

## PEOPLE PORTFOLIOS

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The 'People' portfolio consists of:

- Councillor Lynn Williams - Leader and Cabinet Member for Children's Services
- Councillor Kathryn Benson - Cabinet Member for Schools, Education and Aspiration
- Councillor Jo Farrell - Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health
- Councillor Maria Kirkland - Cabinet Member for Community Cohesion and Leisure

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 Issues

### **Commissioner July report – good progress being made**

In line with the remit of the appointment made by the Secretary of State to review Children's Social Care following its OFSTED judgement, the Commissioner completed their second six-month interim review in July. Councillors will recall that their July 2019 report concluded that an Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) was not recommended and the outcome was that oversight by the Commissioner should continue for at least a year, with six monthly progress reports.

In her report to the Department of Education (DfE), the Commissioner noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted significantly not just in Blackpool, but across all local authorities. As a result of the changes caused by the pandemic, the DfE asked that a second interim review of Blackpool Children's Services be carried out in July 2020, thus delaying the final review report to the end of this year.

The Commissioner has carried out their review remotely, but it has been no less robust as a result. The Commissioner chaired two Quality, Performance and Review meetings with senior officers from across the Council and separately with senior and middle managers from Children's Services and met separately with the new Leader of the Council (who is also currently the lead member), the chief executive and the DCS. Their review was supported by detailed feedback from the DfE-appointed advisor to Blackpool Council, Alastair Gibbons.

In their first interim report in January this year, the Commissioner made a number of recommendations to the service about areas of focus. The Commissioner detailed in their report that they saw evidence of progress in all of these areas in the last six months, in spite of the local and national disruption and challenge of COVID-19.

The Commissioner particularly noted that “A bold and ambitious five year medium term financial strategy for children’s services has been agreed by the Council. *(That this)* financial strategy is an invest-to-save plan that will reduce overall spend on children’s services over five years whilst improving outcomes for children. The Council’s commitment to children’s service is evident through this new investment and at the same time the plan is now closely aligned to Children’s services ‘Blackpool Families Rock (BFR)’ restorative approach.”

Referring to a number of key areas of progress over the past six months, particularly in relation to improving the effectiveness and impact of partnership work, the Commissioner said “These foundations support a shift in culture for the Council and its partners to one that is concerned primarily with finding ways to work more effectively with families to deliver better outcomes for children”. The Commissioner also reflected on the Council, and Children’s Services’ response to COVID-19, saying “Blackpool Council responded quickly and effectively and in a well-organised way, to the challenge posed by the COVID-19 lockdown in March. Its response has provided a high level of practical support to its residents, led to more responsive and collaborative partnership working, whilst maintaining a close focus on its most vulnerable children and protecting the safety and well-being of staff. There is a greater maturity and organisation across children’s services and education than there was 18 months ago.”

In conclusion, the Commissioner reported that in her view “Blackpool has set itself an ambitious and challenging agenda. I look forward to seeing this agenda delivering greater change and improved quality of practice over the next six months to the benefit of children and their families in Blackpool.”

We welcome this report, which provides evidence of a sustainable change in our culture and practices and which puts us in a good position to emerge from the challenges of the pandemic quickly and effectively.

### **Service demand data shows a fall**

Since April 2020, we have seen a significant decrease in demand across the whole continuum of children’s social care when compared with the 2019/2020 figures:

- A 16% fall in the number of requests for service.
- A 30% decrease in the number of social work assessments of new families.
- A 30% decrease in the number of multi-agency strategy discussions concerning families to decide whether to progress to child protection enquiries.
- A 18% decrease in the number of child protection enquiries being undertaken.
- A 22% decrease in the number of new child protection plans.
- A 19% decrease in the number of children entering public care (‘becoming looked after’).

This comparison reflects a particularly unique set of circumstances, with 2019/2020 being a particularly busy year and the effects of the pandemic taking hold during this period. When

compared with the figures of other similar authorities, rates of referral for the past two months after the end of COVID lockdown are still 20% above the average and child protection enquiries are 35% above, reflecting that whilst we have made considerable progress through 2020, there remains scope for further reduction. It will also take time for the ongoing reduction in demand in the system to feed through to reduced numbers of children with child protection plans, or in the care of the local authority.

