

## **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>

## **Strategic Issues**

### **Coronavirus Update**

A presentation will be given to the Council meeting by Dr Arif Rajpura, reflecting the latest position across the town.

### **School attendance through lockdown**

Attendance in Blackpool schools has been lower than in the first and second periods of lockdown. Prior to Christmas the attendance level across Blackpool was consistently at or around the national average and above regional averages, reflecting the efforts of all stakeholders to encourage attendance and support children and families. Attendance in schools is particularly important for our children, as the levels of deprivation and poor child and adult literacy across Blackpool mean that long periods out of school will lead to educational regression and make it harder to close the gap with national achievement levels.

Around 15% of Blackpool pupils have been in school since Christmas, with high attendance at Primary schools, but lower than expected numbers of vulnerable children due to the strong public health message about staying at home. All staff are working hard to encourage attendance, understanding that there is a significant additional financial and emotional burdens placed upon all children and families when a child is not in school. For some children, not being able to attend a safe school environment increases the risk to their personal safety. All schools have robust safeguarding checks in place and are regularly seeing or speaking to all their vulnerable children.

The pattern of attendance is similar in Early Years (EY) settings. Over 2,000 children attended prior to Christmas and 100% of settings were open, but this dropped to 1,600 children at the start of January. This was in part due to school nurseries closing temporarily and then

reopening as a result of changes to government guidance. We now expect EY attendance to increase by the end of January and all settings to be fully open.

All Special schools remain fully open and are in a position to provide for all SEN children, although attendance has dropped to 60% in January due to parents choosing not to send children to school. All special schools where children are not attending are providing work packs or access to online lessons for pupils. Schools are also doing weekly home visits and food parcels or vouchers are being delivered to those qualifying for free school meals. We have completed Risk Assessments with schools to ensure we continue to meet the child's SEN and Social care needs, including those delivered via social care. Health partners continue to provide the therapy services to children in schools, and where a child is not attending, this support has moved online.

### **Free School Meals**

We have provided Free School Meals for all eligible families throughout the pandemic using existing catering arrangements on-site, food parcels through schools or through Blackpool Council's emergency provision, or by issuing vouchers. Schools may now claim £15 per pupil for a voucher, or an additional £3.50 per child per week, on top of the £12.50 a week they already receive to provide a food parcel. Schools have worked with parents to establish their preferences and decide what best meets the needs of a family and we are now using local vouchers to address issues with the Government's voucher scheme. We must say that we were disappointed to see the poor quality of some of the free school meal parcels provided in Blackpool via the private sector and whilst we are glad this has been resolved, we must continue to challenge those who think we should not support families in need at a time of national crisis.

Families who are eligible for Free School Meals over the February half-term holiday period will be provided with a £15 voucher from the Winter Grant, allocated to Blackpool Council. Families were provided with a £30 voucher from this grant over the Christmas period and schools and colleges were also allocated a discretionary fund totalling £3 per pupil on roll at the school, to provide emergency funding for food and fuel where needed.

A significant number of families in Blackpool do not have access to IT equipment or broadband and we continue to work on our approach to digital exclusion. Despite the Government's offer of laptops through their central scheme, many families continue to be left without access months later – this simply is not good enough and has hindered the efforts of professionals to provide home learning with regular contact. We are trying to resolve this with the Department for Education, but progress has been frustratingly slow.

### **Testing and Vaccinations**

Schools have been provided with lateral flow tests to test staff weekly or twice-weekly and pupils on a regular basis, although serial testing of close contacts in school has been suspended. This is for asymptomatic staff and pupils to reduce the onward transmission rates, with initial indications being that this is having some effect. All schools are participating in local and

national arrangements for testing and some are benefitting from support from the army and our local public health teams.

Early years providers have been given access to the Council lateral flow testing being conducted by the Public Health team, however take up is currently low and we are working on a solution to try and provide tests directly to the nurseries.

Two of the four special school will have access to COVID vaccinations from 22 January with the two chosen schools being the highest risk pupils with clinically vulnerable pupils. We anticipate making the vaccine available to the other two schools in the next two weeks. Frontline social care workers including those working with our clinically vulnerable children and families across Blackpool have been identified and supported to access the vaccination programme and we are seeing extraordinary efforts across health and social care to support rapid progress in ensuring all of our health and social care workforce have had an offer of the vaccine.

### **Examinations**

Formal examinations for the summer exam period 2021 have been cancelled and Ofqual are consulting on alternative arrangements for awarding grades. Tests in the Primary phase have also been cancelled.

### **Care and Support**

A partnership is in place across the NHS, the Council and our many providers of frontline health and social care support across the town to ensure that vaccinations are offered and delivered to our eligible workers to help to protect them and those that they support. We have seen a fantastic logistical effort, which has seen vaccinations take place at the hospital site, in primary care network sites and more recently at the Winter Gardens. Throughout January, dedicated teams visited care homes not currently experiencing outbreaks and vaccinated both residents and staff and we are working with all of our providers to ensure that the vaccination programme has met its objectives. The Director of Adult Social Care is continuing to hold weekly calls with all providers and feedback suggests that providers find them a helpful resource for reliable, up to date information and opportunity to share and resolve issues and concerns.

### **Positive news on Avian Flu**

After the sad news about the swans in Stanley Park in November, we are pleased to report that we have received no further reports of birds displaying avian flu symptoms and the cordon around Stanley Park Lake was removed on 31 December 2020. However, Avian Influenza Protection Zone (AIPZ) remains in place across the whole of England, which generally requires bird keepers to keep their flocks indoors.

