

Edinburgh Council children's home reprimanded again

An Edinburgh council run children's home where staff 'assaulted young people' and used inappropriate restraints, has been reprimanded again – this time by an education watchdog which rated its education services as 'weak'.

Edinburgh Secure Services was hit by scandal last year when an investigation uncovered "illegality, maladministration and injustice" in the care accommodation for young people at Howdenhall and St Katharine's Special School.

In September – five months on from publication of the damning internal review which found significant failings "at all levels of management" in the council – the home was visited by Government inspectors.

Edinburgh Secure Services (ESS), which is run by the local authority and also provides education, was subsequently told to take urgent action to improve learning opportunities for youngsters staying there.

Education Scotland gave ESS a 'weak' rating for 'raising attainment and achievement' and 'unsatisfactory' for 'learning, teaching and assessment' following the September inspection, saying a majority of young people "are offered less than half of a normal school week".

Addressing the issues at a council committee this week, a council education director said that at the time of the inspection ESS' school roll was "less than four" and that more time was needed "to make the improvements needed".

The education watchdog found young people were not being provided with a full-time education and have "limited or no attendance at school".

"Young people are not motivated to engage with the learning on offer," the report said.

"Local authority officers and senior leaders need to urgently develop a strategic approach to improve approaches to learning, teaching and assessment.

"The school does not yet provide all young people with a full education timetable. A majority of young people are offered less than half of a normal school week. Senior leaders need to address this issue as an immediate priority.

"Although physical spaces for learning are attractive and well resourced, senior leaders and staff need to improve school culture as a matter of urgency."

The council was warned there should be "no further delay in actioning plans to meet with teachers to improve practice across the school".

Lorna French, Edinburgh Council's acting head of schools and lifelong learning, told the Education Committee on Tuesday that following the local authority's own shocking findings teachers at the secure accommodation were "deployed to other duties because the population was so small".

"The whole improvement journey for Howdelhall is predicated on who is actually attending it and the numbers just aren't there," she said.

Normalisation of abusive behaviour

Although the report on the many failings at ESS was not released in full due to its 'sensitive nature', a shortened version was published by the council in March, revealing "illegality, maladministration and injustice".

A source told the LDRS at the time that it outlined "serious and sustained failings" and "physical and mental abuse of highly vulnerable and disturbed young people in the council's secure units, going up to 2020".

"It also refers to the normalisation of abusive behaviour and inadequate investigation into complaints until the whistleblower raised the alarm," they added.

It was reported elsewhere that it highlighted inappropriate use restraint techniques and assaults on children, abusive language, isolation of young people and a toxic management culture.

Education Scotland's follow-up review also rated the children home's efforts raising attainment and achievement as 'weak'.

Inspectors said: "Young people in the broad general education are making limited progress.

"At present, continued poor attendance and lack of engagement are having a negative impact on all learner's progress."

It said "a few young people" had shown improvements in their reading ability – but the report said this only demonstrated "young people's capacity to learn even with limited engagement".

It added: "Between March and April 2022, local authority officers undertook an evaluation of the school's performance.

"The subsequent report, shared with senior leaders in May

2022, identified areas requiring significant and urgent improvement.

“As yet, these areas requiring attention have not been addressed.”

Noting the poor ratings at the education committee meeting, Jackie Reid, acting senior Education Manager said: “I would also like to reassure you that the intensive support commenced with the educational provision in Howdenhall back in March, and that continued until the point of the inspection, where that external scrutiny process was undertaken.

“And we will carry on supporting as is necessary.”

Ms French added: “I think it’s important that committee understand that the education delivered at Howdenhall is very individualised and the local authority did review in March and found almost exactly the same as what HMI found when they went in.

“But to make the improvements, it wasn’t – the period of time to make the improvements needed other things to be in place, like a population.

“So rather than completely changing the provision of Howdenhall, the teachers were deployed to other duties because the population was so small so the whole improvement journey for Howdenhall is predicated on who is actually attending it and the numbers just aren’t there.”

She added a report on how education provision will be improved at Howdenhall and St Katharine’s Special School will go to committee in March, and will also detail the wider plan for implementing recommendations made following the internal review.

In a letter to parents, Education Scotland said the school “needs additional support and more time to make necessary

improvements”.

by Donald Turvill

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