

**MINUTES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING -
THURSDAY, 9 DECEMBER 2021**

Present:

Councillor Burdess (in the Chair)

Councillors

D Coleman
Critchley

B Mitchell
M Mitchell

Owen
Mrs Scott

R Scott

Ms Jo Snape, Diocesan Co-opted Member

In Attendance:

Councillor Maxine Callow, Scrutiny Leader Member

Councillor Gillian Campbell, Cabinet Member for Inclusion, Youth and Transience

Councillor Jim Hobson, Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care and Schools

Ms Vicky Gent, Director of Children's Services

Ms Jeanette Richards, Assistant Director of Children's Services

Ms Clare Law, Director of the Centre for Early Child Development (Items 1-4 only)

Mrs Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 7 OCTOBER 2021

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 7 October 2021 be signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

3 PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Committee noted that there were no applications to speak by members of the public on this occasion.

4 BETTER START SCRUTINY REVIEW UPDATE

Ms Clare Law, Director of the Centre for Early Child Development presented a progress report on the recommendations arising from the scrutiny review of Blackpool Better Start. She informed Members that the action plan of recommendations had been considered and agreed via the Better Start governance process and thanked the Committee for the work undertaken as part of the review.

An update on each of the five recommendations was provided by Ms Law. In relation to recommendation R1 'That Better Start should target funds to the seven wards originally identified for funding and in cases where residents of these wards are failing to access Better Start provisions the services on offer should be reviewed to ensure they are suitable and accessible,' she advised that funding continued to be monitored through the

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Better Start Executive for distribution across the town and provided details of a number of projects which had been targeted specifically at Better Start wards.

Ms Law informed the Committee that access to services was closely monitored to ensure those with the highest need were receiving the necessary support and a portfolio review had taken place with the Expert Advisory Group to ensure that individuals identified as being in need were receiving appropriate support. Furthermore, she advised that ongoing quarterly review meetings continued to take place with the National Lottery Community Fund.

The Committee questioned the criteria used to originally identify the Better Start wards, with Ms Law advising that an exercise had been undertaken nationally to identify those wards classed as disadvantaged. She explained that the Better Start model aimed to initially trial interventions on a smaller scale within its seven Better Start wards, but that programmes which were successful were often then rolled out across other areas of the town as appropriate.

In response to recommendation R2 'That Better Start works in conjunction with the Council's Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager to target future interventions where appropriate more specifically to those parents identified as being at risk of having their children taken into care, with a periodic review of the subsequent impact on the data of children born into care,' Ms Law reported that work was underway with Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager and Oxford University to link Council data with data from Better Start. In addition, Better Start funds were being invested in a project with Lancaster University to undertake a review of pathways and support to allow a comparison of local and national research and best practice in preventing children from being born into care. The Committee was informed that the project would also include learning from those with lived experience. Ms Law advised that ethical approval to allow Better Start to undertake analysis of the collected data was now awaited and, once received, she anticipated that such analysis would be able to commence from April 2022.

With regard to the Communications Strategy requested within recommendation R3, Ms Law informed the Committee that Better Start's current Communications Strategy had been produced in 2020 and as such was due to be updated in conjunction with the broader Better Start Strategy in early 2022. She offered to keep Members updated on the progress of the Strategy and to share the draft document with the Committee once it had been finalised.

The Committee considered recommendation R4 'That Better Start should introduce within the next six months a regular update bulletin to Councillors informing them of recent achievements and forthcoming events, as well as information on how they can get involved in any programmes,' noting that the target date for completion was December 2021 and seeking an update on the anticipated completion date. Ms Law agreed that a bulletin to Councillors could be produced and circulated before the end of December 2021. The Committee acknowledged the value of such a bulletin, noting that it would allow Councillors to inform residents of appropriate services and events in their wards.