## **Corporate Issues**

### **Children's Social Care Performance - Update**

After a busy period in the run-up to Christmas, we received fewer requests for Children's Social Care involvement between Christmas and New Year. The general trend over the last six months has been relatively steady, both in terms of the number of new requests for service taken through for social care assessment per week (around 50), and in terms of the total number of children and young people open to the service (around 1,900).

There are several noteworthy trends now in evidence. Whilst we have experienced a continued fall in the number of child protection enquiries undertaken and in the number of initial child protection conferences, the number of children subject to a child protection plan remains steady at around 390 – equating to 135 per 10,000 population. We are focusing on this via the revised Edge of Care service, which is working with families who have children who have been subject to child protection plans for a year or longer.

Positively, we have seen a steady reduction in the proportion of referrals which were re-referrals within a year of closure. This was 26% for the last quarter, but was lower than that across the past six weeks (22%).

The number of children subject to interim care orders (ICO) and therefore still in court proceedings, continues to fall slowly, although the proportion where the order has been in place for longer than six months continues to grow. This has been affected by the pandemic, with a backlog of hearings in the courts and a large number of relatively new proceedings at the time that the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The number of children entering care being at its lowest since 2014 has also contributed to this, with the number of children aged over five entering care at its lowest figure in a decade.

We are pleased to report that there are now 606 children are in public care in Blackpool, down from a peak of 668 in May 2020. 119 of these children left care in the six months up to the end of December 2020. In spite of this, there has not yet been a fall in the number of children in children's homes, which are the most expensive form of placements. This is an area of key focus for the coming year and activity in this area is central to the Children's Services Medium Term Financial Plan.

### **National Comparison**

Since our last report, the Department for Education has released the 2019/2020 financial year children's social care data at both national and local authority level. Overall, the national data shows slight rises in most measures. However, data for the local authorities which are statistically similar to Blackpool, such as coastal areas including Torbay, Kingston-Upon-Hull and South Tyneside, as well as inland authorities such as Barnsley and Stoke-on-Trent, shows much more substantial rises in demand across most areas, especially child protection activity and the number of children entering care.

Whilst it is important to treat these figures with caution given that we do not know the impact of the pandemic on demand in these other areas through 2020, the sustained fall in demand and activity in Blackpool over the past 12 months makes us much less of an outlier across most measures. It is important to note though that Blackpool remains a considerable outlier in the number of children in public care per head of population, but this represents considerable positive relative progress over the past 18 months.

### **Ofsted Update**

Ofsted continue to carry out Social Care regulatory work through this period of restrictions including visits as required with providers.

Ofsted has said that they are mindful of the pressures local authorities are facing. At the same time, it is important that they understand what is happening for children during the national lockdown and how local authorities are meeting the challenges it presents. Ofsted have advised that they will be carrying out focused visit activity during the lockdown, but have made some changes to make this more manageable and proportionate. Focused visits will be delivered onsite, offsite, or in a blended format as appropriate.

### **Transforming Services**

#### **Active Lives – part of everything we do**

The Active Lives Strategy consultation process is now complete, with the document approved by the Executive on 25 January. The principle focus is increasing levels of physical activity across young people and adults, with an additional focus on priority groups including people living in deprived areas. It will also improve co-ordination across the voluntary sector and ensure we maximise use of facilities. As the strategic lead, the Active Blackpool service will now develop a plan for implementation with key partners, which will include measures to build consideration of physical activity into all of our plans.

### **Working with Partners**

#### **Children and Families Partnership**

The Children and Families Partnership has continued to meet virtually since March 2020. Having agreed that the key “obsessions” for improving outcomes for our children and families – Inclusion, Literacy and addressing the impact of Poverty - it has developed a dashboard of key performance indicators to monitor the impact of cross cutting, multi-agency programmes of change. A forum for a wide range of stakeholders to come together, share ideas and initiatives for change and to hold each other to account, the partnership is growing in strength despite the challenges of the COVID restrictions.

#### **Project ADDER – tackling drug misuse**

The Home Office has selected Blackpool as one of five places to receive £1.1 million of funding for a new approach called “Project ADDER”, which will tackle drug misuse. ADDER stands for

Addiction, Disruption, Diversion, Enforcement and Recovery, with the initiative involving coordinated law enforcement activity alongside expanded diversionary activity and provision for treatment and recovery work. The project, which is also supported by Public Health England, will focus on heroin and crack users involved with crime and will offer a coordinated and multi-agency response with an outreach and harm reduction focus. It will seek to break up “county lines” drug supply lines and support individuals who are addicted to drugs to obtain the help they need.

Three teams drawn from 25 partner organisations have been established to deliver the project: one focussed on enforcement and diversion, led by the police; an adult multidisciplinary team led by Renaissance; and a young people's (under 25) multi-disciplinary team led by Streetlife. Additional specialist support will come from Housing First and the Council will provide in-employment Individual Placement Support.

The design of the programme is informed by the needs assessment undertaken by the Lancashire Violence Reduction Unit in 2019/2020, along with evidence of effective interventions and has been directed by the people from Empowerment's Lived Experience Team, which provides advice and guidance to shape service provision for those living with multiple disadvantages in Blackpool. The whole programme is based on a trauma informed approach, taking into account the ongoing effects of previous experiences on how people respond to support.