

**MINUTES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING -
THURSDAY, 20 JUNE 2019**

Present:

Councillor Collett (in the Chair)

Councillors

D Coleman
Critchley

Farrell
Mitchell

Owen
Stansfield

Wilshaw
Wing

In Attendance:

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

Councillor Graham Cain, Deputy Leader (Children)

Ms Kate Aldridge, Head of Delivery and Performance

Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Head of Performance and Systems

Mr Steve Ashley, Independent Chair for Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board

Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services

Ms Merle Davies, Director, Blackpool Centre for Early Child Development

Ms Jeanette Richards, Head of Partnerships and Improvements

Mr Philip Thompson, Head of Safeguarding

Mr Paul Turner, Head of School Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion

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 5 'Education and Special Educational Needs Update' and Item 7 'Better Start Update', the nature of the interest being that she was employed by an early year's provider.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING OF THE RESILIENT COMMUNITIES AND CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 7 FEBRUARY 2019

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting of the Resilient Communities and Children's Scrutiny Committee held on 7 February 2019 be signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

3 PUBLIC SPEAKING

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

4 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE AND YOUTH OFFENDING TEAM INSPECTION UPDATES

Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services provided an update on the work of the 'Getting to Good' journey implemented in response to the Ofsted inspection rating of Inadequate for Children's Social Care. It was explained to the Committee that the change of name reflected the high aspirations of the Council to exceed the original goal of a

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'Requires Improvement' rating.

The Committee heard that Children's Social Care had reached the end of the second 12 week plan implemented to drive improvement, with Mrs Booth reporting small and steady developments being made. With regards to the recruitment of additional Social Care staff, Members were informed that although the department was still experiencing challenges in securing quality candidates for permanent positions, there had been significant success in the recruitment programme, with 33 permanent new starters appointed since January 2019.

It was identified that audit activity and performance information indicated incremental improvements and that the Corporate Delivery Unit had brought added value and would support with the creation of a strategic six month plan. Mrs Booth confirmed that all 85 actions from the original improvement plan had been achieved, and that a smaller plan was now being actioned.

Mrs Booth informed the Committee that the Independent Commissioner appointed to work with Children's Services had been reviewing services at the Council since the end of April 2019. It was clarified that the Commissioner would make an assessment of whether the local authority should retain the provision of children's services and its ability to implement improvements as well as the sustainability of such improvements, following which she would then submit her findings and recommendations to the Department for Education, with a decision expected on 5 July 2019.

The Chairman queried whether the Commissioner could have deemed that progress was inadequate during the initial 12 week review period, with Mrs Booth advising that the full process must be completed prior to a decision being taken.

Concerns were raised around the robustness and longevity of the improvement plan, with reference made to previous improvement journeys which had subsequently lapsed once the review period had ceased. Mrs Booth acknowledged that previous strategic plans had not been continued sufficiently, resulting in the halting of progress. Members were assured that improvements would be ongoing and permanent, with no deviation from the strategic plan, even once improvements had been embedded.

Mrs Booth further expanded on the particular challenges faced by Children's Social Care which were specific to Blackpool, identifying that maintaining a strong leadership team in the long-term needed to be a priority. Retention of experienced managerial staff was raised as a concern, with employees leaving the authority despite being informed of the challenges of the role prior to commencement. Mrs Booth felt confident that strong strategic and corporate leadership was now in place despite there still being two remaining vacancies.

Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Head of Performance and Systems explained to the Committee how Blackpool had a disproportionately large number of children placed on care plans as well as large numbers of looked after children. In comparison to other comparable coastal towns, Mr Arrowsmith explained that due to the behaviour of service providers and partners, data demonstrated that cases were escalated and referred to Children's Social Care earlier than was seen in other areas with similar levels of deprivation. The result was

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that Blackpool experienced increased numbers of children concentrated at the higher end of levels of intervention.

