

Report to:	CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Relevant Officer:	Jeanette Richards, Interim Director of Children's Services
Date of Meeting:	22 April 2021

SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT PLAN – CHILD EXPLOITATION AND HOMELESSNESS

1.0 Purpose of the report:

- 1.1 To update the Committee on the progress of the improvement journey in respect of services for vulnerable children and young people, with particular focus on children at risk of or experiencing exploitation or going missing, or young people who are at risk of homelessness.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

- 2.1 For the Scrutiny Committee to have oversight of progress made on the strategic and coordinated approach to providing support for children at risk of exploitation, going missing or at risk of homelessness, to help improve their outcomes by providing scrutiny, challenge and support.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

To fulfil the Committee's scrutiny role in seeking assurance.

- 3.1 Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No
- 3.2 Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

4.0 Other alternative options to be considered:

- 4.1 No other alternative options to be considered.

5.0 Council priority:

- 5.1 The relevant Council priority is: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience.

6.0 Background information

- 6.1 Relevant findings from the Ofsted 2018 Inspection

Children going missing and/or at risk of exploitation

"Children at risk of exploitation do not consistently receive holistic assessments of their needs and risks. The language used in records to describe children's vulnerabilities is sometimes inappropriate

and places the responsibility on children for the risks they are exposed to. “

“The Awaken team specialises in child sexual exploitation and has a more informed understanding of exploitation, although weak assessments and plans undermine this. Direct work is undertaken with children by Awaken, although the impact of this is unclear as the risk assessment tool is not used consistently to evaluate and measure risk.”

“Children who go missing do not always receive a timely return home interview. There is limited intelligence gathering to explore risk in more detail or consider wider factors, as the interview is limited to an account from the child. Return home interviews do not include a clear risk assessment or actions to reduce further risk.”

Homeless Young People

“Young people who present as homeless were not systematically offered the opportunity to become looked after following an assessment of their need for support. A small number of 16- and 17- experiencing unsuitable accommodation, such as bed and breakfast and sofa-surfing. This increases their exposure to risk and their views are given insufficient consideration, even when they have requested to come into care.”

These deficits were summarised as the following needing to improve:

“The response to children at risk of exploitation, and those young people who are homeless, and the extent to which their vulnerabilities are fully recognised and lead to responsive intervention to keep them safe.”

- 6.2 Since the inspection there have been many changes to both the strategic approach to child exploitation and to the Awaken service itself. Strategically, the most critical ones include:
- Governance for missing and exploitation is now clearly in place, with the Exploitation Strategic Board meeting bi-monthly, with representation from the Blackpool Council Head of Service and Contextual Safeguarding subgroup Chair. The Board has now developed a contextual safeguarding strategy that will allow for the adoption of common principles and objectives throughout Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool and Lancashire, while continuing to allow local teams the flexibility to meet the needs of their children.
 - A performance data framework is also being developed and Blackpool has had initial discussions about its requirements and what this may look like.
 - Oversight of the strategy is the responsibility of Blackpool’s exploitation subgroup which meets bi-monthly and monitors the action plan in place and is the intermediary with operations.
- 6.3 The Awaken service itself has undergone significant changes to systems, processes and structures. Strong partnership working now enables the team to know its most high risk exploited and missing children, who receive a bespoke package of direct work to reduce risk and improve outcomes. Central to this improvement is the collaboration and colocation of partner agency professionals from health and police and virtual links with Community Safety Partnership, education, Youth Justice Services, Early Help, Licensing and Substance Misuse services. Important changes include:
- Redesign of the assessment and planning tools used by the service and a redesign of the management information system to support their use.

- A change in approach so that workers in the Awaken service are co-workers, with overall responsibility for the child or young person remaining with their social worker. The Awaken social workers act as the specialist worker, providing knowledge and expertise and offering an enhanced service to families with the most complex needs and/or where risk is considered high.
- A Daily Exploitation and Missing Meeting (DEM) that brings together virtually operational leads from Awaken (social care, police, health, Missing From Home (MFH) Co-ordinators, licensing), Blackpool Request for Support Hub (RfSH), Youth Offending, wider social care staff, drug and alcohol Services, education, Targeted Intervention Services and the Community Safety Partnership team on a daily basis each morning.
 - The DEM meeting reviews referrals, intelligence, crime submissions and multi-agency information to build a picture of children who have been missing from home, those who are being exploited or at risk of exploitation and to raise awareness of offenders and locations of concern. By sharing information at the earliest opportunity, allowing for exploration of contextual safeguarding, mapping of associates, hot spots and persons of concern, multi-agency partners are able to agree and progress actions without delay, to protect and support children.
- Practice of the Awaken team is on a strength based, trauma informed and relationship based model which enables trusted relationships to be built with the young person to reduce risk and improve outcomes.
- A new practice guide/operating procedures for the service, clearly outlining the processes and practices of the team, the expected contribution and approach of all partners, but also stating the purpose of the service and its core principles and values and including a section on the appropriate use of language:
 - Language implying that the child or young person is complicit in any way, or responsible for the crimes that have happened or may happen to them, must be avoided. Instead, language should reflect the presence of coercion and the lack of control young people have in abusive or exploitative situations and must recognise the severity of the impact exploitation has on the child or young person.

