

**MINUTES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING -
THURSDAY, 28 JANUARY 2021**

Present:

Councillor Hugo (in the Chair)

Councillors

Clapham	Critchley	Stansfield
D Coleman	Mitchell	Wing

Dr Elaine Allen, Roman Catholic Co-opted Member

Ms Helen Sage, Diocesan Co-opted Member

In Attendance:

Councillor Maxine Callow, Chair of the Scrutiny Leadership Board

Councillor Kath Benson, Cabinet Member for Schools, Education and Aspiration

Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council (Children)

Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager

Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services

Ms Sara McCartan, Head of Adolescent Service

Ms Jeanette Richards, Assistant Director of Children's Services

Mr Philip Thompson, Head of SEND and Early years

Mr Paul Turner, Head of School Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion

Mrs Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 19 NOVEMBER 2020

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 19 November 2020 be signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

3 PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Committee noted that there were no applications to speak by members of the public on this occasion.

4 YOUTH OFFENDING TEAM IMPROVEMENT PLAN - TRANSITIONS

Ms Sara McCartan, Head of Adolescent Service updated the Committee on the progress of the Blackpool Youth Justice Service Improvement Plan theme of 'Transitions'. She explained that early in 2020 the Youth Justice Board (YJB) had requested that all Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) complete a self-assessment based on the updated Standards for Children in Youth Justice Services (2019). Five self-assessments had been completed, one

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of which had focused on Transitions. The Committee was informed that the Transitions theme was a child first approach which focused holistically on the variety of transitions a child might make. The Youth Justice Board had acknowledged that Transitions was a new area for YOTs to develop and as such would require a substantial commitment from partner agencies to achieve progress and practice development. The YJB planned to undertake moderation and validation visits to authorities where needed and in January 2021 Blackpool Youth Justice Service had been notified that the YJB assessment team felt that Blackpool had given an honest National Standards assessment of Blackpool's improvement journey. The YJB acknowledged that Blackpool was now at the stage of implementing and adopting tools, systems and processes and therefore no further action from the YJB was needed.

Ms McCartan reported that at the end of December 2020 the Council had been informed by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) that Blackpool had been chosen to be part of a Northwest area pilot thematic inspection of youth to adult transitions across criminal justice agencies. The inspection would set out to see what influenced the decision to transition a young person and what a good transition looked like for them at each stage. In response to a question from the Committee as to the anticipated date for the inspection, Ms McCartan informed Members that the inspection would begin on the week commencing 17 May 2021 and that the requested data had already been submitted to the Inspectorate.

With regards to the Youth Court, the Committee sought clarification over when the new Court building would be opened and whether specific facilities for the Youth Court would be provided. Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services confirmed that the need to provide suitable facilities to accommodate young people had been made clear and she anticipated that the new arrangements would be an improvement on the previous facilities.

In relation to the areas identified by the self-assessment as requiring improvement, the Committee asked whether these would be fed into the YOT Improvement Plan. Ms McCartan assured Members that the Improvement Plan was a robust framework for improvement which focused on five themes in line with the Youth Justice Board's National Standards for Youth Justice, with each of the themes identifying a designated lead person from the YOT partnership:

- Out of Court (led by the Head of Criminal Justice, Lancashire Constabulary),
- In Court (led by Legal Team Manager, Blackpool Magistrates Court),
- In the Community (led by Service Manager Targeted Intervention Service, Blackpool Council),
- In secure (led by Business Development Manager, Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool and Lancashire Children Safeguarding Assurance Partnership),
- On Transitions and resettlement (led by Education Inclusion lead and YOT Service Manager, Blackpool Council).

The Committee was informed that the Improvement Plan had been drawn up by the partnership and was monitored through the governance of the YOT Executive Board.

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Whilst Ms McCartan acknowledged the progress and strengths identified via the self-assessment audit, she noted that the area of Transitions required further work and a wider, more holistic approach which was underway.

The Committee requested further information in relation to the assertion that Our Children who were looked after were disproportionality supported by the YOT service. Ms McCartan identified the issue as a national trend and anticipated improvements would be made via the outcomes of the working party established specifically to consider the issue. The Committee requested that the data be reported back to a future meeting as appropriate.

