

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD MEETING - WEDNESDAY, 1 JULY 2020

Present:

Councillor Mrs Callow JP (in the Chair)

Councillors

Burdess	Hugo	Mrs Scott	Walsh
Galley	Mitchell	Stansfield	

In Attendance:

Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services

Mr Alan Cavill, Director of Communications and Regeneration

Mrs Jeanette Richards, Assistant Director

Mr Philip Welsh, Head of Tourism and Communication

Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager

Mrs Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager

Councillor Lynn Williams, Acting Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Councillor Gillian Campbell, Cabinet Member for Tourism and Culture

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Galley declared a personal interest in Item 3 'Tourism Recovery Planning', the nature of the interest being that he was a non-Executive director of Blackpool Entertainment Company Limited (BECL). He would declare a prejudicial interest should any detailed questions be asked regarding the position of BECL.

Councillor Andrew Stansfield declared a personal interest in Item 2 'Children's Services', the nature of the interest that he was an employee of a care home outside of the borough.

Councillor Gerard Walsh declared a personal interest in Item 3 'Tourism Recovery Planning', the nature of the interest that he worked within the hospitality sector.

2 CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services presented the report to the Committee highlighting its focus on the Children's Services response to the pandemic and the social care improvement journey. Ofsted visits had been suspended until autumn, the scheduled commissioner review had been delayed due to the pandemic until December 2020, but an interim corporate stocktake would be undertaken in July 2020, which would inform the final review.

The Board queried reference in the report to an increase in contacts that coincided with the May bank holidays. Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager explained that increase in demand was often seen around bank holidays, however, it had been exacerbated by the Government's significant announcements

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regarding pandemic restrictions tending to coincide with bank holiday weekends during the crisis.

Reference was made to the out of time reviews and Members queried to what extent were reviews behind schedule and the plans that were in place to address the backlog. In response, Mr Arrowsmith advised that six weeks worth of ongoing reviews which had been scheduled had been lost due to the pandemic. However, the majority of reviews were being undertaken on time and those that had been delayed were being worked through. Mrs Jeanette Richards, Assistant Director, Children's Services added that children had been prioritised dependent on need and that additional staff including two HM Inspectors had been working to get reviews back on track. Panels had continued to meet to oversee permanency plans and advise on their appropriateness. Furthermore, Mrs Booth noted the added difficulties caused by virtual meetings and advised that she expected the backlog to be cleared within the next few months.

It was noted that prior to the pandemic, there had been concerns regarding the number of home schooled children and the potential neglect of some children who were being home schooled. The Board queried the impact of the pandemic on those children. Mrs Booth advised that there was a cohort of children and young people who were home schooled well, however, there were concerns regarding some children who were being home schooled full time. She advised that during the pandemic there had been more referrals than ever from people in the community regarding the safety of children. It was important that this positive change was continued after the pandemic. She added that there was a small educated at home team providing support, however, it was up to the parents to engage. It was reported that reducing the long term levels of elective home education was still an aim of the Council.

Members queried the ongoing relationship with Ofsted and their expectations of progress during the pandemic. In response, Mrs Booth advised that fortnightly meetings were held with Ofsted representatives and experienced HM School Inspectors were assisting with work on a variety of topics. She suggested that Ofsted might consider how the Council had used relaxations offered by the emergency Covid legislation and advised that the service had worked hard to maintain as many statutory requirements as possible and therefore not utilise the relaxations, in order to keep children and young people safe. She added that the Council had been fortunate that 75%-78% of staff had been available for face to face contact throughout the pandemic and the remaining staff had been available to carry out virtual meetings in order to maintain relationships through regular contact.

In response to a question, Mrs Booth advised that the co-production journey had improved during the period of the pandemic and that many young people had liked virtual contact. She added that input from children and young people into plans would be sought as and when appropriate and that they had a particular interest in some community venues such as libraries where wifi could be accessed. Mrs Richards highlighted an example whereby young people had recently been engaged with health services in order to articulate their journey with service provision and as a result a working group had been established and Child and Adolescent Support and Help Enhanced Response (CASHER) services had been increased for the weekend of 4 July 2020 to provide additional support to young people as the pandemic restrictions were further relaxed.

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The Board noted that not all young people had the means to access virtual meetings and queried how the issue had been addressed. Mrs Booth reported that the Council was in the process of distributing 920 laptops provided by a Government scheme, however, in order to address the gap in the meantime, money had been spent by the Council in order to provide some of the most vulnerable young people with IT equipment such as phones and tablets in order to ensure the workforce could maintain regular contact.

In reference to children and young people on the 'red list', Mrs Booth advised that all had had physical visits and more frequently than usual, with visits not only from social workers but also from the pupil welfare team and schools. There had been a partnership approach in ensuring the young people were safe. She advised that she did not have the data regarding the number of children on Child Protection Plans seen face to face or virtually and would provide that information in writing following the meeting.