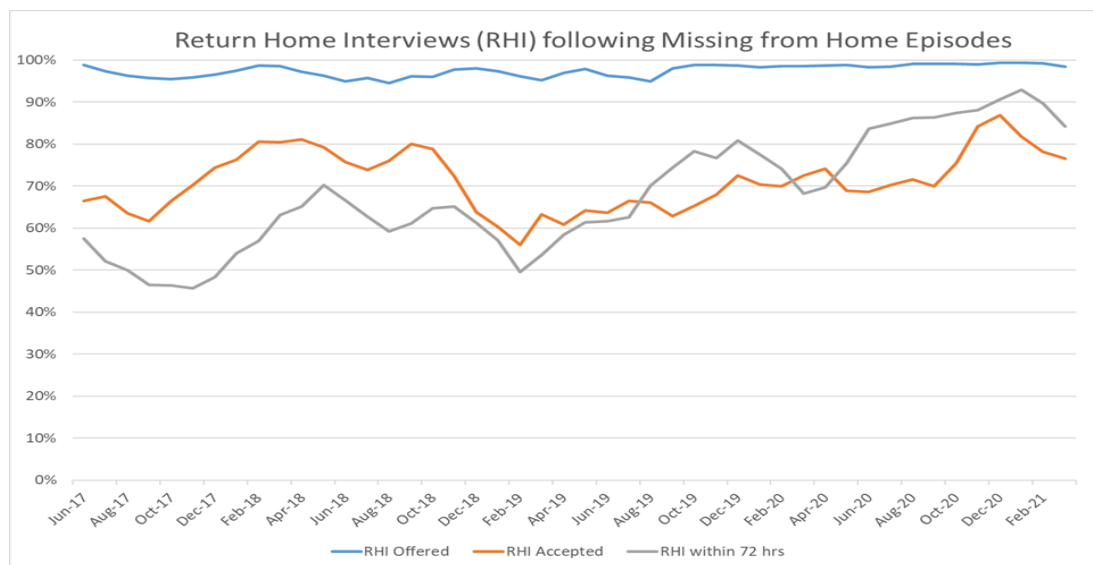
This is particularly important, as victim-blaming language may reinforce messages from perpetrators around shame and guilt. This in turn may prevent the child or young person from disclosing their abuse, through fear of being blamed by professionals.

- 6.4 **Missing from Home (MFH)** episode return home interviews are now undertaken by workers within the Awaken service itself, where the young person is resident in Blackpool or placed within a reasonable distance (where the young person is in care and placed outside of the town's boundaries within two hour travel distance). Young People placed further away will receive a return home interview from a specialist commissioned service in that area as arranged by the allocated Social Worker.
- 6.5 The MFH return home template has been re designed to incorporate contextual safeguarding, so we can understand emerging patterns and trends. In addition, information and intelligence captured enables mapping of associates, hotspots and persons of concern which will influence service delivery

and disruption tactics. Any relevant information is always fed back into the DEM meeting for consideration of next steps.

- 6.6 Blackpool introduced Trigger Plans in December 2020 for all children where the number of missing episodes are a concern. The plan is designed to assist carers, the police and partner agencies in locating the young person at the earliest opportunity and reducing missing from home episodes. The trigger plan is updated with any new information or intelligence to ensure its continued relevance.
- 6.7 A new pilot initiative begins this April focusing on out of hours disruption work. This is a collaboration with Community Safety Partnership and Awaken social care staff. Most activity involving young people takes place at weekends and evenings – the pilot will provide an additional window into the lived experience of the child/young person. This will include a visible presence in areas/locations of concern including arcades, train and bus stations.
- 6.8 Finally, Blackpool recognises that exploitation does not end when a child reaches their 18th birthday, however services in place to support and protect often end at this point. In Blackpool the service is exploring what transitional support could be pulled together for vulnerable young adults from a number of currently available services and initiatives such as Blackpool's Young People Service, Young Adder and Adult Risk Management meetings and how this could be further developed and built up.
- 6.9 **Impact of Changes**
The positive impact of these changes has been recognised both by the Council's own internal quality assurance processes and by external reviewers. Ofsted in their recent visit noted that "Partner attendance at the virtual daily risk meetings has increased, which ensures that the needs of children who are missing and at risk of exploitation are considered promptly within a multi-agency context." Furthermore, they also noted that "For those children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation, the co-location of a dedicated, multi-agency Awaken team has led to reliable and responsive information sharing and effective disruption activity. Relationship-based work, compatible with the Blackpool Family Rocks model of practice, is making a positive difference in this area of work. Multi-agency mapping meetings help identify, track and plan interventions to protect children."
- 6.10 Ofsted's assessment aligns with the Council's own view on an improving service, the recent independent audit of work undertaken by the service found:
- Good co-working between social worker and Awaken worker – initial discussion and joint visit and frequent discussions to ensure that respective roles remain clear.
 - The Quality of CE2 assessments (specialist child exploitation assessments) has improved, with the inclusion of information from other professionals – health information is much more evident than previously – and evidence of management oversight and input from Awaken meetings and good exploration of history – including research and analysis.
 - Good Police intelligence, mapping and interventions to protect young people and prosecute perpetrators and proactive action in use of Section 2 Child Abduction Warning Notices.
 - Awaken health assessments were on file where appropriate and provided a good overview of health needs and actions taken to address specific needs e.g. sexual health, referral to CAMHS or Youth Therapy.
 - Direct work is more consistently recorded with good examples – although not always consistently recording the tools used or uploading copies of the work.
 - Good voice of the child – although there could be more on the child's daily lived experience.

