

**MINUTES OF RESILIENT COMMUNITIES AND CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MEETING - THURSDAY, 7 SEPTEMBER 2017**

Present:

Councillor Rowson (in the Chair)

Councillors

Critchley
O'Hara

Owen
D Scott

Mrs Scott
Stansfield

L Taylor

In Attendance:

Councillor Graham Cain, Cabinet Secretary (Resilient Communities).

Councillor Kath Benson, Cabinet Member for Schools and Learning.

Councillor Maria Kirkland, Cabinet Member for Third Sector Engagement and Leisure Services.

Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services.

Mr Steve Sienkiewicz, Clerk to the Committee.

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 29 JUNE 2017

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting of the Resilient Communities and Children's Scrutiny Committee held on 29 June 2017 be signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

3 PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Committee noted that there were no applications from members of the public to speak at the meeting.

4 EXECUTIVE AND CABINET MEMBER DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Executive and Cabinet Member decisions within its remit, taken since the last meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Cain, Cabinet Secretary (Resilient Communities) responded to a question from the Committee in connection with decision number PH39/2017 'Home to School Discretionary Faith Transport'. Asked how many pupils would be affected in relation to free bus pass allocation, he explained that more people would now be entitled to bus passes as a result of the changes.

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In relation to decision number PH41/2017 'Early Years' Service Provision' The Committee expressed concern about the promotional pack and training courses for potential childminders being discontinued and asked what help would be given to childminders in the future. Councillor Cain responded by explaining that the changes were as a result of the funding distribution formula which had been amended via Government. As a result, the funding would now go directly to the providers. He further explained that the Council was working closely with the Safeguarding Board to ensure the funding was properly distributed and that Ofsted would be inspecting the providers, in order to provide an additional level of assurance. With regards to the discontinuation of the training courses, Councillor Cain explained that the Council had been providing the training over and above the statutory requirements and that in future, it would continue to be available directly from the providers.

The Committee agreed to note the Executive and Cabinet Member decisions.

5 CHILDREN'S SERVICES UPDATE REPORT

The Committee considered a report which highlighted key areas of work and progress within the Children's Services Directorate. The report was presented by Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services, who began by providing a verbal summary of the main content of the report under the following headings:

- Blackpool Young People's Service
- Review of High Needs Provision
- Social, Emotional and Mental Health Free School
- Edge of Exclusion Project
- Ofsted Inspection Gradings
- Unvalidated School Results
- School Admission Appeals
- Demand Management/Early Help Thresholds
- Improvement Plan
- Opportunity Area
- Neglect
- Compliments.

Mrs Booth then responded to comments and questions from the Committee in relation to the content of the report and the summary she had provided.

With regards to the Ofsted Inspection Gradings, the Chair pointed out that at the last meeting of the Committee, it had been requested that a short summary of the reports be provided to Committee Members as and when they became available. She requested that in future, it would be helpful if this information could be provided on an ongoing basis.

In connection with the Opportunity Area report, Mrs Booth reported that a draft Opportunity Area Plan was almost ready and that a further update would be provided at either the October or December meeting of the Committee.

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The Committee raised questions relating to the Edge of Exclusion Project and specifically, how children were referred onto the scheme. Mrs Booth explained that it was a needs-led scheme with a wide range of tools available to support it. Most of the referrals were directly from schools and the scheme was considered to be working well. In addition, the Council was developing an Inclusion Strategy that would include elements of alternative education provision.

The Committee pointed out that the School Inspection Outcomes report indicated that overall, Blackpool had good primary schools, although secondary school education required improvement. Asked what was being done to improve matters, particularly around quality of teaching, Mrs Booth explained that a school improvement plan was now in place which contained a wide range of different elements around school improvement. She also referred to the Inclusion Strategy which was being developed in collaboration with schools. The main areas of improvement were linked to behaviour, aspiration and holding schools to account. Mrs Booth explained that she was meeting with headteachers and heads of academies on 19 September 2017 in order to take things forward.

The Committee queried about the funding for the review of high needs provision, and whether the allocated £22,000 would be sufficient to support the implementation of changes following the review. Mrs Booth explained that it would likely be enough, although additional money would be available via Opportunities Funding.

Members discussed the accountability of academies and what means were available to the Council to hold them to account. The Committee also discussed the rates of retention amongst teachers, especially those that were newly qualified. Mrs Booth acknowledged that it was difficult for the Council to hold academies to account. She explained that she was working hard to build a constructive relationship with the Regional Schools Commissioner who held the accounting role. The Committee was informed that Mrs Booth was due to meet with 34 newly qualified teachers at the end of September and then quarterly thereafter. She explained that a great deal of successful work had been done in relation to Social Worker retention and that a similar provision needed to be applied to schools. The Committee requested that it be kept informed as to the outcome of Mrs Booth's meeting with the school teachers.