The Board referred to the food voucher scheme take up for children eligible for free school meals and queried the success of the programmes in place and the plans for the school summer holidays. In response, Mrs Booth noted that schools had taken different approaches with some using the Government's voucher scheme and others using the Council's Catering Services or their own voucher schemes. She advised that Catering Services had provided an invaluable service and delivered a large number of meals. Food had also been available through the Coronakindness hubs. With regards to the school holidays, the Government had advised that all schools could apply for six weeks worth of vouchers to be given to parents funded by the Government. However, some schools had chosen to continue to use the Council's Catering Services during the summer despite being unable to claim back the funding from the Government.

The pressure on staff was highlighted by the Board and questions were raised regarding the support provided through the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and how the return to the office was being managed. Mrs Booth advised that the EAP had continued through the pandemic and had been promoted to officers early on. In relation to the return to the office, the service had been supported corporately to achieve as much office space as possible to enable as many Children's Services officers to return as possible with social distancing measures in place. Officers would be split into two teams and be located together. Feedback from staff indicated a return would be welcomed in particular by social workers who were in their first year of practice and had missed out on physical day to day support.

The Board went on to consider the historical gap in Blackpool between primary and secondary education and queried the impact on the transition of the prolonged absence from school. In response, Mrs Booth referred to the recent Government announcement of funding for tutoring and mentoring programmes. Funding would be provided directly to schools and a task and finish group had been established by the local authority to ensure consistent application across schools. In response to further questions, Mrs Booth advised that communication was good between primary and secondary schools and that many schools were employing innovative and creative means of supporting the transition between schools.

With regards to the overall ambition for Children's Services at Blackpool, Mrs Booth advised that the Council was aiming for an 'outstanding' judgement. She considered that the current outcome for the Council would be 'requires improvement' however progress

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could still be made prior to Ofsted carrying out their next inspection.

Members queried the financial implications of the pandemic on Children's Services and Mrs Booth advised that there was an anticipated pressure of £2.8 million on the budget. The majority of the additional costs had been due to the delay in children exiting care due to the reduced number of cases being heard in court and the increased costs of children in specialist placements and transport costs of children attending special schools due to social distancing requirements. Innovative solutions were being sought to address potential increased costs such as the offer to pay mileage to parents for providing transport to school through direct payments should it be appropriate.

In conclusion it was noted that there had been no key decisions taken during the period of the pandemic with regard to Children's Services that required reporting to the Scrutiny Leadership Board and that the improvement journey had continued despite the difficulties posed by Covid-19.

3 TOURISM RECOVERY PLANNING

Mr Philip Welsh, Head of Communication and Tourism advised that at the time of writing the report a number of points had been unclear. He reported that since publication of the agenda, requirements regarding social distancing had been reduced from two metres to one metre plus which would improve the viability of reopening some premises. The announcements made by the Government had also confirmed that attractions, hotels and bed and breakfasts in Blackpool could start to reopen on 4 July 2020.

Whilst many attractions were reopening, the main exceptions were the Sandcastle as swimming pools and waterparks remained closed and performance venues such as The Grand, the Winter Gardens and Viva Blackpool. It was noted that the Zoo had already reopened and had been sold out each day albeit at a limited capacity. The Tourist Information Centre, Pleasure Beach and Merlin attractions were all scheduled to open on 4 July 2020.

Visit England had put an industry standard in place 'We're good to go' which would provide an accreditation to a range of businesses and aimed to provide reassurance to members of the public that it was safe to visit. Marketing and communications were also being used to provide reassurance to members of the public that visitor experiences were safe and there had been a positive response to the announcement that the Illuminations season had been extended until early January 2021.

Members referred to the reduction in social distancing from two metres to one metre plus and raised concerns that the reduction could impact upon how covid secure attractions were. Mr Welsh advised that he had spoken to the attractions and most were taking a cautious approach. A number had already installed signage based on the two metre requirements and would be continuing to work on that basis. Ensuring attractions were safe was a common goal of all involved in the tourist industry.

The impact of the pandemic on the coach industry was referenced and questions asked relating to the importance of the market to Blackpool. In response, Mr Welsh advised that the implications were still being worked through. The coach industry was not viable with social distancing requirements reducing the number of people travelling on a coach below the break-even threshold. It was noted that some hotels in particular relied upon coach

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bookings and that the Council would work with the industry. Mr Alan Cavill, Director of Regeneration and Communication added that the potential of Blackpool Transport Services would also be considered to determine if it could replace some of the capacity lost in the coach industry.