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Further to recommendation R5 'That the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee receives annual updates from Better Start on the progress of sustainability planning of Better Start programmes,' Members extended an invitation to Ms Law to attend the Committee on an annual basis and requested that she attend more frequently should she feel that additional updates were required. The Committee sought further information on current sustainability planning and questioned what Blackpool Better Start would look like once the funding ended. Ms Law highlighted that sustainability of services had been at the forefront of Better Start planning from the start and advised that a comprehensive strategy for the final phase of Blackpool Better Start was anticipated to be completed by summer 2022.

The Committee questioned whether Covid-19 had impacted on Better Start services and sought details of any necessary changes to provision as a result of the pandemic. Ms Law reported that the pandemic had made a significant impact and that in response Better Start's community engagement team had collaborated with the Council to ensure that contact had been made with hard to reach residents via doorstep visits and the delivery of resources. In addition, such doorstep drops had been utilised to provide additional support and signposting to available services to any residents in need.

The Committee extended its thanks to Ms Law for attending the meeting and for the provision of a comprehensive and thorough progress report.

The Committee agreed:

1. To request that a Better Start information bulletin be produced and circulated to all Councillors before the end of the calendar year, to inform them of recent Better Start achievements and forthcoming events;
2. That Better Start's draft Communications Strategy be shared with the Committee once completed;
3. That a further update on the work of Better Start be provided in twelve months' time.

[Ms Law left the meeting on conclusion of this item.]

5 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT - DOMESTIC ABUSE

Ms Jeanette Richards, Assistant Director of Children's Services provided information on the Council's approach to tackling domestic abuse. The Committee was informed that Blackpool's rate of domestic abuse was relatively high at over twice the average rate for Lancashire and the town's high levels of socio-economic deprivation had been identified as a risk factor for domestic abuse. Ms Richards reported that Blackpool had greater proportions of younger people who could be lone parents, on low incomes, have a long term illness and/or low education levels, which she advised were all risk factors for increased occurrences of domestic abuse. In addition, between June 2019 and June 2020 there had been 748 children from the Blackpool area who were living in households which had been referred to Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC). Ms Richards reported that activity was being undertaken around domestic abuse with the aim of improving the quality of practice to families experiencing some form of domestic abuse.

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In response to the reported referral figures, the Committee questioned the thresholds used for the stepping down of cases to 'no further action.' Members noted that in the 2020/2021 financial year, of the 848 children who had been subject to an assessment where domestic abuse had been identified as a factor, 467 had resulted in either a step down to services or no further action. Ms Richards advised that referrals to the Children's and Families Hub arose after any intervention by the police. Following this, the multi-agency team reviewed all referrals and any relevant information would be shared with a child's school to make them aware of any incidents or concerns. She assured Members that no referrals resulted in no further action, as all would be actioned in some way. Cases could be stepped down to Early Help or stepped up to Children's Social Care, depending on the specific findings of each case and thresholds would be closely monitored throughout the whole process.

The Committee sought clarification around whether children who had been referred due to domestic abuse would be supported away from the family unit, with an emphasis being placed on raising their awareness that domestic abuse was not normal in a family setting. Ms Richards reported that following a domestic abuse referral, a social worker or health professional might make contact separately with the child away from the family. She informed Committee Members of the bespoke services offered by 'The Den', which aimed to raise awareness around domestic abuse, as well as the mandatory health and wellbeing work undertaken in schools around healthy personal relationships.

The Committee acknowledged the difficult job undertaken by social workers but noted the importance of their role and of vulnerable children's reliance on social workers and their ability to protect children from harmful family environments. In relation to the cited 748 children from the Blackpool area living in households which had been referred to Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences, the Committee sought clarification over the specific number of households involved. Ms Richards advised that some of these children might come from multi-sibling families and offered to circulate more detailed analysis of the figures to the Committee following the meeting. In addition, the Committee requested further data around the number of children whose families had elected to home educate them, raising the concern that home schooled children ran the risk of any issues going undetected. The Committee was informed that the school nurse service was still offered to home schooled pupils and that in the event of an unmet need being identified, this would be escalated for further review. Ms Richards agreed to provide data around the number of children identified as being exposed to incidents of domestic abuse who were being home schooled.

