

PEOPLE PORTFOLIOS

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>

Strategic Issues

Supporting vulnerable people through the pandemic

With increased case rates in October and new national restrictions from the 5 November, we have continued to provide coordinated support to vulnerable people and households across the town in partnership with our providers and third sector organisations. Work is underway to contact all of the people who have been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable in Blackpool and are subject to more restrictive advice than the general population, to ensure they have access to the support they need. We continue to receive calls, emails and forms asking for our support from the corona kindness campaign and the efforts of our staff and volunteers are helping people to comply effectively and safely with the requirement to isolate if they exhibit symptoms or receive a positive test result. It has been fantastic to see the supportive response from local businesses to the impact of the virus on our communities, with the availability of locally-based and flexible delivery shopping services proving very popular across the town.

Our provider support hub continues to work with the fantastic carers who are supporting our residents to live safely at home and in care and nursing homes across the town, by coordinating access to the latest advice and guidance, supporting them to get the right PPE and helping them to access the infection control funds, which are available to enhance the protection for both staff and service users. Our emergency workforce provision is in place to enable providers to access staffing support quickly if they have staff self-isolating. We continue to see an incredible amount of peer support across our provider networks, the sharing of good practice and creative ideas to support both staff and service users and we want to thank all of the staff, managers and leaders across our health and social care providers for their continued hard work and dedication.

Children in Care numbers starting to fall

Children and families are now receiving more proportionate support from those best placed to deliver it. Despite the impact of COVID-19, we are also beginning to see more children leaving public care and a fall in the headline number of children in our care. For some of our key measures, numbers are now lower than the long-term levels in Blackpool over the past five years or longer.

The impact of a more robust process at the “front door” has delivered a 28% reduction in entrants to the system for the first six months of 2020/2021, compared to the full year rate for 2019/2020. This is mirrored through the entire social care system, with a decrease in child protection enquiries by 21%, initial child protection conferences decreasing by 28%; and new child protection plans decreasing by 23%. This partly reflects the high levels of presenting demand in 2019/2020, but also reflects a necessary shift towards less intervention.

However, there is no room for complacency. The number of children subject to child protection plans has risen through the latter part of COVID-19 lockdown due to a slowing in the number of plans ceasing, although numbers of those becoming subject to a plan for a second or subsequent time has settled at around the national average as new approaches bed in.

Moreover, the high number of child protection plans ceasing in the latter part of 2019 and early part of 2020 was partially driven by escalation of some of those children into public care – a reflection itself of the work of the permanence panel and its scrutiny of families in pre-proceedings. This culminated in the number of children in care peaking at 668 in May 2020, as court proceedings slowed, a number which has fallen to 622 at time of writing. This reflects both a slowing of entry into care, but also the conclusion of delayed court proceedings in September and October, where the local authority was seeking discharge of a full care order. It also reflects initial court proceedings concluding without a full care order.

Whilst we need to do more to ensure that full care orders are reserved only for those who need it, there has been definite positive movement in this area during 2020. More children in settled placements have left care to special guardianship orders, more care orders have been discharged where children are placed at home and we are seeing fewer children placed at home on full care orders – there are currently 25 children, whereas there were 40 a year ago.

Meeting service delivery challenges to deliver real outcomes

There is no question that the last seven months have been challenging for both families and workers – requiring a number of changes to our approach to service delivery – but delivering a quality service whilst safeguarding our young people has been a constant focus. We have continued to support virtual family time during lockdown, reintroducing face to face family time soon after lockdown eased, whilst feedback from the Judiciary suggests that Blackpool is amongst the more proactive local authorities in seeking to expedite proceedings for the benefit of children and young people. We have not seen the kinds of major problems as other places, such as missed identification of very vulnerable babies and young infants and subsequent non-accidental injuries. Local services have so far held up well under the strain and still provided a

strong safety-net for local children and families. In the circumstances and given the ever-present and increasing levels of social need in the town, this represents a good achievement.

We recognised that care leavers were especially vulnerable during COVID-19 and lockdown, being more likely to be without a family or wider network of support. We maintained regular contact with every care leaver, especially our most vulnerable young people throughout and were particularly zealous in securing support from health colleagues for those young people who were really struggling. We know from the young people themselves that this support was highly valued and we believe that this softened the impact of the pandemic on them, which sadly cannot be said for all local authorities.

We also recognise that too many children in our care are placed in residential homes and that too many are placed with independent fostering agency foster homes, when compared to the regional averages per head of population. The Medium Term Financial Strategy has specific initiatives designed to reinvigorate the council's fostering service, including changes in payment to carers together with a targeted recruitment campaign; and an innovative idea to step-down children from residential care into foster care using a therapeutic children's home. We hope to begin to change the long term pattern over the next year.

