

**MINUTES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING -
THURSDAY, 13 FEBRUARY 2020**

Present:

Councillor Stansfield (in the Chair)

Councillors

Clapham
D Coleman

Critchley
Farrell

Hugo
Hutton

Wing

Dr Elaine Allen, Roman Catholic Co-opted Member

Ms Helen Sage, Diocesan Co-opted Member

In Attendance:

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

Councillor Lynn Williams, Deputy Leader of the Council (Children)

Councillor Maxine Callow JP, Chair of the Scrutiny Leadership Board

Ms Kate Aldridge, Head of Delivery and Performance

Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Head of Performance and Systems

Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services

Mrs Elaine Ireland, Democratic Governance Senior Adviser

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Debbie Coleman and Stansfield both declared a personal interest in Item 5 'Children's Social Care Improvement and Residential Children's Home Provision', the nature of the interest being that they were employed by residential children's homes.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 9 JANUARY 2020

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 9 January 2020 be signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record subject to the following amendment: Councillor Coleman's name to be deleted from Item 1 Declarations of Interest from those declaring an interest in Item 9 'Corporate Parent Panel Annual Report' as she had not declared an interest in that item.

3 PUBLIC SPEAKING

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

4 FORWARD PLAN

The Committee considered the Forward Plan, March-June 2020 relating to the portfolio of the Deputy Leader of the Council (Children) and the Cabinet Member for Schools, Education and Aspiration. Members noted that the Forward Plan contained two items relevant to the Committee: 'To progress the acquisition of the former Job Centre Plus

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building at 43 Queens Street to accommodate Children's Services in a single location, in line with the preferred delivery model following the Ofsted review' and 'The implementation of a regional adoption agency with Lancashire County Council in November 2019, in accordance with the regionalising adoption agenda'.

Councillor Mrs Callow, in her capacity as Chair of the Scrutiny Leadership Board enquired as to the anticipated cost to the Council of the potential relocation of Children's Services to the former Job Centre Plus building, as well as seeking details of the proposed lease arrangements. Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services responded that the purchase of the building was one of the options being considered.

Further information on the implementation of the regional adoption agency was requested. Mrs Booth confirmed that the decision would be considered by the Executive on 1 April 2020 and that the proposals would recommend joining together with Lancashire County Council to provide adoption agency services across both areas.

5 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT AND RESIDENTIAL CHILDREN'S HOME PROVISION

Mrs Booth, Director of Children's Services presented her report outlining the progress of Children's Social Care as well as the outcomes of the review of residential children's home provision.

Members queried the lack of an action plan in relation to the residential children's home provision, as previously requested by the Committee. Ms Kate Aldridge, Head of Delivery and Performance explained that a Sufficiency Strategy for 2020-2023 would form part of the action plan, with the strategy currently undergoing internal consultation prior to publication. Ms Aldridge confirmed that once finalised, the action plan would be shared with the Committee. The anticipated timescale for the implementation of the Sufficiency Strategy was queried, with Ms Aldridge explaining that whilst elements of the strategy had already been implemented, finalisation of other features were still outstanding.

As outlined within the report, Members noted that of the 63 children requiring residential provision, only 23 had been placed within the area and the remaining 40 had been placed out of the Borough. Whilst the Committee acknowledged that the residential providers were operating commercial businesses, the question was asked of whether the Council could have any influence over ensuring our children were placed in Blackpool. Ms Aldridge advised that there were 70 residential places available across Blackpool and that efforts were being put in place to help safeguard the places for Blackpool children by strengthening relationships with providers. Ms Aldridge explained that providers often charged rates that Blackpool was unwilling to pay and which other Local Authorities would pay, thus keeping the prices at a high level. She informed the Committee that relevant Local Authorities had been contacted to raise awareness of the situation and to ask them to ensure that Blackpool was a suitable location for their placements. Ms Aldridge outlined a number of avenues being explored to discourage providers from building residential children's homes within unsuitable areas of the town, for example via the planning regulatory process.

In response to a question raised on the high cost of placements, Ms Aldridge explained

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that specialist out-of-Borough placements were sometimes necessary and the number of such provisions across the country was limited. The increase of £7 million towards placements to support looked after children was discussed, with the Committee expressing the view that the high level of increasing costs was unsustainable. Assurance was sought that all residential providers in Blackpool were Ofsted registered, with Mrs Booth confirming that all places used by Blackpool were.