The Committee agreed: That the data relating to the proportion of Our Children who were looked after be reported to a future meeting of the Committee following the outcomes of the working party examining the issue.

5 CHILDREN'S SERVICES MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

Ms Jeanette Richards, Assistant Director of Children's Services introduced the Children's Services Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP). She outlined that the MTFP called for significant additional investment into Children's Services over a two year period and that the focus would be around the five work programmes underpinning the plan as follows:

- Fostering Service Transformation;
- Edge of Care Services;
- Therapeutic Children's Home and Step Down;
- Placement Stability; and
- Discharges from Care.

In relation to the therapeutic children's home, the Committee sought clarification around the cited delays as well as questioning where the children would be recruited from and where they would be placed following completion of the 16-week placement. Ms Richards advised that the children identified for the therapeutic children's home project would be carefully selected for their suitability and during the 16-week period they would be supported to step down into foster care. The aspiration being for a reduction in placements within residential children's homes and a supported move into foster care.

The future plans for the former children's home located on Bispham Road were questioned. Mrs Booth, Director of Children's Services informed the Committee that the Council was in talks with Blackpool Coastal Housing to examine the feasibility of converting the building to supported accommodation for care leavers.

The Committee requested additional information around the reported numbers of children discharged from care, specifically seeking clarification around where they had been discharged to. Ms Richards reported that the majority of the children had stepped out of public care via a special guardianship arrangement order which added permanency to their care as provided by either foster carers or family members. She added that a

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small number of these children remained as Looked After but under the care of their parents whilst under supervision and review and with the provision of support as necessary.

With regards to the Council's preference of keeping children with their families or within the local authority area wherever possible, the Committee questioned whether appropriate training had been provided to the Planning Committee in order to ensure cohesion of policies across the Council. Mrs Booth advised that she was aware that this had been identified for inclusion on the programme of training for the Planning Committee and would seek clarification of when the session had been scheduled to take place. Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager clarified that the intention was not for the addition of more residential children's homes within Blackpool but for more children to be looked after within family homes, for example via foster carers.

In response to a question seeking clarification around the cited tighter management of the fostering service, Ms Richards explained that part of the fostering transformation programme had included the creation of three bespoke teams in the following areas:

- Recruitment and training of foster carers;
- Supporting carers and children through to permanence of placements;
- Supporting foster carers.

Ms Richards advised that the purpose of the bespoke teams was to create a more structured approach to the recruitment, assessment and training of foster carers and a subsequent alignment of skills with the fostering payment system. The Committee questioned whether the transformation programme had been created in response to previously identified areas of concern within the fostering service, with Ms Richards identifying that staffing resources within Children's Services had previously been diverted elsewhere which had resulted in a reduction in the training being offered to foster carers. Mr Arrowsmith suggested that the high number of children placed within residential children's homes reflected the abilities of Blackpool's foster carers to meet the needs of the children in their care and he anticipated that an increase in the skills of carers should result in a reduction in the need for residential children's home placements. In addition, the introduction of the therapeutic model of foster care added a further level of training for Blackpool's foster carers and aimed to better match the needs of the child to the most suitable foster carers whilst simultaneously providing better support and appropriate training.

The Committee requested details of the success of the current recruitment drive aimed at attracting suitable foster carers, in response Ms Richards reported that following the official launch of the recruitment campaign on 13 January 2021 there were 11 ongoing assessments for potential foster carers within the mainstream fostering service. This was an encouraging improvement on the five newly recruited foster carers for the whole of 2020. In addition, four prospective carers were being assessed for addition to the therapeutic fostering team who would potentially be providing foster homes for children on completion of their journey through the 16-week therapeutic programme, with Ms

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Richards advising that 12 carers would be required in total. The Committee was informed that a combination of approaches was being utilised to include a balance of digital campaign methods and more traditional recruitment techniques. Mr Arrowsmith reported that due to the importance of the need to recruit, a team specifically dedicated to the recruitment of foster carers had now been established. In response to a question regarding remuneration of Blackpool foster carers in comparison to other local authorities, Ms Richards advised that rates of pay were now set at competitive levels but that also of importance was the provision of adequate support for carers and the presentation of foster caring as a career. The Committee requested further information on how prospective candidates could begin the application process, which Ms Richards agreed to provide to Committee Members following the meeting.

