

**MINUTES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING -
THURSDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2019**

Present:

Councillor Collett (in the Chair)

Councillors

Clapham	Farrell	Mitchell	R Scott
D Coleman	Hugo	Owen	Wing

In Attendance:

Councillor Kath Benson, Cabinet Member for Schools, Education and Aspiration
Councillor Graham Cain, Deputy Leader of the Council (Children)

Councillor Mrs Maxine Callow, Chair of the Scrutiny Leadership Board

Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Head of Performance and Systems
Mr Steve Ashley, Independent Scrutineer of the Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board
Ms Moya Foster, Head of Targeted Intervention Services
Mrs Jeanette Richards, Head of Partnerships and Improvement
Mr Philip Thompson, Head of Special Educational Needs and Disability
Mrs Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager
Mrs Elaine Ireland, Democratic Governance Senior Adviser

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Debbie Coleman declared a personal interest in Item 7 'Children's Social Care Improvement', the nature of the interest being that she was employed by a residential children's home which dealt with Blackpool children.

2 PERMISSION TO SPEAK

The Committee agreed that Councillor Mrs Callow, Chair of the Scrutiny Leadership Board, be given permission to speak at Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee meetings due to her role on the Scrutiny Leadership Board.

3 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 20 JUNE 2019

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 20 June 2019 be signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

4 PUBLIC SPEAKING

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

5 APPOINTMENT OF CO-OPTED MEMBER

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The Committee agreed to approve the appointment of Ms Helen Sage as a diocesan co-opted member to the Committee.

6 EXECUTIVE AND CABINET MEMBER DECISIONS

The Committee noted that four Executive decisions had been taken within the remit of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee since the previous meeting.

Members asked a number of questions pertaining to PH41/2019 'Temporary Closure of 331 Bispham Road and Review of Residential Services' and in response Councillor Graham Cain, Deputy Leader (Children) advised that the provision of the service was under review. Mrs Jeanette Richards, Head of Partnerships and Improvement, advised that the independent review of the provision was expected to reach its conclusion by the end of October 2019, following which next steps would be determined. In the interim, affected staff had been deployed within Children's Services. Mrs Richards reiterated the complexity of the needs of the young people accessing the residential provision and stressed that the provision would need to address those specific individual needs in the best way possible.

The Chairman questioned why the establishment had not been full prior to its closure despite the need within Blackpool for residential provision. He went on to ask whether it was foreseen that the outcome of the review would result in the provision being permanently closed. Mrs Richards responded that she would not like to pre-empt the outcome of the review and that the outcome would be reported to the Committee once the findings had been received and the next steps identified.

Councillor Mrs Callow noted that the service had been identified as 'Inadequate' following an Ofsted inspection in June 2019 and she queried the delay in the accommodation being closed by the Council. Councillor Cain acknowledged that the accommodation had not been closed as quickly as it could have been, however action had now been taken to address any underlying concerns.

7 FORWARD PLAN

The Committee considered the Forward Plan, October 2019 – February 2020 relating to the portfolio of the Deputy Leader of the Council (Children) and the Cabinet Member for Schools, Education and Aspiration. The Committee noted that the Forward Plan contained three items relevant to the Committee: The School Organisation Plan 2020-2028; Review of Residential Children's Home Provision and the Implementation of a Regional Adoption Agency.

The Committee requested that the findings of the review of the residential children's home provision be reported to the next meeting of the Committee. Mrs Richards, Head of Partnerships and Improvement confirmed that following the review a plan would be formulated, with the resulting plan being made available to the Committee at its meeting in December 2019.

8 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT

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Mrs Jeanette Richards, Head of Partnerships and Improvement presented the Committee with an update on the progress and implementation of developments within the "Getting to Good" Journey for Children's Social Care.

The Committee was informed that in August 2019 Children's Services had its first monitoring visit from Ofsted, the outcomes of which were shared with the Committee. As part of the monitoring process the inspectors had asked for information in advance, reviewed case audits and case files and during their visit had sat with workers and managers from the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Assessment and Planning teams. Overall the findings reported that the inspectors had seen improvements in the way the work of the 'front door' had been managed since their last visit, although they shared the view of the Director of Children's Services that further work was required with the partnership to ensure that the service was as effective as it could be.