Mrs Booth explained that three key factors were being implemented to address numbers of looked after children:

- Working with partners to improve early help provisions and reduce the number of children brought into care;
- Recruitment of appropriately trained and experienced staff;
- The timely discharge of children out of care.

With regards to target-setting, Mrs Booth advised that a financial planning meeting would be held imminently and agreed to share Medium Term Financial Planning (MTFP) information at the next meeting of the Committee.

A question was raised on the percentage of children in care that ultimately returned to living with their families. Mrs Booth advised that previously only low numbers of children had been returned to their families but that improvements were being implemented, such as the consideration of short-term placements and the regular review of cases to consider if children could be safely returned. In addition Mrs Booth identified that social workers with less experience needed to be taught the skills required to recognise cases where children could potentially be returned to their families, acknowledging that such skills took time to develop. The Committee was also informed that children had entered the social care system in the past when perhaps they should not have but in such legacy cases it was still difficult to reunite the children with their families. Discussion was held around the causes of large families with multiple siblings being placed into care and the complex nature of the many contributory factors.

In response to the recent findings of the monitoring visit undertaken by Ofsted, Mrs Booth stressed that the specific context of Blackpool had not been referenced or acknowledged within the findings. In response to the statement that progress had been identified as too slow, Mrs Booth highlighted the importance of a thorough approach to the improvement journey in order to ensure lasting changes were implemented. The Committee requested evidence of longer-term planning which Mrs Booth stated would be detailed within the Children and Family Strategic Partnership action plan, which would be circulated to the Committee on completion.

A summary of specific Key Performance Indicator (KPI) data was requested by the Committee, which Mrs Booth agreed could be added to future Committee agendas. Mr Arrowsmith, Head of Performance and Systems advised that a monthly performance update was provided to the Getting to Good Board and confirmed that partners from Health, the police and Council Members sat on the Board.

In response to the Ofsted monitoring report, the Committee raised the issue that the large numbers of cases requiring support within Blackpool and the recruitment of suitably experienced social workers were issues that needed to be addressed as these situations

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were unlikely to change. It was instead suggested that any action plan for improvement needed to include working methods and systems which made allowances for the specific conditions in place within the town, for example ensuring that case notes were detailed and accurate to allow for the potential change of social worker if required. The Committee requested a strategic overview for the following three years in order to seek assurance that the issues raised by Ofsted were being adequately addressed. Mr Arrowsmith and Mrs Booth agreed to make the reporting of the quality of practice the focus for future reports to the Committee and would bring the Practice Improvement Plan to the next meeting.

Further to the discussions on the Sufficiency Strategy, the issues around the shortage of foster carers within Blackpool were raised. Mr Arrowsmith explained that the current remuneration offer for foster carers within Blackpool was lower than the package offered across Lancashire and by independent fostering agencies, with the need to address this being acknowledged by Mrs Booth. The age at which care ceased for a young person was also discussed, with the various options available being noted by the Committee. Mr Arrowsmith provided data on the distribution of young people across different care provisions within Blackpool, with Committee Members requesting an age breakdown of each category to be provided, which Mr Arrowsmith agreed to produce and circulate.

The Committee agreed:

1. That the Children and Family Strategic Partnership action plan be circulated to the Committee upon completion;
2. To receive a summary of specific Key Performance Indicator (KPI) data within future reports.
3. To receive the Practice Improvement Plan to the next meeting of the Committee.
4. That Mr Arrowsmith produce and circulate an age breakdown of each category of care provision across Blackpool.

6 COMMITTEE WORKPLAN

Committee Members considered their annual workplan and requested the following items:

Placement Sufficiency Strategy – 23 April 2020.

Medium Term Financial Planning information in relation to Children's Social Care – 23 April 2020.

Residential Children's Home provision action plan – once finalised for publication this would be included within the MTFP.

Positive Transitions report – to be circulated to Committee Members by Ms Aldridge.

Six month Commissioner review – to be circulated to Committee Members by Mrs Booth.

7 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as Thursday, 23 April 2020, commencing at 6pm.

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Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.35pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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