It was further explained that the current position could be traced back to a starting period between 10 to 12 years ago, with patterns of behaviours beginning to deviate from the usual pattern seen elsewhere. Mr Arrowsmith asserted that although Blackpool was different, it was not so singular as to explain the variances seen. He gave the opinion that the differences in performance were due to the ways in which services were being delivered and the resulting high numbers of children accessing care services. It was suggested that services were not addressing issues appropriately, with examples from other localities demonstrating a more successful approach.

Members further heard that it would be necessary for ongoing major changes in service provision to occur in order to secure improvements. Mr Arrowsmith highlighted that schools were not suitably inclusive, reiterating that entire partnerships needed an evaluation of their behaviour and a thorough examination of previous actions and a resulting culture shift in approach.

Members sought clarification on the fact that it was not necessarily Blackpool families that caused the extremely high numbers of children accessing care services, but rather the way in which services responded to their needs. Mr Arrowsmith confirmed this to be the case, highlighting that the rates of children being looked after and those accessing care services were disproportionately high, and the initial challenge would be to get Blackpool performing closer to other parts of the country.

Mrs Booth reiterated that all services were linked and that it was imperative that children and young people were at the centre of all strategic decisions and actions. Members heard that long-standing cultural habits needed to be addressed, challenging the assumption that putting children into care was the best course of action to keep them safe, rather than the provision of support to keep families together. It was highlighted to the Committee that removing children from their families and placing them in care did not always improve their long-term outcomes and that instead work was ongoing with partners to improve the provision of support offered to families in need.

A query was raised in relation to the seeming reduction in open cases, yet a rise in protection plans. Mr Arrowsmith explained that Child Protection plans had remained high in response to the initial inspection rating, with children remaining on plans longer than may be necessary due to a lack of confidence from practitioners to end the plans in place. Questions were raised over the extra financial resources being made available to Children's Services as the service had been identified as already being over budget. Mrs Booth confirmed that additional funding had been committed to the whole service to ensure that improvements could be made and embedded over the long-term.

Committee members queried the fact that adoption levels were at their lowest levels for five years, with questions raised over the impact of media promotion of adoption services. Mrs Booth stated that alternative options to adoption were on the increase, citing special guardianships as a viable alternative. Ms Jeanette Richards, Head of Partnerships and Improvement, reiterated that courts were awarding fewer adoption rulings, with adoption only considered where no other solutions were available. As a

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result, the Committee was informed, the national promotion of adoption had been halted across the North West.

Mr Steve Ashley, Independent Chair for the Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board presented information to the Committee in relation to the Board's role in overseeing improvements to services. Mr Ashley identified neglect as the biggest driver of children entering the care system, stating that the Neglect Strategy had not resulted in the anticipated fall in numbers. It was also made clear that schools needed to improve at identifying and addressing cases of neglect, with alternative support offered to families before automatically referring to Children's Social Care. Mr Ashley stressed the importance of engaging partners in order to move away from the expectation that Children's Social Care would tackle all problems.

The Committee requested that due to the size and complexity of both the Children's Services Ofsted review and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) inspection of Blackpool's Youth Offending Service that future updates to the Committee be reported as two separate items with a summary of progress provided for ease of understanding.

Mrs Booth expressed to the Committee that its role was vital as an additional monitoring function of the improvement process, with Scrutiny's strategic overview offering a valuable function.

The Committee agreed to continue to monitor the improvement plans of the Youth Offending Team and Children's Social Care.

Ms Richards and Mr Arrowsmith left the meeting following the conclusion of this item.

5 EDUCATION AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS UPDATE

The Committee received a report detailing the latest updates on Ofsted inspections of schools, numbers of exclusions, school improvement and the new Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Strategy.

Mrs Booth, Director of Children's Services informed Committee members that an Ofsted inspection of the SEND service was expected imminently, therefore in preparation an ex-inspectorate officer had been commissioned to review the current arrangements. Members were informed that the review had identified a weakness around health and as such this was being addressed.