Members discussed the circumstances which might cause a breakdown of foster placements, with Ms Richards acknowledging that there was a complex combination of reasons which differed for each individual child and which often became more complex as the age of the child increased. In relation to the disproportionate number of teenage children in care in Blackpool, the Committee suggested that this mirrored the decline in academic achievement across the education phases whereby attainment levels of primary phase children declined as they progressed through the secondary phase. The Committee noted the correlation and asked for information on any plans in place to address this. Ms Richards reported plans to coordinate adolescent services with other support services offered across the Council to young people. She advised that an early help offer for teenagers was in the process of being formulated and a new structure for implementation being devised. She agreed that schools played an integral role and acknowledged the importance of working closely with them to ensure a coordinated approach to early help.

The Committee requested details of what young people asked for from the Council, with Ms Richards reporting that they often requested the development of different leisure activities and opportunities to keep them occupied. She added that Looked After Children had previously reported that they felt they could have been better supported to remain in their family homes. The Just Uz group would ordinarily be included in gathering the views of young people but Ms Richards advised that their meetings had been impacted by the pandemic and as such were not currently taking place. The Committee sought further clarification around how, in normal non-Covid times, young people were consulted and engaged with and asked for details on the methods utilised to capture their voices and valuable input. Ms Richards noted that the wishes and feelings of young people were at the centre of plans for restructuring and remodelling of services and that their input was factored into the consultation process for all major changes within Children's Services, along with the views of previous users of a service via engagement with young people and their families who had been key recipients of a service in the past.

With regards to any anticipated budgetary reductions arising from the MTFP, the Committee asked when any positive impact on the budget might become evident. Mr Arrowsmith advised that due to the longer-term nature of a number of the interventions as well as the increased initial spend required to implement them, the financial modelling

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indicated that it would be two to three years before any reduction in spending would be realised.

6 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY (SEND) STRATEGY

Mr Philip Thompson, Head of SEND and Early Years provided an update on the implementation of the current Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Strategy. Within his accompanying report, Mr Thompson had highlighted that one of the priorities of the SEND Strategy was to develop a continuance of local provision and services to meet the needs of children with SEND and he outlined that the consultation with mainstream schools to open SEN provision units within their schools had resulted in five successful applications from primary schools. The Committee requested an update in relation to the provision of SEN units within Blackpool's secondary schools, with Mr Thompson reporting that talks were currently ongoing with one of the town's special schools. The proposals centred around the potential of two classrooms being made available within one mainstream secondary school to be accessed and utilised by pupils attending a special school. The plans included proposals for the pupils to gradually transfer to the mainstream school fully over a period of two years.

With regards to the five successful applications for the SEN units, the Committee sought additional information on the consultation and recruitment process. Mr Thompson explained that all schools had been included in the consultation and had been asked to submit expressions of interest to be included in the project. As all applications had successfully met the suitability criteria, the decision had been taken to approve all five schools.

In response to a question around the status of the Oracle building, Mr Thompson reported that the current timescale aimed for completion by September 2021 with the building to be used as a sixth form SEN provision from that date. He advised that the building had undergone appropriate building surveys to assess its suitability and to provide estimated costings for any necessary modifications. The Committee was informed that a total budget allocation of £100,000 had been reserved for the work from the SEND capital works budget but that if costs exceeded this amount then funds would need to be allocated from alternative sources.

Mr Thompson reported that the Lotus free school for children aged 10 to 16 years was now open and had 21 pupils across years six, seven and eight. The Committee questioned whether this was as planned for this stage in the school's development, with Mr Thompson confirming that a total of 24 places had been commissioned for the first year, as agreed with the Department for Education. He outlined that from September 2021 this number would be expanded to 40 places and that 36 children had already been identified as looking likely to be suitable for most of those. By year five of the school, Mr Thompson anticipated that up to 67 pupils could be in place. He advised that the pandemic restrictions had impacted the settling in period for some of the pupils, with teaching staff reporting that the disruption of repeated periods of lockdown had been difficult for some of their children and advising that the pandemic might delay the introduction of additional pupils until the settling period had been completed for all current placements.