Outcomes achieved for care leavers have remained steady and generally better than the national average, in terms of the proportion of those with whom we are in touch and the proportion in suitable accommodation. Education, employment and training remains the key challenge especially for older care leavers (19 to 21 year olds), although levels have improved in the past six months and the proportion of care leavers in higher education remains comparatively good. We have several stunning examples of young people achieving exceptional academic outcomes, even during COVID-19.

Overall, in spite of the challenges of the past year, Blackpool's children's services are in a better position: services are better, children are safer, practice is improving, there is less drift and delay, we have a more stable workforce and, most importantly, tangible outcomes for children, young people and families are better.

Working with Partners

Lotus Free School – meeting the needs of our young people

The Lotus Free School opened in September 2020 as a partnership between the Champion Education Trust and the Council and is the first of its type in Blackpool. Aimed at children aged 10-16 with Social, Emotional, Mental Health Needs (SEMH) who have an Education, Health and Care plan, 18 pupils joined across years 6,7 and 8 as part of a phased opening agreed with the Department for Education.

Prior to the Lotus school there was no provision for SEMH needs in the Blackpool Local Authority area, with over 100 Blackpool pupils having to attend independent special schools elsewhere. Local mainstream settings do not have the capacity and resources to provide the

specialist provision required, with the complex needs of the young people preventing a successful reintegration back into mainstream school, whilst the Pupil Referral Unit has historically been over capacity. This often means that pupils travel for over 40 minutes to and from school, despite displaying challenging behaviours which can cause safety concerns for both staff and young people, in addition to the expense involved.

Once fully open, the school will cater for 48 pupils, ensuring they maintain strong links with the local community and ultimately providing a more stable education which should deliver better outcomes.

Providing holiday activities and food for our most vulnerable young people

The Council, together with the Opportunity Area and partner organisations, formed a partnership in 2019 in order to give children in Blackpool a full summer holiday activity programme, which included a food provision for our most vulnerable children. Its success has led to the partnership seeking funding and opportunities for the development of a sustainable programme to provide activities and food in all School Holidays. In December 2019, the Sunday Times ran a series of hard-hitting articles about the impact of poverty in Blackpool and the issues families faced during the holidays. The resultant appeal organised by the newspaper to help support and fund activities and food in 2020 resulted in Blackpool receiving a proportion of the money raised along with other Opportunity Areas, contributing towards the £209,000 cost of addressing these most fundamental issues well before the government's recent U-turn on this issue. Other funding came from Children's Services, the Opportunity Area, the Free School Breakfast Funding underspend, the Big Lottery Fund, FCAT and Christ the King/St Cuthbert's Schools.

This year's programme was inevitably somewhat different. The partnership recognised that it would need to provide food to those on Free School Meals, but was limited by restrictions on the number of children able to meet in groups. The final programme, Blackpool Summer of Fun, was developed by a willing collective of local organisations - Active Blackpool, the Family Hubs, Groundworks, the Magic Club, Blackpool Football Club Community Trust, the Boys and Girls Club, UR potential, Boat House Youth and Park Rangers – and included both virtual provision and a range of face to face activities. These included a sports camp with packed lunches provided, the purchase of "STEM Boxes" (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) for Year 5 children and the development of Nature boxes by our Park Rangers. Due to the tight timescales some of the boxes were instead used in the October Half term, with other provision including a sports camp and other face-to-face activities. The partnership are now considering a programme of activities and food provision for the Christmas Holidays and will make best use of the money allocated as part of the Winter Grant scheme to support our families.

Corporate Issues

Fun nature activities from the Early Years Park Rangers

Thanks to funding by Better Start and the support of the Parks Development Team, the Rangers did an amazing job throughout lockdown of engaging families through their social media

channels, providing ideas for fun nature activities in the local park and bedtime stories. The activities are continuing throughout the second lockdown and are proving to be a great way of keeping young children entertained! We would recommend keeping up to date with their activity by following Blackpool Park Rangers on Facebook.

Transforming Services

Returning to school

With the re-opening of schools from September being a key aspect of the government's approach to reducing the impact of the coronavirus on long term outcomes of children, we have taken every step possible to ensure that this was achieved in a safe and secure way. At the start of the original lockdown we made materials available to all schools to support COVID-19 secure routines, including the embedding of handwashing in schools' culture and social distancing signage from Print Blackpool. This was supported by regular sessions with an infection control specialist and the Director of Public Health to reinforce this in the day-to-day planning and activity of our school leaders, sessions which have continued through into the latest phase of lockdown.

This has been backed up by a comprehensive communications campaign that has sought to reassure the community and to reinforce these messages. Co-ordinated by the Council's Communications Team, key channels used included radio advertisements, leaflet drops, social media updates and notices in local and national newspapers. The schools communicated directly with parents over the summer holidays to emphasis that schools were reopening in September with these measures in place, with messages continuing throughout September to target any parents whose children had not returned to school.