Members were informed that demand for Children's Social Care assessment had remained very high, with 4,200 children and young people having been the subject of a reported concern to Children's Social Care over the past six months. In the same period 2,000 assessments had been completed by Children's Social Care. Issues remained regarding the quality of the referrals received from partner agencies, with particular reference being made to the seeking of parental consent and the impact this had on the Council's ability to take decisions within the expected timeframe of 24 hours. Mrs Richards pointed out that two thirds of referred assessments did not require further services, which highlighted that large numbers of referrals had been made unnecessarily. The Committee was informed that the total number of children and young people open to Children's Social Care in Blackpool remained slightly over 2,000 at the end of September 2019, with most of the children and young people being subject to child protection plans or in care. Mrs Richards stressed that the steady increase in the number of children in care had been putting pressure on placement stability and there had been an increase in placement breakdown and in the number of children and young people living in high-cost placements.

A question was asked regarding the location of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) team, with Mrs Richards confirming that all agencies had now been located in one building which had resulted in beneficial co-location working and significant improvements in understanding the full picture of children's needs. The Chairman asked whether some partners were more effective than others in addressing the requirements of the improvement plan, with Mrs Richards reiterating that improvements had been made but that further work was still required. The previously identified issue of a delay in the sharing of information by police was discussed and Mrs Richards confirmed that the Director of Children's Services had been addressing and challenging the problem with the police.

Discussion was held around the shortage of foster carers. The Committee was informed that an increase had been seen of foster carers applying for special guardianships of the children in their care, which then reduced the number of foster carers available. The Committee heard that a new service manager was in post who was working to raise awareness of the need for foster carers in Blackpool as well as implementing a focused recruitment drive looking at creative ways to encourage new foster carers and the resulting reduction in the number of looked after children.

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Within the feedback of the Monitoring Visit, reference had been made to an increase in audit activity. The Committee requested specific details of the audit activity cited, with Mrs Richards confirming that this had related to the Ofsted framework, Social Care practices and the associated audit processes, which had all provided adequate assurances.

The Committee raised concerns over the increased budget required to address the Ofsted recommendations, with reference being made to the large scale recruitment of social workers. The question was raised of the potential budgetary impact across other areas of the Council as well as whether an issue with the retention of social care staff had been identified. Mrs Richards informed Members that the Council had been utilising agency staff due to the national shortage of qualified social workers, caused in large part by the stressful and distressing nature of the job. The successful recruitment drive had been able to bring a level of stability to the workforce. With regards to the overall impact on the budget, the Committee considered the possibility of undertaking a separate focused review of the budget implications associated with the improvement journey. Mr Arrowsmith, Head of Performance and Systems confirmed that only a quarter of the budget had been allocated to staffing costs, with a further quarter spent on the provision of out of area residential placements. He pointed out that such placements were extremely costly and impacted on approximately 50-60 children, with the longer-term aim being to reduce the need for such placements.

[Mr Ashley, Independent Scrutineer for the Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board joined the meeting during consideration of this item.]

9 YOUTH OFFENDING TEAM IMPROVEMENT

Ms Moya Foster, Head of Targeted Intervention Services updated the Committee on the progress of the Youth Offending Team (YOT) improvement plan. Data indicated that incremental improvements had been made and the service manager and duty manager posts had been filled. The Committee was informed that work with the Youth Justice Board had been ongoing, with a peer review scheduled for January 2020 and an anticipated re-inspection in the next six to eight months.

Committee Members requested more detailed budgetary information to be included within future update reports, with Ms Foster confirming that whilst some of the YOT budget had been integrated into Blackpool Young People Services it would be possible to provide a breakdown of funding which had been received through grants. Ms Foster confirmed that this data would be included in the YOT improvement report for the December 2019 meeting of the Committee.

A question was asked regarding the support offered to care leavers, with Ms Foster advising that care leavers received support up to 25 years of age, with a specifically tailored plan around positive transitions being offered. In addition, in conjunction with Blackpool Coasting Housing, semi-independent and independent living accommodation had been provided as an option for care leavers via the Housing Clinic scheme.

Discussion took place around the relatively high reoffending rates with Mr Arrowsmith,

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Head of Performance and Systems asserting that the number of first time offenders entering the justice system had reduced over the past ten years, but that the offences committed were more likely to be serious in nature which in turn raised the likelihood of reoffending. Success in keeping young people out of the justice system altogether had been reported as a result of the implementation of beneficial diversionary activities.

