that, with the correct strategic support, multi-agency work in this area can be developed and improved.

Much good practice already exists, particularly within our education establishments. Given more time and wider scope I would have liked to test if this is the case in other agencies. It has not been possible for me to detail all of this but the Cause for Concern meetings, pilots to engage pupils who are subject of multiple fixed term exclusions, actions to prevent exclusion from lessons, engagement with voluntary sector and the work of the Pupil Referral Unit were some real highlights.

The findings and recommendations made are provided to afford strategic leaders an opportunity to support and develop much of the work I have described above. There is a further opportunity to acknowledge the potential impact greater multi-agency work could have in this area. This would provide the best possible opportunity to improve outcomes for our children.

It should also be noted that this report is delivered at a time when the pandemic and associated lockdown leaves many of our children vulnerable. As stated earlier in this report the same safeguarding risks will continue to exist post pandemic for many children who are excluded.

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