

Concern over lack of background checks for carers

Major concerns have been raised for the safety of some of Edinburgh's most vulnerable residents after it emerged a healthcare provider used by the council was not carrying out background checks on new staff.

Councillors were left shocked at a meeting of the authority's scrutiny committee as an audit report revealed the 'large' care contractor – which was not named – was not adequately vetting carers through the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) scheme as of December last year.

One said he was "astonished and appalled" after officials were unable to answer whether the council was "breaking the law" as a result of the contract failures.

Run by government agency Disclosure Scotland, the PVG scheme aims to ensure people applying to work with children or vulnerable adults don't have a history of behaviour which would make them unsuitable for such roles, by checking criminal databases and other relevant records.

Describing the checks as "absolutely essential," Cllr Dan Heap said they are in place to "protect some of the most vulnerable people who receive care".

He said it was also concerning that it was not known whether it was "an isolated incident, or is also happening with other service providers".

A report scrutinising how effectively the council manages services delivered by external organisations said audit testing of a sample of 14 contracts found a 'large healthcare provider' – which it is understood provides care at home services – was not carrying out "compliance activities such as PVG or insurance checks".

These were "stopped during the recent pandemic and, as at December 2023, have yet to resume," the report added.

Laura Calder, head of internal audit for the council, said "conversations with contract managers" confirmed "PVG checks were not happening" during the meeting of the governance, risk and best value committee on Tuesday.

She said during the Covid-19 pandemic there was a "shortened PVG process" for "certain key roles" and suggested some work by the city's health and social care partnership "has been caught up in that".

She said: "Once someone is a member of the PVG scheme there's continual updates," adding: "The concern would be if there was anyone new who hadn't had a PVG done before – that would provide us with concern."

Committee convener Cllr Kate Campbell said she was "really worried" by the report's contents.

She said: "My understanding is if you're carrying out a PVG check you're carrying it out because there's a risk for children, young people or vulnerable adults."

Cllr Heap asked whether the council was "in breach of statutory requirements" and whether failure to carry out PVG checks was "an issue more broadly" across the local authority.

In response Chief officer for Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership, Pat Togher, said: "A PVG is mandatory for those carrying out regulatory roles as is being described.

“There are some areas that don’t necessarily require it and it will be for us to go away and look at the finer detail of that.”

After the meeting, Cllr Heap said: “I was extremely concerned to hear that at least one company providing health and social care services to the Council was not undertaking required background checks for new care staff.

“These checks are in place to protect some of the most vulnerable people who receive care, so they are absolutely essential. I was astonished and appalled to hear that council officers were not able to confirm that legal requirements had not been breached, nor whether this is an isolated incident, or is also happening with other service providers. In other words, we don’t know whether the council is breaking the law. I have asked for an urgent written response to the questions I raised today in order to provide some reassurance.”

The City of Edinburgh Council and Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership have been contacted for comment.



The City Chambers at night PHOTO ©2024 The Edinburgh Reporter