The significance of the findings contained within the recent 'Child of the North' report was discussed by the Committee, with Members acknowledging the correlation between childhood poverty and an increased risk of domestic abuse. The Committee noted the relevance of the report's findings to Blackpool and agreed that further work should be undertaken by the Committee in order to allow a thorough consideration of the report's recommendations.

Further details were sought around the Caring Dads programme, which the Committee had been informed was an evidence based programme designed to rebuild relationships between fathers and their children. Ms Richards reported that the programme had

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recently been evaluated by the Violence Reduction Network and had been found to be effecting positive change. Members were advised that the Caring Dads programme worked with men to support them in considering their behaviour and the impact it could have on their children.

The Committee discussed more subtle forms of domestic abuse, in particular coercive control and emotional abuse, with Members raising concerns that for some children and young people such behaviour could become normalised in the family home. Ms Richards outlined the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) programme offered in schools and informed the Committee that this included lessons on healthy relationships and family interactions, which the Committee requested further details of at a future meeting. In addition, she reported that social care assessments had been designed to help identify any coercive behaviours in the home and noted the benefits of the 'Ask Angela' campaign in raising awareness of the problem within the wider community by allowing bars and associated venues to identify and help people who felt at risk of sexual abuse.

In response to a question on the approach taken by the police towards victims of domestic abuse, Ms Richards reported that a bespoke domestic abuse team was to be reintroduced, which would consist of officers who understood the vulnerabilities of victims of domestic abuse. Furthermore, a multi-agency team had been formed specifically to respond to incidents of domestic abuse.

The Committee sought additional information around the reported eLearning module to be undertaken throughout January 2022 by all Early Help staff, with the aim of raising awareness of the impact of parental conflict on children. Clarification was sought over whether the training would extend to cover nurseries, with Ms Richards confirming that Early Years staff, including those in privately run nurseries, should have undertaken safeguarding training which identified the route employees should utilise to report any safeguarding concerns.

The Committee agreed:

1. To request that details be provided of the number of households involved in the cited data of children living in households which had been referred to Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences;
2. To request data around the number of children identified as being exposed to incidents of domestic abuse who were being home schooled;
3. That further details of the Personal, Social and Health Education programme offered in schools be provided at a future meeting, with particular emphasis on raising awareness of coercive relationships;
4. That further consideration be given by the Committee to the findings of the 'Child of the North' report and the potential impact on Blackpool.

6 EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY

Ms Vicky Gent, Director of Children's Services updated the Committee on the requested information regarding the introduction of a counselling service at the Educational Diversity Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). Ms Gent highlighted that one of the aims of the PRU was to integrate pupils back into a mainstream education setting and as such the purpose of the counselling provision was to support and assist this. She provided a summary of the

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counselling service offered to all Educational Diversity pupils and identified that referrals were made either by teaching staff, support staff or self-referred by pupils themselves.

The Committee requested further details around the number of referrals received since the commencement of the service in October 2020, noting that 76 pupils had accessed the provision and asking whether Ms Gent felt this represented a cost effective service. Ms Gent responded that the overall size of the PRU had been significantly reduced over the past two years, with pupil numbers having been reduced from 320 down to approximately 130, therefore noting that 76 pupils represented a significant proportion of all its pupils.

Ms Jeanette Richards, Assistant Director of Children's Services informed the Committee of an emerging national picture of increasing concern over the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, not least as a result of the ongoing pandemic. In response, funding had been secured to provide mental health practitioners in Blackpool schools and work was currently ongoing to determine the most effective mechanism to allow the service to be rolled out across all schools.

