

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE COUNCIL (CHILDREN) AND STATUTORY LEAD MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICE – COUNCILLOR GRAHAM CAIN

The 'People' area covers my portfolio and those of:

- Councillor Kathryn Benson (Schools, Education and Aspiration)

The full details of the portfolio areas can be found on the Council's website at <https://www.blackpool.gov.uk/Your-Council/Your-councillors/Executive-members.aspx>

Corporate and Strategic Issues

Control and the Improvement Journey for Children's Social Care

OFSTED / Commissioner Update

In June I updated Members on the role and remit of Helen Lincoln, Independent Commissioner for Children's Services. As Members will recall, the Commissioner's task was to assess the capacity of Blackpool Council and crucially its leadership, to drive improvement in our services. As such, the Commissioner was tasked by the Department of Education to make a recommendation on whether the Council should retain control of Children's Services, or whether an alternative delivery model should be pursued (as has been the case elsewhere).

Helen Lincoln began her work in March 2019. Helen and her team worked closely with the Council for three months to carefully and rigorously assess the capacity of the leadership to deliver the change necessary to improve outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people. Helen submitted her findings to the Secretary of State for Education, which were published on the 22 July.

I am extremely happy to formally confirm to Members that the Commissioner's unambiguous view is that the Council has the necessary capacity and skills necessary to drive positive change and therefore Helen recommended that the Council retain operational control of Children's Services. This view was accepted and endorsed by the Secretary of State. A revised direction has been issued to the Council and the Commissioner will report further on our progress in delivering and sustaining improvements in December 2019 and June 2020.

There is a long journey ahead, but I would like to thank all our staff and partners who worked so hard to achieve this outcome. There is no greater responsibility for a Local Authority than the protection and care of vulnerable children and I am delighted that Government has confirmed its confidence in our ability to continue to deliver this responsibility in Blackpool.

On the 14 and 15 August, OFSTED visited Children's Social Care to undertake their first Monitoring Visit after the inspection. They focused their scrutiny on the front door of social care, reviewing the impact of change in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Assessment and Support Teams (AST). The inspectors noted the substantial additional investment made by the Council in developing the service and emphasised the need to embed further the positive changes they had seen, both in terms of recruitment of permanent staff into roles and in developing good practice across the wider service.

Their report comments further on the progress the Council has made and I would like to share some of their observations with you:

- "The Local Authority has been effective in addressing some of the shortfalls identified in the inspection regarding the initial response that children and families receive at the front door";
- "A single point of entry for all contacts to Children's Services has been developed";
- "Systems and processes for all contacts and referrals have been reviewed and enhanced to ensure that there is appropriate consideration of children's histories";
- "Thresholds (for social care intervention) are applied consistently, reviewed by managers at key decision-making points and the rationale for next steps is evidenced clearly"; and
- "Children are signposted promptly to appropriate levels of help and support, including those who require an early help service".

OFSTED also reported that "careful consideration is given to obtaining parental consent, but there is still more to do to ensure that partners seek consent from families prior to contacting MASH". The Council will continue to work with its partners so they understand the importance of this issue and I have already agreed a pan-Lancashire approach to working through the issues of consent with them.

The Department for Education has appointed an advisor to support Blackpool in its improvement journey. They will co-ordinate with the Council's Partners in Practice and sector-led improvement from Stockport, Essex and Leeds in the coming months, to support the Council's commitment to holistic practice improvement and achieving positive change in the lives of Blackpool children and families.

Recruitment and Retention

I am pleased to report that in Children's Services the average monthly turnover of Social Workers had fallen to just over 3% on average for the period from January to August 2019. Since January, the Service has had 19 social workers new to the Council join as permanent employees and a further 13 have been appointed and a start date set. The Service has created new management posts at Assistant Director, Head of Service, Service Manager and Team Manager level. The Service has made seven appointments from outside the Council in to these posts, with a further seven people recruited, but not yet in post.

Caseloads currently average 20 across frontline social work services, with more consistency across individual worker caseload levels than seen in the past, which will also help the Council retain staff. Positively, OFSTED noted during their recent monitoring visit that caseloads in the Assessment Teams are manageable and allow workers to engage in direct work with families. However, the number of children's cases being overseen by Team Managers in the Supporting and Strengthening Families Teams remains a challenge, given the breadth, complexity and volatility of the work.

Performance in Children's Social Care

Since Christmas, the Council has invested heavily in our ability to draw together and analyse service and demand data. The Council has a vastly improved understanding of what is driving current levels of demand in Blackpool, both now and over the longer term. Indeed, recent analysis clearly demonstrates that the current position has been at least a decade in the making. As at 11 September 2019, 587 children are in the Council's care.

Demand for Children's Social Care intervention in Blackpool remains high – whether from partner agencies, the Council's own services, or the wider community and families. This is unlikely to change swiftly. Current levels of demand reflects the culture of the locality, the long-time practice of agencies and the ineffectiveness of work with families in the past, which can only be addressed by the sustained, consistent implementation of new approaches.

The changes made to create a single entry point into the Service mean that demand can be dealt with more consistently and effectively. The recent monitoring visit by OFSTED confirmed that entry into the Children's Social Care system is now safer, more robust and the application of threshold is appropriate. This means that more work is held within Children's Social Care, initially within the assessment teams, but increasingly in the teams focused on longer term child in need work and child protection work.