The Committee asked whether the transition between primary and secondary school was still proving problematic. Mr Paul Turner, Head of School Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion responded by acknowledging that once primary pupils transitioned to secondary school academic progress often faltered. Members heard that a transition project had been introduced to review the problem, with a number of potential issues being explored. It was noted that secondary school lessons were taught in a different style to primary school lessons and that parents were more likely to communicate any issues to primary schools more readily. Mr Turner indicated that year nine had been identified as a crucial point, where social groups may become more influential and parents often experienced parenting challenges.

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In addition, Mr Turner made reference to a curriculum project which spanned school years five to eight and focused on the avoidance of duplication of previously taught topics and subject matter. Members were informed that a number of projects were ongoing with the aim of improving the transition from primary to secondary school, acknowledging that analysis of the impact of any specific project was difficult due to the number of interventions in place.

Mrs Booth informed the Committee of the new but significant home to school support in place aimed at extending the provision of care to continue at home as well as during the school day. Training of the whole workforce to impress to families the importance of education was being implemented, as well as measures to prevent young people who attended university leaving the area once they had completed their education.

It was queried whether children had been asked to identify the issues affecting them as they transitioned from primary to secondary education. Mrs Booth concurred that the ability to ask children to identify what had happened to them was being lost, agreeing that direct questions needed to be asked.

Following a question regarding the high number of children opting for Elective Home Education, Mr Turner clarified that legislation in the area favoured parents and only stated that children must receive an education, with the Local Authority's role being to ensure that the level of education received was appropriate.

Members identified that the number of Blackpool children attending mainstream education was significantly lower than the national average of 47 per cent and requested clarification on this. Mr Turner explained that whilst Blackpool was moving closer to the national average it was only via incremental improvements. This was in part explained by the intolerance within schools to address Special Educational Needs. He informed the Committee that in some cases Blackpool schools and academies were not meeting their statutory obligations in the provision of sufficient facilities. In addition, Mr Turner expressed that the situation was further compounded by the popularity of the three special schools within the area.

Mrs Booth informed the Committee of an outreach project which had been introduced over the past few months and which aimed to build better relationships between schools and education trusts. It was noted that improvements were beginning to be seen with solutions being identified and worked towards. The importance of education on a child's future prospects was discussed, with the potential impact on employment, housing and parenting being acknowledged as well as the need to redraw the landscape of what it meant to be a child in Blackpool.

Mr Philip Thompson, Head of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) stressed that sanctions implemented by schools could often be avoided if a child's needs were recognised and met. The example was given of a disruptive pupil whose inability to communicate or access the curriculum alongside the rest of the class resulted in sanctions and potential exclusions. It was stressed that Special Educational Needs needed to be recognised and correctly identified, as 95 per cent of pupils placed in Pupil Referral Units were found to have undiagnosed special educational needs or disabilities. It was agreed

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that this was an area requiring further exploration and improvement.

Mrs Booth, Mr Turner and Mr Thompson left the meeting following the conclusion of this item.

6 BLACKPOOL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD HALF YEAR REVIEW

The Committee received an update on the operation of the Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board (BSCB) from Mr Steve Ashley, newly appointed Independent Chair of the Board.

Members were informed of the forthcoming changes to safeguarding arrangements, with the current BSCB ceasing from 29 September 2019. Mr Ashley confirmed that the new arrangements would not be published until 28 June 2019, but that they would involve the replacement of the Board with a partnership consisting of the Local Authority, the Police and Care Commissioning Groups with an Independent Scrutineer in place of the role of Chair.

Mr Ashley stated that the new arrangements would bring a refreshed focus, with the primary function of the Independent Scrutineer to be to hold partners to account. The Committee was informed that the Independent Scrutineer would have the benefit of being a permanent position which would allow consistency in the overseeing and challenge element of the role. Mr Ashley reiterated the important function of the Scrutiny Committee, which he saw as being integral to the process going forward, with the Independent Scrutineer calling upon the Committee with areas of concern for Members to then investigate further.