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Members considered the need to balance parental choice against the benefits of pupils remaining within a mainstream school, particularly at the transition point from primary to secondary. Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services identified that a common perception was that mainstream schools were unable to adequately cope with the needs of SEND pupils and that work was ongoing to help redress this misconception with parents and to demonstrate that pupils were often better placed within the mainstream system.

The Committee noted that the current strategy was due to expire at the end of 2021 and that the working party would begin to review and create a new strategy from February 2021. Members welcomed the opportunity to be involved in this process.

7 EDUCATION ASSESSMENT UPDATE

Mr Paul Turner, Head of School Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion updated the Committee to inform Members that GCSE, A Level and AS examinations for summer 2021 would not be going ahead and that the Office of Qualifications and Examinations (Ofqual) and the government were now beginning a consultation on how best to proceed. In addition, all primary school assessments scheduled to take place between April and July 2021 had been cancelled, which included KS1 teacher assessments, KS2 tests and teacher assessments and phonics screening checks. Mr Turner added that schools would not be required to complete any further activities to prepare for these assessments and that local authorities would not need to undertake monitoring or moderation activities.

When asked whether Blackpool pupils were adequately equipped to undertake appropriate home learning, Mr Turner reported that a rolling programme of laptop provision was underway but that not all pupils had as yet been in receipt of the necessary computer equipment, however no child in Blackpool would be unable to complete any school work during this time. Councillor Benson, Cabinet Member for Schools, Education and Aspiration informed the Committee that schools had been working in innovative ways to source the necessary equipment and suggested that should Councillors wish to support their local school then they might want to consider utilising some of their ward budget towards contributing to school equipment.

In response to concerns over the long-term academic impact of pupils being unable to adequately access home schooling provisions, Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services assured the Committee that dialogue was ongoing with the Department for Education regarding the unacceptable delays in the delivery of laptops to schools and she highlighted that the most deprived areas should have been prioritised. The Committee acknowledged the Department for Education's responsibility in providing IT equipment and internet capabilities to pupils but also noted the duties of schools to ensure that devices were promptly delivered to all pupils and where possible to utilise available school budgets to purchase additional equipment.

With regards to the potential impact on pupils' attainment, Mr Turner advised that future strategies, for example the Literacy Strategy which was currently in the process of being

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developed, would aim to address the impact of the pandemic on learning and would look for ways in which to incorporate methods by which pupils could catch up for any learning missed. Mr Turner praised the efforts of all the school leaders and staff for their dedication to their pupils throughout the pandemic and assured the Committee that efforts would be made to address any remaining issues once pupils were permitted back to school.

8 COMMITTEE WORKPLAN

The Committee reviewed the contents of the Workplan for 2020/2021. As part of its monitoring of the implementation of recommendations and actions, the Committee received a progress update from Mr Paul Turner, Head of School Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion on the recommendations resulting from the reviews of the School Response to Covid-19 Pandemic and Inclusion in Education. Mr Turner advised that all recommendations were ongoing and were achievable and he agreed to provide a full progress update at the next meeting of the Committee in April 2021.

The Committee considered the scoping document for the scrutiny review of Blackpool Better Start and agreed to approve the document.

Consideration was given to the proposed addition of SEND Funding and Capacity as a future topic for scrutiny, as suggested by Councillor Hobson, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change. Due to the number of existing items within the workplan, the Committee agreed that the proposed item be included for consideration as part of the programme for work for the next Municipal Year.

The Committee agreed:

1. To approve the addition of SEND Funding and Capacity to the Committee workplan for consideration as a scrutiny topic in the following Municipal Year;
2. To approve the scoping document for the Blackpool Better Start scrutiny review;
3. To receive a full progress report on all outstanding recommendations resulting from the School Response to Covid-19 Pandemic and Inclusion in Education Scrutiny Reviews from Mr Turner at the next meeting of the Committee on 22 April 2021.

9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting of the Committee was noted as Thursday 22 April 2021, commencing at 6pm.

Chairman

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(The meeting ended at 7.32pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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