10 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND EDUCATION RESULTS UPDATE

Mr Philip Thompson, Head of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) updated the Committee on schools' educational results and provided an overview of SEND provision. He reported that provisional data released by the Department for Education had showed that Blackpool's primary schools had enjoyed their strongest ever year, performing two per cent above the national average in the main accountability measure 'The percentage of children performing at or above expected levels in Reading, Writing and Maths'.

The achievement of children identified as having Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) was also particularly strong at the end of Primary school, performing at 10 per cent above the national SEND cohort in 'reading, writing and maths at expected levels'. Mr Thompson also pointed out that the positive performance of primary schools was not an isolated exception with Blackpool's primary schools having performed relatively strongly at the end of Key Stage 2 since 2017. Members were informed that provisional school level GCSE data would be published on 17 October 2019 but that early indications of secondary school performance at GCSE showed continued weakness in aggregate performance, with improvements at some schools being offset by falls at others.

Mr Thompson reported that national data concerning Post-16 engagement with education, employment and training showed substantial improvement in Blackpool, with figures up nine per cent on the results from March 2018 and standing at 90.2 per cent of all 16 and 17 year olds. The Committee was informed that this was still one per cent beneath the average for the North West and two per cent beneath the national average, but was now above the figure for Lancashire.

The Committee noted the excellent results from Blackpool's primary schools and the Chairman reminded the Committee that some elements of secondary school education would be looked at further as part of the focused Scrutiny review of inclusion in education.

In response to a question on the low levels of apprenticeships, Ms Foster informed Members that a newly commissioned service in the area would be targeting apprenticeship programmes to young people, with substantial work being undertaken to tackle this area.

[Councillors Benson and Cain along with Mr Thompson and Ms Foster left the meeting on conclusion of this item.]

11 BLACKPOOL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD - FINAL ANNUAL REPORT

Mr Steve Ashley, outgoing Independent Chair of Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board

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(BSCB) and newly appointed Independent Scrutineer for the Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board presented the Committee with the final BSCB annual report. In summarising the work of the Board over the previous year, Mr Ashley identified two key areas for focus for the coming year under the new Lancashire Board arrangements. He stressed to members that Early Help and Neglect were two areas of importance which would require a multi-agency approach, with the high volume of referrals being made to Children's Social Care and the associated financial strains requiring significant changes to multi-agency working.

Mr Ashley reiterated to the Committee that Early Help and Neglect needed to be priorities for all partners if real changes were to be achieved. He stated that Children's Social Care should only be supporting those families identified as top tier cases, when currently they had been in receipt of referrals for all manner of issues not requiring their specialist high level support. In his role as Scrutineer, Mr Ashley stated that he would be holding the agencies to account and ensuring that improvements were implemented. He stressed that the focus would be shifted from primarily being on Children's Social Care and would instead also include all relevant partners.

A number of issues which Mr Ashley felt required particular attention from the Committee were identified. Firstly he identified the need to focus on how grants were being spent and suggested that assurance should be sought to ensure that funding was being appropriately targeted at addressing issues of neglect and being spent in areas to protect children. Secondly he identified the need to seek assurance that safeguarding partners were working together appropriately to adequately safeguard Blackpool's children. He also urged members to invite certain partners to speak to the Committee on the work they were doing, in particular citing the police and the Blackpool Clinical Commissioning Group.

A question was asked in relation to the poor attendance figures reported as part of the annual report, with assurance sought that Mr Ashley would be addressing the issue going forward. Mr Ashley was confident that he would be reporting improved attendance figures at future meetings due to changes being implemented and the obligations of agencies to ensure that an appropriate decision-maker would be in attendance.

[Mrs Richards and Mr Arrowsmith left the meeting on conclusion of this item.]

12 COMMITTEE WORKPLAN

Committee members considered their annual workplan and discussed the addition of a specific review focusing on the budgetary implications associated with the Children's Social Care improvement plan. The Committee agreed that feedback would initially be sought from the Scrutiny Budget Panel, as this would include representation from the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee, following which a decision would be reached as to whether the Committee should undertake further work scrutinising the budget.

Members noted that the expected update on the Placement Sufficiency Strategy was overdue and requested that Mrs Booth, Director of Children's Services be asked to provide an update on the development of the strategy as soon as possible.

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The Committee reviewed and agreed the proposed scoping document for the review of Inclusion in Education.

13 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as Thursday, 5 December 2019, commencing at 6pm.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.50 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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