Mr Ashley identified the following issues as priorities for the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee:

- Early Help – stating that support for families required a major focus.
- Child Exploitation/Criminal Exploitation – identifying exploitation as a large area requiring constant review.
- Children's Social Care – raising the question of whether staff were sufficiently supported to adequately fulfil their roles.

The Committee thanked Mr Ashley for his input who left the meeting following conclusion of this item.

7 A BETTER START UPDATE

Ms Merle Davies, Director, Blackpool Centre for Early Child Development (CECD) attended the Committee meeting to provide an update on the work being undertaken by the Centre for Early Child Development on behalf of the 'A Better Start' partnership.

The Committee was reminded that Blackpool had been awarded £45 million from the National Lottery as part of a ten-year strategic investment to develop new approaches

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designed to improve early child health and development. Using a place-based approach, the 'A Better Start' partnership, consisting of the Police, Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Blackpool Clinical Commissioning Group, the Local Authority, the NSPCC and the community, worked collectively with the aim of breaking the intergenerational cycle of poor outcomes for children. Ms Davies informed the Committee that the partnership aimed to reduce critical pressures, for example mental health and substance misuse and build capabilities such as self-efficacy and positive parent-child interaction, in a collaborative manner to achieve collective impact.

Early indications of success included a significant reduction in childhood dental caries, reduced numbers of children admitted to hospital due to unintentional and serious injury and an increase in the number of children achieving a good level of development by the end of reception. Members asked for further details of the change indicators and Ms Davies confirmed that she would provide this information for circulation to the Committee.

Ms Davies expressed that culture change was at the heart of the desired improvements with the community identified as a key partner as well as the importance of external agencies working together to address the issues. The Committee was informed that the scheme consisted of evidence-based programmes designed to bring about long-term behaviour change, with the Enhanced Health Visiting Service cited as an example. The 'Be Your Baby's Hero' campaign was discussed, with Members hearing that the project was a three year scheme aimed at tackling alcohol consumption during pregnancy, with the whole community being asked to support pregnant women in stopping drinking and changing unhealthy behaviours.

The low take up of breast feeding was questioned, with Ms Davies explaining that behaviour change was more successful when the information provided addressed the specific needs of new mothers, which in some cases was advice on safe bottle feeding as well as information on breast feeding. It was specifically queried why the breast feeding buddies scheme was no longer available, and Members were informed that Public Health had identified a decline in breast feeding during the time of the campaign, with very few women taking part. Therefore the decision had been taken to cease the buddy scheme. However, the CECD had been training Learning to Feed Supporters to provide additional help to new parents in infant feeding.

Ms Davies described the aim of A Better Start to be the bringing together of the community, including volunteer recruitment, in order to intervene before it became necessary for Children's Social Care to be required and that all agencies needed to be influential in bringing about the changes.

The Committee raised the concern that private Early Years providers were not being adequately informed of the help available from A Better Start. Ms Davies assured the Committee that private nurseries were informed of any available assistance, citing the toothbrush scheme and twilight training sessions as support that had been widely implemented across private Early Years facilities. It was acknowledged by Ms Davies that more could be done in this area, with the Early Years Strategy aiming to produce better trained nursery staff via work with the college and the provision of further support. In addition, Members were informed that Early Years settings were encouraged to take part

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in the training programme on offer. A further priority was identified as the training of staff around speech and language, as well as the recognition of Special Educational Needs by staff.

When asked if A Better Start had performance data, Ms Davies confirmed that the first full set of key performance indicators would be available for consideration by the A Better Start Executive Board in October 2019. It was requested that the Committee also receive the data, with Ms Davies agreeing to provide the report for circulation to Members after the information had been through the appropriate governance channels.

The encouraging work of A Better Start was noted, with confirmation received of the expected funding end date of 2024.

8 COMMITTEE WORKPLAN

The Committee agreed the contents of the draft Work Programme for the remainder of the calendar year and noted the date and time of the workplanning workshop as 25 June 2019 at 12.15pm.

9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as Thursday, 10 October 2019, commencing at 6pm.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 8.25 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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