The Council's Health and Safety Team undertook the role of reviewing and giving feedback on all of the educational establishments, excluding Further Education and Higher Education, in Blackpool. This included Local Authority schools, Academies with a Council Service Level Agreement and any school in the area requiring help, advice and guidance. This indicated that the vast majority of Head teachers and School Business Managers fully understood and embraced the guidance and all appeared to have worked hard to ensure their schools were COVID-19 Secure in line with Health and Safety law and current government guidance. The Health and Safety Team offered continued support to schools, as well as providing guidance and advice with any queries and concerns, which schools raised and monitoring Local Authority schools to ensure the risk assessments were reflected in the procedures in place and updated to account for changing guidance. Health and Safety Executive visits have confirmed that practice is acceptable and in line with national expectations.

National guidance called for the formation of "bubbles" of pupils. In the first phase, schools have been able to form bubbles of between 10 and 15 pupils, with a teacher and Teaching Assistant. In the second phase, schools have used larger bubbles, but have also dealt with positive cases through a track and trace approach, resulting in more children being able to stay in school. "Zones" have been used to keep these bubbles separate, with pupils entering and

leaving the buildings through different entrances and exits where possible. To support social distancing, extra transport services have been provided with a maximum capacity of 50%, whilst correspondence has been sent to schools to share with parents that emphasises the need to walk or cycle to school where possible rather than using public transport.

Maximising pupil attendance

All schools returned within 14 days of the official start of term. This was partly due to the change in term dates. Attendance has been around 85% or higher for most of the school year, even taking into account absences due to COVID-19. Many schools would have a percentage attendance rate in the mid to high 90% range without the impact of COVID-19.

Two schools have closed for short periods of time and the numbers of pupils who were isolating were initially high. Cases of illness other than COVID-19 are lower in most schools than at this time last year, which is probably an indicator of the measures being taken to reduce COVID-19 also reducing the incidences of other viral infections.

Whilst we have taken a comprehensive approach to ensuring pupils' safety as much as possible, some parents have not returned their children to school. We are using family-focused professionals from the Pupil Welfare Service, the charity School to Home Support and school pastoral staff to work with families, re-engaging them in education again and supporting them to resolve their underlying concerns and issues. We have also shared the pan-Lancashire agreed protocol for issuing Penalty Notices with Head teachers and Academy CEOs so that they are aware of how to use these and which specific circumstances apply, so that they can be used if absolutely necessary.

Pupils who have previously been poor attenders at school have been identified, as have those who have found it difficult to follow the rules set out by schools. Their families have additional support provided by the Pupil Welfare Service and, if they consent, through Targeted Intervention Services and the charity School to Home Support. Places have been made available at our Hospital School provision, with increased access to specialist mental health support and in the LA PRU and in independent alternative provision if schools require it. Bespoke timetables have been arranged which gradually encourage full attendance, which combine face to face learning with online learning.

Facilitating remote learning

Schools have been working hard to ensure that they have functioning systems that can easily pick up remote learning if required. Schools that were unable to facilitate online learning were able to access the free support from the DFE and establish a Google or Microsoft platform. We have shared information with school leaders about how to safely and effectively use Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom, as well as using available online resources such as Oak National Academy.

All our allocated DFE laptops have been distributed to families, with 4G "dongles" to enable internet access. The Council worked with the PRU and the social work teams to identify children

and young people who were in need of a laptop and/or internet access. Devices arrived in late June and the majority were delivered to school settings in early July. Around half of the devices were delivered via schools thereby enabling the schools to add the devices to their own systems and networks. Schools then made arrangements to handover the device directly to the child or young person. The remainder of the devices were delivered directly through social workers or an allocated worker.

We also distributed 26,882 Free School Meal packs, the equivalent of 134,410 meals.

Elective Home Education

We have seen a rise in the numbers of parents choosing to educate their children at home from 240 in November 2019 to 301 currently. 213 of these are secondary school age. Given this rise, we are putting in place a total of 2.0 full time equivalent (FTE) posts in place to ensure we discharge our responsibilities effectively in relation to ensuring that all children in Blackpool are in receipt of a full-time education and are safeguarded, with 0.6 FTE of this capacity currently in place.

Concerns were raised as to the potential increase in families opting for Elective Home Education (EHE) following the lockdown as a result of several months of compulsory home schooling. We are firmly of the opinion that a school learning environment is the best way for the overwhelming majority of young people to get the best quality education for their needs, whilst acknowledging the right of parents to educate their children at home. To this end we have decided not to provide additional support to families who opted to home school once the restrictions were lifted and all virtual learning ended in September, we have proactively contacted children identified as being considered 'at risk' of not returning to school to deter any applications for Elective Home Education (EHE) and have sent letters to all Blackpool-educated families informing them that no school places would be held, with no guarantee that a place would still be available in the same school in the future once an application for EHE had been completed.