## **Strategic Issues**

### **A-Level and T-level results – a good year**

We saw another good year of A-level results in Blackpool, despite the “down-grading” of over 20% of grades submitted by teachers. Blackpool Sixth Form was pleased with an overall improvement, with increased pass grades, high grades and upper high grades. Seven out of nine students secured their places at Oxbridge, whilst five high needs students who were planning to progress to university have all secured their place and 85.7% students have already secured their university place (up 9% on last year). St Mary’s saw a 100% pass rate with every single student getting into their first choice or insurance choice university, whilst two students secured Oxbridge places, one of whom gained 5A\*s! Meanwhile, Blackpool and Fylde College saw an overall pass rate for all technical and professional level 3 qualification of over 99%, an increase of over 4% from 2018/19.

### **GCSE results – a mixed picture**

Whilst we are seeing some improvements to GCSE results, progress is slower than we would have hoped for. Positively, we have the highest proportion of children passing English and Maths since at least 2013 (56% at 4+ and 34% at 5+), whilst our attainment 8 score for the town is 39.5 – our highest since 2016.

We know that this is still not high enough and much work needs to be done on improving outcomes at all levels. A particular focus is now needed on the biggest secondary academies that have the most impact on town-wide levels of performance. This is a continuing focus and Blackpool School Improvement Board and the Opportunity Area are funding and supporting measures to ensure this improvement. Our 2020/2030 vision for Blackpool’s education system, which will be launched in October, will outline the ways in which this will be achieved.

### **Our Children (Care Leavers) at University**

We are proud to say that three of our Young People have graduated this year. All are planning on continuing their studies at postgraduate level, with one potentially pausing their plans pending the re-introduction of more face-to-face learning the following year.

Of those applying to university, the vast majority of our Young People have had their places confirmed and they have been informed this will be a hybrid mix of face to face and distance learning. At the time of writing, exact start dates and timetables are still unconfirmed. We keep in close touch with our Young People at university and whilst most are doing well, a couple of them are re-sitting a year. They have Personal Assistants and Tutor support and this

will be particularly crucial to help them as they re-start after teaching was suspended due to the pandemic.

As any parent with university age children knows, we also have the usual challenge of moving Young People and all their belongings for the start of term, which has been heightened by social distancing rules. But we are pleased to say that everybody is pulling together to make it happen.

### **Our Children leaving school**

Of the 43 young people in our care who are leaving school, 21 are continuing in education, two have found jobs and 20 are currently not in Education, Employment or Training.

Of the twenty young people categorised as NEET, four are looking to begin educational courses and six are actively looking for employment. The number of Our Young People not engaged in either employment or education is still too high and reducing this number this will also be part of our collective aim as corporate parents.

### **Active Lives Strategy**

Leisure Services has developed a draft Active Lives Strategy, which is currently out to consultation with key stakeholders. The draft Strategy will be discussed with the Scrutiny Committee for further feedback at the end of September.

## **Transforming Services**

### **Catering Services – new learning opportunities**

Blackpool Catering Services is working in partnership with Children Services and local secondary schools to establish a Catering Academy, designed to provide opportunities for children and young people to gain skills and qualifications in the catering and hospitality industry. The programme will provide real life experiences of preparing meals for the catering service whilst providing young people with vital life skills and qualifications. Young people will be put forward for the programme by the school, with a focus on providing opportunities for Our Children. The programme is planned to start in November 2020 following the refurbishment of identified catering facilities.

### **Anchorsholme Park – welcome back!**

Anchorsholme Park reopened to the public in July 2020, shortly followed by the cafe facility. The new playground, sports facilities, cafe and wider green open space have all received excellent feedback from a wide variety of users who have enjoyed using the new space.

### **Sports and Leisure facilities**

The leisure facilities adopted a phased approach to reopening following the easing of government restrictions at the end of July. The facilities at both Moor Park Health and Leisure Centre and Blackpool Sports Centre are now fully reopened, following COVID secure guidance through managing maximum numbers for the various activities. Palatine Leisure Centre remains

closed for a significant refurbishment project of the ground floor spaces, which will see a refurbished entrance and reception, fully refurbished and reconfigured pool changing rooms with pool tiles in both pools being replaced and new dry side changing rooms.