6.11 Finally, performance data also shows an improving picture around missing from home return home interviews: the consistency of the offer to all those reported missing and the increasing proportion of those offers that are accepted by the young person as well as the proportion held within 72 hours of returning home – see chart below:



6.12 It is likely that the success of this work is also evident in the 15 per cent drop in the number of missing from home episodes and in the increasing concentration of those episodes amidst a smaller number of young people going missing frequently (often children in public care). In 2020, children and young people going missing five times or more accounted for 69 per cent of the total number of missing episodes in Blackpool, with just 20 young people accounting for over 40 per cent of all missing episodes in the calendar year 2020.

6.13 Housing and Homelessness

Housing Options still offer a single point of access for customers and professionals with a wide range of services, including:

- In house temporary accommodation for homeless families, including a number of self-contained dispersed units.
- In house supported accommodation for 16/17 year olds.
- In house tenancy training programme.
- Access to Social Housing Waiting list.
- Access to Social Lettings Agency hosted by My Blackpool Home (Council owned company) to facilitate access to good quality, affordable, accommodation in the private rented sector.
- Family Mediation Service for 15 – 18 year olds.
- Access to money advice.
- Negotiation with landlords.
- Tenancy Support.

6.14 Over 90 per cent of families receiving help with housing were supported through early intervention and prevention, avoiding homelessness. As a unitary authority, Blackpool Council also takes a pragmatic approach to intentionality in homelessness decisions, only finding families intentionally

homeless when absolutely necessary and then still helping colleagues in CSC providing move on support. Only one family was found to be intentionally homeless in 2019. When households do unfortunately become homeless, they experience short stays in Temporary Accommodation. 97 per cent of families are moved into long-term accommodation in less than six months.

- 6.15 16/17 year olds are never placed in Bed and Breakfasts by the Council. There is now a joint protocol on homelessness with a strong focus on prevention and a toolkit to support frontline Social Workers and Housing Options Officers. The protocol provides a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities and a joint focus on prevention to keep young people with their families, wherever it is safe to do so, in addition to simpler pathways to access emergency accommodation when needed. Training sessions have now taken place internally with all relevant staff, albeit during COVID lockdown. Where 16/17 year olds cannot remain at home, whether temporarily or permanently, emergency accommodation is available through both housing and social care and family re-unification remains central to the plan for the young person. The Council has also developed William Lyons House to provide additional supported accommodation sourced by the Council and managed by Blackpool Coastal Housing (BCH) for young people (for 16 to 25 year olds, but predominantly 18 to 21 year olds).
- 6.16 A “Housing Clinic” continues to plan from age 17 for children and young people getting ready to leave public care. The Positive Transitions Housing Model provides transition for young people leaving care (from 17.5) where they move into a Council property (managed by BCH – the Council’s ALMO) and receive support for as long as required. The tenancy is held in trust until 18 and then the young person becomes a tenant in their own right. The impact of this approach can be seen in the fact that very few young people who have left care are deemed to be in unsuitable accommodation (typically 95+ per cent in suitable accommodation, with those that are not generally being in custody).
- 6.17 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No
- 7.0 List of Appendices:**
- 7.1 None.
- 8.0 Financial considerations:**
- 8.1 There are no financial considerations to consider.
- 9.0 Legal considerations:**
- 9.1 There are no legal considerations to consider.
- 10.0 Risk management considerations:**
- 10.1 None.
- 11.0 Equalities considerations:**
- 11.1 There are no direct equalities considerations. However, it would be appropriate to note that children and young people from more deprived backgrounds are, on average, more vulnerable to risks during

their childhood.

12.0 Sustainability, climate change and environmental considerations:

12.1 There are no sustainability, climate change or environmental factors to consider.

13.0 Internal/external consultation undertaken:

13.1 None.

14.0 Background papers:

14.1 None.