

**MINUTES OF RESILIENT COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING - WEDNESDAY, 6  
APRIL 2016**

**Present:**

Councillor Benson (in the Chair)

Councillors

Critchley	O'Hara	Singleton	L Taylor
Humphreys	Scott	Stansfield	

**In Attendance:**

Councillor Eddie Collett, Cabinet Member for School Improvement and Children's Safeguarding  
Councillor Maria Kirkland, Cabinet Member for Third Sector Engagement and Development

Councillor Peter Hunter  
Councillor Mrs Maxine Callow JP  
Councillor Debbie Coleman  
Councillor Gary Coleman  
Councillor Peter Callow

Ms Amanda Hatton, Deputy Director Early Help and Social Care  
Mr Andrew Foot, Housing, Planning and Transport  
Mrs Judith Mills, Public Health Specialist  
Ms Moya Foster, Senior Service Manager, Families in Need  
Mrs Vikki Piper, Housing Options Manager  
Mr Chris Kelly, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser (Scrutiny)

**1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Singleton declared a personal interest with regard to item 2, 'Domestic Abuse Thematic Discussion', the nature of the interest being that she was a member of BSafe Blackpool, the Blackpool Community Safety Partnership.

Councillor Singleton declared a personal interest with regard to item 3, 'Homelessness Thematic Discussion', the nature of the interest being that she was a member of the Fulfilling Lives Steering Group.

Councillors Critchley, Hunter and Stansfield declared a personal interest with regard to item 3, 'Homelessness Thematic Discussion', the nature of the interest being that they were Board Members of Blackpool Housing Company.

**2 DOMESTIC ABUSE THEMATIC DISCUSSION**

Ms Amanda Hatton, Deputy Director Early Help and Social Care, summarised the key issues

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to the Committee relating to domestic abuse. She advised that Blackpool experienced a high volume of domestic abuse incidents, with a large number of high risk cases being dealt with through the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC). She reported that domestic abuse in Blackpool was significantly high when compared to the rates in Lancashire and England as a whole. It was also noted that national research highlighted that domestic abuse was a significantly under reported crime. It was therefore considered likely that the underlying issue was higher than reported statistics.

The Committee was informed that for high-risk abuse cases, referrals were made to a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference, which determined a risk management plan for all parties, i.e. the victim, perpetrator and associated children. Members were advised that the rate of cases being discussed at a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference and therefore reflecting a higher risk of abuse, was significantly higher in Blackpool than it was nationally. Ms Hatton advised that of the cases reported to a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference, 26% were repeat victims. Members also noted the high numbers of children experiencing domestic abuse incidents, as well as a higher percentage of male victims in Blackpool than the national average.

Members noted the map in the report that illustrated the distribution of children in families subject to the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference process. It was noted that the highest incident rates of domestic abuse were in the central wards of Claremont, Talbot and Bloomfield. Members noted that there were also significantly high rates in the wards of Waterloo, Clifton, Brunswick and Hawes Side. Members challenged plans to ensure that incidents of domestic abuse in other areas of the town were not overlooked due to efforts being focused in wards with higher incident rates. Ms Foster, Senior Service Manager, advised that most services were not ward-specific and would therefore be available to all residents in Blackpool. She explained to Members the work that was undertaken in Early Help and in schools, where if cases of domestic abuse were uncovered or suspected, they would be escalated appropriately.

Ms Hatton advised Members of the work that was being undertaken in an attempt to reduce domestic abuse and to lessen its impact. She reported that work was currently being conducted to comprehensively review domestic abuse services. She informed Members that the piece of work involved all partnerships and commissioning representatives looking at an integrated commissioning approach for services and that it would also further include workforce development for front line staff. It was noted that the review would be chaired by the Deputy Director Early Help and Social Care and undertaken with senior officers from various partner agencies. Ms Hatton reported that it was expected that £100,000 funding would be received from the Home Office for undertaking the review and making appropriate evidence-based recommendations. It was considered that the work posed a significant challenge, but there was a requirement to be more robust in the services provided.