The Committee pointed out that the baseline assessment of children starting school could often be poor, especially for those who had not attended pre-school nursery. Asked if anything could be done to improve this, Mrs Booth explained that the Better Start Programme was all about improving a child's readiness for school. It aimed to influence delivery and provide early help intervention for families in need.

With regards to the Unvalidated School Results, Mrs Booth explained that she was confident that all the results would be validated by the Department for Education. The Committee acknowledged that there had been a significant improvement in Key Stage 2 outcomes, but asked what impact there had been regarding the change in relation to GCSEs. Mrs Booth explained that the changes had created confusion. In terms of results, Blackpool was the second weakest in the region overall, although the maths results had improved slightly. She commented that the more inclusive schools appeared to have done better, although it was early days in the context of validation and understanding

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The Committee moved on to a discussion regarding the numbers of looked after children in Blackpool, pointing out that that the 20% reduction target appeared to be very ambitious. Mrs Booth explained that the current figure stood at 532, compared with 554 on 24 April 2017. Huge efforts were being undertaken to ensure that children were placed into care when appropriate. She acknowledged that up until now, some children had been admitted to care when more could have been done to support them at home. Responding to a question about the rescinding of care orders, Mrs Booth explained that sometimes, applications would be made to rescind, as well as other intermediate measures that could be applied in relation to a child in care.

Asked about the assessment system for a child being considered for care, Mrs Booth explained that threshold criteria was applied to risk, which had not always been applied properly in the past. There had been little confidence in that system and subsequently, the scheme of delegation had changed and the journey of care planning was being examined to ensure that children were only being admitted to care when appropriate.

In relation to staffing, Mrs Booth explained that Blackpool should be fully staffed with social workers by January 2018, resulting in far less reliance on agency workers. It was however, necessary to ensure that adequate levels of management support was in place, particularly in relation to the less experienced and newly qualified staff.

Asked how Blackpool's figures were looking in relation to children being returned to care having being previously discharged, the Committee was informed that no children had been returned to care during the last four months and that extensive packages of support were provided to the families of discharged children.

The Committee moved on to a discussion regarding the Blackpool Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and asked about how well it was performing. Mrs Booth explained that more needed to be achieved in terms of joint working on decision making. Currently, only 11% of police referrals were converted to statutory assessments. The Committee requested that it be kept informed in terms of MASH performance and the work being done to improve matters.

Members asked questions about the caseload of social workers and whether it was fully monitored. Mrs Booth explained that robust monitoring now took place. Current figures were as follows:

- Lowest 3 (newly qualified social worker)
- Highest 33 (but with 11 due to close)
- Average 17.

She added that the preferred average figure would be 15-16 for Newly Qualified Social Workers and it was anticipated that this would be achievable in the near future.

The Committee went on to consider and discuss the Blackpool Safeguarding Children's Board report, which highlighted the multi-agency response to neglect. Members pointed out that the report made reference to 238 practitioners who had attended the two day training programme delivered by the Safeguarding Board and asked what percentage of

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all the practitioners that figure covered. Mrs Booth explained that she was unaware of the exact figures, although was not confident that everyone who should have received an invitation to attend actually did so. As a result, more sessions would be facilitated in the near future. She went on to explain about the wide range of tools available to assess neglect.

The Committee pointed out that overall, the report focussed on the work of professionals and asked what was being done to highlight what action to take in relation to concerns from the public in relation to neglect. Mrs Booth explained that a wide range of information was available on the Safeguarding Board website and also via the Council website. In addition, a number of leaflets were available which now needed to be re-distributed. She added that part of the overall Improvement Plan was to improve communications, which would include the promotion of information in this area.

The Committee asked about what advice was available in relation to concerns raised by professionals. Mrs Booth explained that more needed to be done in relation to information sharing on a need to know basis. A family hub approach was being developed in Talbot and Brunswick Wards, aimed at information sharing that would be expanded to other areas if deemed to be successful.

The Committee thanked Mrs Booth for her attendance and agreed to note the report.

Background papers: None.

6 SCRUTINY WORKPLAN

The Committee considered its Workplan for the remainder of the current Municipal Year and the Chairman invited suggestions from Committee Members as to possible Workplan items.

The Committee agreed to note the Workplan.

Background papers: None.

7 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee agreed to note the date of the next meeting as Thursday, 19 October 2017, at 6.00pm.

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Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.17 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:

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