

Report to:	CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Relevant Officer:	Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services
Date of Meeting	9 January 2020

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT

1.1 To inform the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee on the progress and implementation of developments within the "Getting to Good" Journey for Children's Social Care.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

- 2.1
- To note the contents of the report and to ensure that current work continues to meet statutory obligations, is delivering change in Children's Services and that work to prepare for external inspections continues.
 - To continue to meet statutory monitoring, challenge and support obligations.
 - To identify any further information and actions required.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 For Members of the Scrutiny Committee to be fully informed as to the day to day work of the Children's Services Directorate and have assurance that Blackpool is continuing to meet its statutory obligations for future inspection requirements.

3.2a Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.2b Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

3.3 Other alternative options considered:

Services are subject to national and statutory frameworks.

4.0 Council Priority:

4.1 The relevant Council Priority is:

- Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience.

5.0 Background Information

5.1 Performance Overview

Children's Social Care Overview at Month End – November 2019

Blackpool's children's social care services face three particularly pressing issues:

1. The volume of presenting concerns from partner agencies (Health, Police, Schools) felt to require children's social care input/assessment.
2. The quality of work undertaken with children and families across the partnership to remedy concerns and to prevent escalation; and the quality of partnership support for those children and families; and
3. The number of children open to children's social care, in particular those in local authority care, and the financial pressure this places on the Council.

All three of these issues are intrinsically related to each other: the volume of new work places pressure on the capacity of the service and the time social workers have to build the effective relationships with children and families to support positive change. This then leads to less effective interventions and long-term escalation of some children and families, which, in some cases, leads to entry of children into our care. Equally, the high numbers of children in our care places significant constraints on the local authority's ability to provide other services.

Progress since December 2018

Far in advance of the inspection in November 2018 the Council recognised the need for transformative change in children's services and this led to the appointment of a new Director of Children's Services (DCS) in July 2017 and the setting up of a multi-agency improvement board. It has also led to an almost total overhaul of the senior leadership in the department over the past two years, with many significant new arrivals during 2019.

Since December 2018, the leadership team has been working to address the issues raised during the inspection. The significant and sustained investment in Children's Social Care to support the improvement of outcomes for children and families now amounts to £4.3 million of additional expenditure in extra staffing, with the vast majority of this focused on strengthening social care teams: increasing the number of frontline social workers, reducing caseloads and building managerial capacity to develop and support consistency and quality in practice.

In recognition of the 'whole system' nature of the issues, there has been a complete reconfiguration of children's social care services, to achieve a clearer delineation of

area of practice: Assessment and Support, Strengthening and Supporting Families, Supporting Families. Structures that better support relationship-based practice have been created – flatter structures, smaller teams, encouraging experienced practitioners to continue to practice and have a direct impact on children and families (conversion of the Practice Development Manager into the Senior Social Work role). Practice standards have also been raised, such as the frequency of visits to children subject to child protection plans or children placed at home with parents, to emphasise the additional support the service wishes to offer the children that the Council is most worried about. Finally, working with local children and families, Headstart and other local agencies, the Council has reviewed how children’s social workers work with children and families and co-produced a way of working – “Blackpool Families Rock”(a review that also has considerable resonance for statutory local partner agencies as well).

Change of this scope and scale takes time to embed and deliver measurable positive impact for children and families. Positive changes are being seen in key outcomes at the front door. Considerable time and energy have been invested in working with partner agencies to improve the quality of information provided to the front door, and the Council has worked with social workers and managers to improve the consistency, depth and breadth of decision making with families. The Council has provided a professional consultation line enabling professionals to discuss concerns with a social worker before a referral is formalised. Children’s Social Care has stressed the importance across the partnership of working transparently and openly with families, as a basis for developing a constructive relationship and the need for consent from the family/child in circumstances where there are needs/concerns that do not cross the significant harm threshold.

It can be seen that this has had an impact and the first monitoring visit from Ofsted confirmed that a significant improvement had been made at the front door since the inspection. Following on from the visit, there have been further signs of the Council’s impact on the behaviour of partner agencies – contacts from other agencies have fallen and this is providing the opportunity for better screening and fewer referrals leading to assessment. Children’s Social Care is also more effectively moving work into Early Help services where appropriate, the number of children supported in Early Help services has risen by 36% since the end of April 2019 (200 children).

In summary, the evidence shows that the Council is now providing a better, safer, more proportionate approach to its early work in support of the help and protection of local children and families. In spite of all of this, as noted in performance reports, contact and referral rates from local agencies remain much, much higher than in comparably deprived local authority areas in the region, so there is still a considerable distance to go with partners about their perception of, and work with,

the local community.

However, the front door, while the critical starting point for children and families, is only one part of the overall system. At base we are seeking to transform the work undertaken across the service as a whole and across the partnership as a whole.