The Committee was provided with details of the Inner Strength Programme, which targeted perpetrators of domestic abuse. She reported that the programme had been developed to impact upon offending behaviour, support victims who decided to remain with their

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offending partner, and reduce the risk of repeat offending patterns. Ms Hatton advised that the programme was starting to have a clear impact and was providing valuable learning into the reasons for domestic abuse occurring. It was noted that traditionally, most social work with families had focused on women and children and had excluded men. The programme reversed that trend and was helping men manage their anger and to consider the impact of their actions on their family and had received positive feedback so far.

Ms Hatton also provided details of the Step Up project that involved work with families who had experienced a domestic violence incident and had at least one child aged 15 or under, or a pregnancy. It was reported that the initiative was a research pilot aimed at assessing how early support could be provided through targeting families of standard risk domestic abuse in an attempt to reduce the risk of escalation.

Members noted the assumption that nationally domestic abuse crimes were underreported and questioned whether officers had any indication of how prevalent the issue was in reality. Ms Hatton advised that it was very difficult to estimate and noted that it was common that instances of domestic abuse were only reported at a later stage of contact with services and was not often the preliminary reason for contact. Ms Hatton also noted that recent reported figures indicated a reduction in domestic abuse cases being reported, which reflected a national trend. However, she advised that a potential key explanation for the reduction in cases being reported, could be that people did not feel they were getting an appropriate response. It was hoped that the review into domestic abuse services would help to uncover whether there was an evidence base to that potential reason.

Members noted the rates of domestic abuse incidents that involved a male victim and questioned what had been done to reduce the issue. Ms Hatton provided the Committee with details of the 'Be a lover, not a fighter' regional campaign against domestic abuse. Ms Foster advised that the review into domestic abuse services would also consider how to better target reducing the rate of male victims.

The Committee raised questions regarding whether more could be done to raise awareness of domestic abuse and cited the recent training offer for taxi drivers on the issue of child sexual exploitation. Ms Hatton advised that awareness of the issue had been raised through the 'Be a lover, not a fighter' campaign and that there had been recent national campaigns to raise awareness of the types of behaviour that constituted domestic abuse. However, Ms Hatton agreed that further consideration was required as to how to raise awareness of the issue in the future.

Responding to queries from Members relating to what work was undertaken with schools on the issue, Mrs Mills, Public Health Specialist, advised that there were 44 Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) lesson plans for pupils between Year 7 and Year 9, which provided learning for pupils on what constituted a healthy relationship. Mrs Mills also advised that staff in schools were trained to notice behaviours that demonstrated children were at risk of being in a family with occurrences of domestic abuse. Members noted that Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) lessons were not statutory and raised questions relating to the state of the relationship with academies in order to ensure the

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lessons were provided. Mrs Mills advised that all secondary schools currently participated in the lessons and Ofsted had commented favourably on the lesson provision, which would help to ensure the academies were more likely to continue providing the lessons in future.

Members raised questions relating to the training offer that was provided for frontline staff around the issue of domestic abuse. Ms Foster advised that although the Council no longer had a position of Designated Domestic Violence Co-ordinator to arrange training for frontline staff, multi-agency training was now provided by the Blackpool Safeguarding Adults Board.

The Committee raised questions relating to the Inner Strength programme and Ms Foster advised that the cohorts would have up to a maximum of 12 people, so that they would be small enough to fulfil their therapeutic purpose. Questions were also raised regarding women that suffered repeat abuse from different partners. Ms Hatton provided the Committee with details of the Pause project that worked with women who had children removed from their care from birth and which covered issues relating to the suitability of their choice of partner. Members were also informed of a piece of work that had been undertaken by Blackburn with Darwen Council on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), which was therapeutic work that focused on women's early childhood experiences and aimed to raise their aspirations and improve their self-esteem. It was reported that results in Blackburn had been positive.

Members raised questions regarding the services that were provided to children who had witnessed domestic abuse and Ms Hatton advised that there was a commitment to ensuring children witnessing domestic abuse were provided with specialist support through the Families in Need Team.