The Committee noted the anxiety within the industry regarding the level of information and guidance provided in relation to a wide range of issues and queried whether the Council had a role in simplifying the advice to businesses in Blackpool. A further question was asked regarding the Council's role in inspecting businesses in order to ensure they were meeting requirements. In response, Mr Welsh advised that the process for acquiring the industry standard was simple. He advised that when detailed guidance was received from Government, the Council would ensure it was fit for purpose locally and adjusted accordingly. He added that Visit England had a number of advisers monitoring complaints regarding the 'We're good to go' standard and that they would be forwarded to Blackpool as a destination for review.

Mr Cavill added that there had been high levels of guidance issued by the Government in relation to a wide range of issues. It was intended that all the guidance would be brought together into one place and that all guidance relating to the safe reopening of tourism would ultimately be easily accessed in the same place.

A specific issue relating to the safety of public toilet blocks accessed by turnstiles was raised. It was agreed that a full response would be provided in writing following the meeting, however, the operator of the specific toilet block referred to had immediately altered the toilet block to prevent people being able to climb over the turnstile.

Members indicated their wish that scrutiny be utilised to assist in the identification of creative ideas to further promote the tourist industry and Mr Welsh agreed to consider how this could be best achieved.

Concern was raised regarding the potential reputational damage to the town of incidents such as that at Bournemouth Beach and referred to issues in Blackpool of beach overcrowding and high levels of litter. Mr Welsh noted that a number of issues had combined to result in high levels of visitors to the beach at once including hot weather and having few other places to go. He highlighted that beach patrol services had been reintroduced and that they had access to an alert system to request help from other services. Public toilets had been reopened and car parking enforcement had been reintroduced. There had been a number of litter picks undertaken by volunteers and Members commended their efforts.

The Committee noted the local lockdown that had been introduced in Leicester and raised concerns that the re-opening of Blackpool could cause similar to happen in the town. Mr Welsh advised that Public Health had worked closely with the tourism sector throughout and that no-one wanted a further local lockdown in Blackpool. The emphasis in the town was on the safe reopening of attractions and amenities and enforcement officers would continue to operate and were working well with the Police who had been very supportive. Mr Cavill added that infection rates were monitored closely every day and that figures were continuing to fall.

It was noted that a key demographic of visitors to Blackpool was the over 65s and that

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there were concerns regarding the current willingness of this age group to travel. It was suggested that a specific marketing campaign would be required to target this group and encourage their return to the town. Mr Welsh agreed that specific marketing was required. He advised that the extension of the illuminations season had had a positive impact on the extension of the whole tourist season and that the Pleasure Beach had confirmed that it would continue to open on weekends until 13 December 2020.

The Committee referred to the Lancashire Recovery Plan and queried the Council's input into the Plan. It was noted that the development of the Plan had been led by Marketing Lancashire. Mr Cavill advised that the Council had been involved and that it was a good attempt at providing a single document to reflect the needs of all areas across Lancashire to the Government, in a similar way to which the combined authorities of Liverpool and Manchester had already submitted documents. It would be the start of a further dialogue with Government and it was confirmed that the views and needs of Blackpool were being well represented through involvement in Government consultation groups.

Members queried the level of support being provided to the theatres in the town.

(At this point Councillor Galley declared a prejudicial interest, the nature of the interest that he was a non-Executive Director at Blackpool Entertainment Company Limited, the operator of the Winter Gardens. Councillor Galley left the meeting for the duration of the response to the question).

In response, Mr Cavill advised that there was no proposed reopening date for such establishments. He noted that a number of scenarios were being modelled by the companies and the impact of the pandemic on their financial position. It was expected that there would be a very slow return to entertainment venues and support was being provided where possible. Mr Welsh added that representatives from The Grand and Winter Gardens attended the Tourism Recovery Group and had raised an additional issue regarding the availability of shows even when they were allowed to reopen as the whole industry was currently on hold.

(Councillor Galley returned to the meeting).

Reference was made to the extension of the season in 2020 and the Committee questioned whether there were any plans to also start the season earlier in 2021. Mr Welsh advised that it could be considered, however, would be dependent on the viability of business being open and the number of potential visitors. He added that marketing for the 2021 season would be started earlier than normal to raise the profile of the town. Mr Cavill added that a range of options were being considered and worked through to achieve the best outcome for the town.

4 SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2019/2020

Councillor Mrs Maxine Callow, Chair of the Scrutiny Leadership Board presented the Scrutiny Annual Report 2019/2020 to the Board. She highlighted the good work undertaken during the 2019/2020 municipal year and the impact of the pandemic on the work programme and calendar of meetings. She thanked officers for their support during the year and highlighted potential future areas of improvement.

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The Scrutiny Leadership approved the Scrutiny Annual Report and agreed to forward it to full Council for consideration.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.45 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:

Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager

Tel: 01253 477213

E-mail: sharon.davis@blackpool.gov.uk