The statistics monitored show evidence of change in the performance pattern of the service, with a greater proportion of incoming work involving cases, which have already been open and closed within the past year. The Service has also noticed that a growing proportion of those becoming subject to child protection plans have previously had plans, although not generally in the recent past.

More positively, there is evidence of resilience in the Service:

- Indicators of timeliness continue to improve across assessment and child protection processes;
- The assessment teams and MASH are coping with the presenting volumes of work; and
- There is also early evidence of positive practice improvement, including more recorded oversight and supervision, greater currency in visits to children and families and fewer very short or very long child protection plans.

The challenge for the remainder of the year will be to maintain and build on the positive steps in the early parts of people's journey within Children's Social Care, while beginning to transform the longer-term work undertaken with children and families.

Summary

The Council has come a long way since the OFSTED judgement at the end of last year and has successfully convinced an independent Commissioner and the Government that it has the capacity to improve and have now had the first OFSTED visit that went well. Experience elsewhere suggests that the Council has a long and perhaps bumpy road ahead on the improvement journey, but is ready for the challenge and has made a very positive start.

The Council has truly pulled together to work very hard on the Children's Services challenge. Across Children's Services and key corporate support services like HR, Finance, Legal, Policy and Performance, everyone continues to work tirelessly in support of the significant scrutiny of Children's Social Care, whilst also delivering improvements in the way that we work with families.

Caseloads of Social Workers are now coming down as more permanent workers join Blackpool and our reliance on the work of agency employed workers is reducing. The Council is expanding its work with its partners, which has been effective in delivering improvements in the front door and in the Youth Offending Services in to the services for Supporting and Strengthening Families. There is much sustained effort and momentum required in the coming months and years to deliver the scale of change and to see it having a real impact on the town's children and families, but the work that has been done over the past eight months since the inspection stands the Council in good stead.

Transforming Services

Children and Young People (CYP) Now Awards

It is my pleasure to report that we are celebrating a double in the CYP Now awards, with two projects shortlisted despite being up against some very tough competition! The awards recognise and showcase the best organisations, teams, individuals and initiatives in the UK, shining a light on the hard work, innovation and dedication of those working with children, young people and families.

The Talbot and Brunswick (TaB) Family Hub trial has been shortlisted for the Early Intervention Award. Led by the Council's Targeted Intervention Services and driven by a multi-agency partnership, the trial aims to ensure services have a greater focus on local needs. The partnership has introduced a range of positive activities and preventative services to children, young people and families on their doorstep, developed a 'community budget' to determine spend on family activities and supported young people to develop activities which prevent them being involved in anti-social behaviour.

More people are now accessing the Family Hub for the first time. Parents are benefitting from a wider support network and services. A range of local improvements have been delivered including improvements to the local sports barn and community green, provision of a free meal for young people this summer to reduce 'holiday hunger', collaboration with Blackpool Transport Services to provide summer trips within Blackpool for residents and all whilst helping people to access support services earlier, when they can have a greater impact.

Meanwhile, Language that Cares has been shortlisted in the Children in Care Award. This is a joint project with several Children in Care Council's led by adoption and fostering charity TACT and has led to the production of a glossary of alternative words and terms and the banning of jargon when talking with children and families! Blackpool's justuz Children in Care Council played a major part and as a result, words like "placement" "siblings" and "Looked After Children" are all now banned in favour of less formal ways of speaking such as "our home", "our brothers and sisters" and "our children". I hope that I can report on a double celebration after the awards ceremony in November!

Working with Partners

Summer Results: Primary, Secondary and 'A' Level

I will provide Members with a more comprehensive report in due course, but I thought it useful to detail some headlines from the results that were announced in August.

There is clear evidence that Blackpool primary schools have once again exceeded the national average in terms of progress at Key Stage 2. This is extremely good news and represents a very significant achievement, especially when relative under-achievement at Key Stage 1 is factored in. However, it is disappointing that early indications from provisional GCSE data show no improvement in overall aggregate performance across the town this year. There is clear evidence of improvement at some of our secondary schools, but this offset by falls at others. Although results at this stage are still provisional and will be firmed up over the coming months, it is unlikely that the gap to the national average or similar local authorities will have narrowed this year.

As yet, the Council does not have a full dataset of the 'A'-level results to draw meaningful conclusions from. That said, Blackpool is typically strong in terms of Key Stage 5 performance and the expectation is that this will have continued.

Toward a Blackpool Children and Families Partnership

One of the Independent Commissioner's recommendations was the creation of a strategic partnership to drive and oversee positive change for all Blackpool children and families, not just those in receipt of support from Social Care. It is the intent to pursue this recommendation into the winter and beyond.

Blackpool Children and Families Partnership will bring together organisations working to help families thrive in Blackpool, ensuring there is a common set of principles, priorities and desired outcomes. The partnership will start this work at its first meeting later this year. By looking beyond the Council at the wider system, it will complement the Getting to Good Board, which has a focus on the improvement journey within Children's Social Care and which is focussed on delivering clear, measurable and sustained impact across the quality of practice evident in our assessments, plans and work with families.