New arrangements for planning and tracking support for Children and Families who are working with the service in a statutory framework have been introduced, providing an opportunity for the Principal Social Worker and Assistant Director to coach and mentor managers, several of whom are relatively new in role, in more restorative approaches and on how best to consider and manage the work with children and families by maintaining focus and clarity on key issues - the purpose of our intervention and each process and the relevant questions for social workers and families.

Understanding of our performance in the improvement journey is not focussed on the key performance indicators and compliance statistics, but is shaped and informed by the regular and focussed audit of the work being undertaken across the service. Evidence is being sought of improving practice in this activity, with key areas of improvement including:

- The lived experience of the child is more evident within assessments
- More direct work is taking place with children and this is becoming more evident on the case file records
- Assessments and plans are becoming better informed by wider partnership knowledge and expertise
- The footprint of Child Protection Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers is starting to be more evident on children's files
- There is some evidence of improved management oversight, including reflective supervision, although this is not consistent

In the New Year, we will continue with the panel approach and extend it to cover other groups of children. We will also:

- Use the Partnership Implementation Group, reporting to Blackpool's 'Getting to Good' Board and the Children's Safeguarding Arrangement Partnership (CSAP), to emphasise the importance of core groups to all partner agencies
- Roll out training to staff on the use of Public Law Outline Pre-proceedings
- Provide further training for our staff concerning neglect
- Use the appointment of a Performance and QA service manager as an opportunity

to further revise the QA framework, in the light of the experience of the past year, while also seeking to develop the skills of managers in auditing through the use of audit clinics and training from an experienced external auditor.

5.2 Recruitment and Retention

Since the last report the Council has welcomed two new Service Managers (arriving in October and November 2019) to oversee the Supporting and Strengthening Families (SSF) Teams.

Recruitment remains a key challenge for the service. We are committed to ensuring that we have the right quality and experience in our senior managers to support the degree of change required, and the Head of Service for Strengthening and Supporting Families remains unfilled because of a lack of suitable applicants following two recruitment exercises.

Currently there are 31 permanent qualified vacancies in the children's social care structure to fill, including the Head of Service role above and three team manager roles. Use of agency staff has decreased a little – currently down to 22% - but this conceals churn within the agency worker group. Since January 2019, 67 agency workers in HCPC posts have started with the Council and subsequently left, half of which were in post for less than three months. This turnover in workers creates disruption within teams and has a negative impact on children and families.

5.3 Conclusion

In summary, the capacity to drive forward improvement in practice at the rate that the Council would wish has been compromised by staffing sufficiency and stability. The staff group is growing and strengthening through change and requires support and development to enable them to deliver good quality, purposeful social work to children and families. A skills gap/training analysis for staff has been undertaken and a training offer has been developed with Workforce Development and the Council is engaging with partners in practice across the country to bring the right expertise to bear in Blackpool.

Our children and young people are a fantastic asset, and their commitment, passion and ambition is inspirational and should be mirrored in our workforce.

Overarching all of the above is a commitment to keep going– building on the positive evidence that is emerging in key areas. Maintaining a consistent focus on critical issues and a consistent approach to our practice, while progressively overhauling the whole system. Effectively, children's services in Blackpool need to be rebuilt from the ground up and this will only be achieved through sustained consistency of purpose, focus and approach.

Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

6.0 List of Appendices:

Appendix 7(a) - Revenue Summary - budget, actual and forecast for Children's Social Care.

7.0 Legal considerations:

7.1 None

8.0 Human Resources considerations:

8.1 None

9.0 Equalities considerations:

9.1 None

10.0 Financial considerations:

10.1 At Month 4 (reported to the Executive)

Children's Social Care is forecast to overspend by £8,989k, due to ongoing pressures relating to Looked After Children (LAC). When budgets were set, £3,570k was earmarked to cover the forecast overspend. Since that time, there has been an increase in LAC numbers and an adverse change in the mix of LAC placements, resulting in an additional pressure of £4,625k.

In addition to this, an amount of £4,364k is included in the forecast relating to the Directorate's Ofsted Improvement Plan, which is being implemented following the recommendations outlined in the Ofsted report published in December 2018. This figure includes the cost of a number of ongoing interventions which were put in place immediately following the review, but also reflects the outcome of a detailed evaluation of the service model, which has taken place in the early part of the current financial year and which has resulted in the introduction of a new staffing structure for the longer term. The new structure represents a fundamental shift in the management of Children's Social Care in Blackpool – a shift from managing the problems to addressing the source of them. It proposes additional capacity to enable social workers to spend more time with children and families to build better relationships, have more effective interventions, building on the strengths within each family and thereby preventing escalation. Independent analysis suggests that the approach should result in a long-term reduction in the number of cases open to Children's Social Care at any one time and through the year. It will also reduce the

number of children on child protection plans or in the care of the Local Authority.

Attached at Appendix 7(a) is the full revenue summary as reported to the Executive in October 2019.

11.0 Risk management considerations:

11.1 None

12.0 Ethical considerations:

12.1 None

13.0 Internal/ External Consultation undertaken:

13.1 None

14.0 Background papers:

14.1 None