

Children's secure unit closed permanently Edinburgh after string of failures

Scotland's last council-run secure children's unit in Edinburgh has closed permanently following a string of failures – as council officers said it is no longer needed and unveiled plans to re-purpose the building.

Edinburgh Secure Services was shut due to a “significant reduction in our need” and to “divert children away from needing to be in secure services,” the authority’s education Director said.

The council said it will now be turned into “a multi-functional, multi-disciplinary resource to manage family crises”.

However councillors said they were “nervous” about the plan and feared this could lead to more youngsters being placed in accommodation outwith the local authority.

An investigation last year found that highly vulnerable children who stayed at the six-bedroom unit, known as Howdenhall, were subject to “serious failings” which compromised their “well-being and safety” over a 10-year period.

This included “physical and mental abuse of highly vulnerable and disturbed young people in the council’s secure units” up to 2020, a source who read the report in full said.

Last September government inspectors rated the secure care unit’s education services, based at St Katherine’s Special School within the facility, as ‘weak’.

Education Scotland said the majority of young people “are offered less than half of a normal school week”.

Young people were not being provided with a full time education and had “limited or no attendance at school,” the watchdog found.

A follow-up inspection in May shortly before the service was wound up “provided evidence that some progress was made with each identified area for improvement,” a report to the council’s Education Committee on Wednesday.

It added: “The school closed permanently on 28 June 2023.

“Education Scotland will therefore make no further visits in connection with the original inspection.”

Amanda Hatton, executive director of children’s services at Edinburgh City Council, told councillors: “We have seen a really significant reduction in our need for secure and we’ve had some success in diverting children away from needing to be in secure services which is obviously the right thing to do.

“We therefore don’t need to have a secure service – and we were the only local authority in the country to have our own secure service.

“What we do need though is provision that supports children and young people when they come into care to be supported to go back home with their parents.

“If you come into care, and you’re in care for 12 weeks, you

tend to spend the rest of your childhood in care, so that 12 weeks is really, really important.

“We need a really intensive resource so we can support people to come into care in a crisis but then work fairly intensively with their family to get them home.

“It’s closed as a secure unit – it’s not closed in terms of provision, it’s being re-purposed.”

Cllr Euan Davidson, Lib Dems, said: “I’m quite nervous that we’ve stopped providing secure services.

“I’m particularly nervous they’re not going to be placed in the authority because we’re trying to avoid that in every other aspect of social care.”

Cllr Davidson said Howdenhall was “not ideal” but having that having a “local connection” was a “positive thing”.

However senior education official Steve Hart responded: “I’ll challenge you on that – that it was a positive thing.”

Mr Hart said Edinburgh had been “an outlier” for many years in relation to the use of secure provision.

He said: “We disproportionally had a significantly higher number of children within our secure care.

“In some respects this touches on to the film the Field of Dreams – *‘if you build it they will come’*.”

“If you have capacity for 12 children to be secured, you will pretty much use the capacity for 12 children to be secured.”

A council spokesperson said: “We are re-purposing the Howdenhall Secure Provision to provide an emergency resource for Edinburgh’s children where they can be safely housed, assessed, and supported to be reunified with their parent(s)/family, or appropriately matched to a long-term

placement that will meet their needs.

“It will provide a multi-functional, multi-disciplinary resource to manage family crises.”

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