### **Care and Support: In-house Provider Services during the pandemic**

Our care and support services continue to adapt to provide the best support to those in need as a result of the pandemic. We have learned again that our Care and Support has an amazing workforce that has kept going to enable the people of Blackpool to continue to receive quality care and support, with most staff delivering their usual services adapted to the evolving nature of the pandemic. Key activities and changes including:

- The Assessment and Rehabilitation Centre acting as a COVID receiver service, supporting a number of people who arrived at the building who were COVID-19 positive. Their excellent infection prevention methods and PPE supplies sourced by the Business Support team ensured no-one having contact with people has contracted COVID.
- The Coopers Way Learning Disability Respite Service saw a reduction in people using the service in the early days of COVID as people self-isolated or were shielded and so broadened their offer to provide respite for parents and carers who were struggling to keep their loved ones stimulated during lockdown.
- Home Care saw a reduction in referrals as fewer people were in hospital with other ailments and although the team had staff unavailable due to shielding or self-isolation, the reduction in referrals meant this was managed without significant additional hours.
- The Keats Day Service for People with Dementia was closed at the start of lockdown and staff redeployed to the provider hub. Work is now being completed to ensure that Keats is a safe environment for service users and staff to return to once dates have been agreed for its reopening.
- Langdale Day Service for Adults with Learning Disability closed and staff were redeployed, but the service maintained contact with households receiving a service on a weekly basis to offer support at home, including going shopping, over the phone support, some outreach work where required and newsletters posted to their some address. Work is now underway to re-open it in line with COVID-safe guidelines.

Other initiatives which we developed include 'Kindness on the Doorstep', with over 50 flower pots put together by the green team at home and funded by BCH and Councillor Paul Galley, with contributions from local garden centres matching our spend in the form of plants and pots, creation of jigsaw, games and book libraries for day service users, online baking sessions and a new newsletter.

- The Phoenix (mental health crisis support) and Extra Support (Supported Living) services continued as normal, but with support from staff redeployed from other areas. Phoenix initially saw a reduction in people using the service as people self-isolated or were shielded, but numbers accessing the service have recently increased. Extra Support

prepared the Gloucester Avenue premises for emergency use by service users, although this has not yet been needed.

- Shared Lives continued to support people in longer term placements, with the service now starting to introduce day support and short breaks for people living in the service
- Volunteer services ceased when lockdown occurred as the main support was in other people's houses and a lot of people were shielding or self-isolating, including some of the volunteers. They are now delivering work books to staff and PPE for the Hub.
- Vitaline have been contacting all customers proactively throughout the pandemic ensuring they were coping and if they required additional support, advice or reassurance.

### **Adult Social Care Social Work and Support Services – adapting at pace**

The onset of the pandemic prompted a radically different approach to the way in which services in Adult Social Care (ASC) are organised, located and delivered, making real-time changes without piloting delivery and whilst continuing to meet needs of people who receive either commissioned or directly delivered services and contacting the 7,000 people on the shielded list. With some staff maintaining a presence in the office throughout, robust ICT and PPE provision arrangements were quickly developed, along with rotas and new arrangements for staff supervision and increased working hours to cope with hospital-based pressures, which certainly contributed to the avoidance of some of the more traumatic scenes witnessed in the international media.

Despite the reduced volume of face to face work, the service has continued to assess people under the Mental Health Act and address safeguarding concerns, some of which required home visits. Assessing for deprivation of liberty has been a significantly impacted area, due to the restrictions of visiting to care homes. However, this has been mitigated by the use of video and audio technology by both medical staff and Best Interest Assessors.

Business activity has been moving towards normal levels for the last few months, after a decrease over the first one/two months of lockdown. Safeguarding numbers are now at usual levels, referrals are slightly above normal and the number of hours of domiciliary care commissioned is more than 800 hours per week higher than the same time last year.

As we move towards a more normalised way of working we will have the opportunity to better understand what we got right and what we did not get right and consider whether some of the operational changes made are appropriate to continue in the future, or are sustainable.

### **Working in Partnership**

#### **Back to school safely campaign**

A wide-ranging communications strategy was developed, which ran over seven weeks over the summer holidays, delivering timely prompts about the school return, overseen by the return to school group. Schools were supported by the Council's Health and Safety team who has

provided “pop-in” visits to schools for quality assurance. We also provided PPE for schools, model signage and line-marking paint. So far, the number of pupils returning is very positive, with a small increase in pupils who are Electively Home Educated due to the pandemic.