The Committee discussed how the issue of domestic abuse was perceived by the wider public and women's refuges. Ms Foster advised that an 'Orange House' approach had been developed in the Netherlands that provided a new style of women's shelter for combating domestic abuse, where care was provided in a safe, open and familiar setting, rather than in hidden refuges. Members were advised that the approach had helped to ensure the issue was not considered a taboo and was managed better by the community. It was noted that there were cultural differences between the Netherlands and Britain, but that the approach had been considered successful and was an example of the type of approach that should be considered when developing new models of service provision.

The Committee raised questions relating to how the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference process was monitored and considered to be working effectively. Ms Hatton advised that the process was led by Lancashire Constabulary and that there were challenges relating to how some agencies reported into the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference process.

Members questioned whether there was adequate resilience to maintain current service levels and withstand current budgetary pressures. Councillor Collet, Cabinet Member for School Improvement and Children's Safeguarding advised that maintaining current service

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levels would remain a priority. Ms Foster also advised that resolving domestic abuse was not solely the responsibility of the local authority and that all public services needed to improve how they worked together given current budgetary pressures. She noted that the review into domestic abuse services and subsequent development of a domestic abuse strategy would help to achieve an improved partnership approach to tackling the issue. Ms Hatton advised that it was expected that the domestic abuse strategy would be drafted by the Autumn 2016 and that it would be useful to have an input from the Committee into the strategy.

The Committee agreed to request that the draft domestic abuse strategy be considered at a future meeting of the Resilient Communities Scrutiny Committee, once it was available.

Background papers: None.

### **3 HOMELESSNESS THEMATIC DISCUSSION**

Mr Andrew Foot, Head of Housing, summarised the key issues to the Committee relating to homelessness. He reported to Members that around 2,500 households, out of 64,000 total households in Blackpool, sought help from the Council's Housing Options team each year because they were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The level of contacts had remained broadly the same over the past five years. He reported that there had been approximately 1,000 formal homelessness assessments completed by the Housing Options team in the last year. Around 60% of those were found to be homeless but not in priority need and 10% were found to be homeless and in priority need resulting in an immediate duty to find them accommodation. Upon questioning from Members, Mr Foot explained that somebody would be considered priority need if they would find it more difficult than the average person to spend the night as a rough sleeper, for example if they were elderly, had mental health issues or had children.

The Committee was advised that the level of assessments for homelessness in Blackpool was relatively high when compared nationally. It was noted as being by far the highest in Lancashire and higher than some London boroughs. However, it was reported that there was a big gap between the high levels of people presenting as homeless and low levels of people being found to be homeless and in priority need. It was considered that the gap reflected the dynamics in Blackpool, with high numbers of single people failing to keep their homes who were not classed as being in priority need, with the people in priority need being made up predominantly from families with children, 16/17 year olds and people fleeing domestic abuse.

Mr Foot advised that, unlike other locations, the crises that precipitated homelessness presentations in Blackpool were largely a product of social problems, rather than directly of housing shortages or housing prices. He added that, paradoxically, the easy accessibility of homes in the private rented sector and the subsequent transience of which that fuelled, led to high levels of homelessness. He noted that there was a tendency in Blackpool for tenancies to continually break down because of the poor quality of accommodation, the poor behaviour of some tenants and the expectation that there would always be

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somewhere else available.

The Committee was advised of the issue of 'local connection', which was especially relevant given the high level of transience and people coming into the town from other areas. He explained that as a result of the relatively large housing supply, Housing Options was usually able to find housing for people able to evidence a local connection. However, he noted that a significant minority of people had approached Housing Options having come into the town within the last six months, but were not eligible for full assistance as they had a connection elsewhere. Responding to further questions on the issue from Members, Mr Foot advised that anybody approaching Housing Options would have a right to a housing assessment. As part of that assessment, a consideration would be made on their local connection. However, if they did not have a local connection, but were considered a priority need, there would be a duty to provide housing for them.

Mrs Piper, Housing Options Manager, advised that if people were found to have a local connection in another area, efforts would be made to establish a reconnection with friends or family in that area. Should that not be achievable, Housing Options would contact the local authority in the area that the person had a local connection. It was considered that helping people that may have various problems to reconnect with where they were from and could potentially have a support network, was a better outcome for the individual. It was acknowledged that there were also many transience-related issues in Blackpool, so the approach to try to establish a reconnection would also help to prevent transience-related problems from increasing. Upon challenge from Members, Mrs Piper advised that Housing Options would not attempt to help people return home that were fleeing domestic abuse when it was not safe to do so. She noted that people fleeing domestic abuse would be considered to have a priority need.

Mr Foot advised the Committee that there had been an increase in homelessness in the last 18 months and upon questioning, suggested that a potential reason was due to an increase in the number of people with multiple and complex needs and especially issues of substance misuse and mental health problems. It was also considered that recent welfare reforms, including an increased use of benefits sanctions, had led to crisis levels of debt and rent arrears. Members noted that the number of households that had received formal support to prevent or relieve homelessness had increased significantly in the last year and queried the reasons for that. It was explained to Members that the high figures in 2015/2016 partly reflected better recording, but were also consistent with higher demand on the service from people in urgent need of help.

Members questioned what the impact of Selective Licensing had been upon homelessness levels and Mr Foot advised that he did not consider that it had led to an increase in homelessness in a direct way. He explained that the Selective Licensing programme was helping to stabilise communities with high levels of transience and reduce levels of anti-social behaviour leading to people being evicted from their premises, which was noted as being a factor in the high levels of homelessness in Blackpool.

The Committee discussed the challenges and areas for development in relation to

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homelessness and Mr Foot advised that further work between Housing Options and Children's Services was required to improve accommodation and support for young people at risk of homelessness. He advised that the work aimed to provide a more integrated service for young people, especially through drawing together services in a 'Vulnerable Adolescents' Hub, where all needs could be met in one place.

Mr Foot also advised that there was a greater requirement to work together and improve relationships with partners. He reported that voluntary agencies had an increasingly critical role in helping to support vulnerable people, but noted that it was important that a clear framework of strategy and guidance was provided so that support was coordinated and effective. He noted that working together with partners would be an increasingly important requirement due to increased pressures on the Housing Options service budget.

The Committee raised questions regarding the requirement to develop a new strategy and action plan for preventing and dealing with homelessness. Mr Foot advised that there had been a change in Central Government's requirements to the effect that the strategy must have a greater emphasis on prevention. Responding to questions from Members, Mr Foot advised that it was expected that the strategy and action plan would be completed by the end of 2016. Members requested to be presented with further information on what was being done to prevent homelessness, and it was noted that details would be provided within the revised strategy. The Committee therefore requested to be presented with the strategy and action plan for preventing and dealing with homelessness once it had been drafted.

The Committee noted the detrimental impacts to health of being homeless and raised questions relating to the access to healthcare for homeless people. Mrs Mills advised that homeless health services had been developed and noted the development of the Bridge Project's services in regards to the issue. She also advised that homeless people could make use of the walk-in centre and that she had not received any feedback that suggested a reluctance amongst homeless people to access the centre located on Whitegate Drive. Mrs Piper considered that whilst access to a GP may be available to homeless people, there were potential barriers as a result of the complex needs of the homeless person that could prevent their consistent access to healthcare services when needed. She noted that examples were in managing to keep appointments and remembering to attend follow-up appointments. Mrs Piper advised that the Fulfilling Lives project, which identified and provided intensive support for a caseload of up to 240 people with multiple and complex needs, helped homeless people make initial and follow-up GP appointments. The Committee requested that a report containing further information be provided regarding health issues for homeless people, with a particular focus on their access to healthcare.

Members questioned whether an updated list of service providers and organisations that offered services to rough sleepers was available. Mrs Piper advised that a list was available and that she could circulate it to Members.

The Committee agreed:

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- 1) To request that the strategy and action plan for preventing and dealing with homelessness be presented to the Committee, once it had been drafted
- 2) To request that a report containing further information be provided regarding health issues for homeless people, with a particular focus on their access to healthcare.
- 3) To request that a list of service providers and organisations that offered services to rough sleepers be circulated to Members following the meeting.

Background papers: None.

**Chairman**

(The meeting ended at 7.50 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:

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