The Committee gave consideration to the transition of young people from Children's to Adults' Services, noting that access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) ceased at age 16. Ms Richards acknowledged the difficulties and frustrations experienced by young people and their families in accessing appropriate services and recognised that services needed to be commissioned in a different way in order to meet the needs of this group of vulnerable young people.

7 ORACLE BUILDING UPDATE

Ms Vicky Gent, Director of Children's Services provided an update on the proposals for Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) provision at the Oracle building.

Ms Gent reported that following a public consultation, planning continued for the transfer of Park Community Academy's post-16 students into the Oracle building on St Anne's Road. The Committee was informed that internal modifications had been completed and advice sought from the Fire Service regarding emergency egress from the building. Ms Gent advised that the Sea View Trust was awaiting the outcome of its application to the Education and Skills Funding Agency regarding the proposed change and the Council was liaising with the funders of the building in order to progress a change in the use of the facilities.

Discussions were underway with the Trust regarding tenancy arrangements, which Ms Gent reported would include continued access for those community groups who currently used the Oracle. Further clarification was sought around the tenancy agreements, with the Committee specifically hoping to determine whether building access to all current user groups would continue under the new arrangements as well as seeking details of who the groups were. Assurance was also sought over whether the facilities to be utilised by Park School students would remain completely separate to any other users of the building. Ms Gent was unable to provide the specific details at the meeting but agreed to provide the requested information to Committee Members.

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The Committee agreed: To request a further update report on the proposed SEND provision at the Oracle building at the Committee meeting scheduled for 27 January 2022.

8 SEND STRATEGY UPDATE

Ms Vicky Gent, Director of Children's Services reported that the revised Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Strategy would be available in early 2022 following approval by the Executive. She asked for volunteers from the Committee in order that a working group could be established to review the draft document prior to submission to the Executive. The Committee agreed to the establishment of a working group to review the draft Strategy but requested the deferral of the final document to the Executive in order to allow the whole Committee to consider the amended Strategy at its meeting on 27 January 2022.

Councillor Hobson, Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care and Schools advised that Blackpool historically exhibited a low percentage of children with SEND attending mainstream schools, in part due to the popularity with parents of selecting a place at one of Blackpool's Special Schools, even in cases where attendance at a mainstream school might be more beneficial. As a result, space within the Special Schools was now at a premium and the Council was working with all its schools to improve SEND provisions in mainstream settings.

The Committee noted the reported consultation exercise on the SEND proposals and sought further information on who had been consulted as part of this process. Ms Gent advised that an extensive piece of consultative work had been carried out earlier in the year but that further consultation would be undertaken, including with parents and carers who sat on the SEND Board. She acknowledged that wider consultation with parents attending mainstream schools would also be required.

The Committee requested a future update on the pathways available for young people with SEND once they had left education, which Ms Gent agreed to provide at a future meeting of the Committee. Members noted the importance of including this area within the SEND Strategy.

Committee Members discussed the potential problem of delays experienced by families in securing a SEND diagnosis. Ms Jeanette Richards, Assistant Director of Children's Services recognised this as a potential issue, which she advised might benefit from future consideration by the Committee.

The Committee agreed:

1. That a working group be established to review the draft SEND Strategy, made up of Councillors Burdess, Critchley, D Coleman and R Scott and which would meet in January 2022;
2. That the amended draft SEND Strategy be considered by the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 27 January 2022 prior to being submitted to the Executive;
3. That information on the pathways available for young people with SEND once they had left education be provided at a future meeting of the Committee and that this area be considered for inclusion within the SEND Strategy;

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4. That further consideration be given to the topic of delays in SEND diagnosis as a future scrutiny review area.

9 COMMITTEE WORKPLAN

Members considered the Committee's Workplan for 2021/2022 in conjunction with the proposed scoping document for the Catch-Up/Recovery Premium Spend Scrutiny Review.

The Committee agreed:

1. The Workplan for 2021/2022;
2. The scoping document for the Catch-Up/Recovery Premium Spend Scrutiny Review.

10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the Special meeting of the Committee was noted as Wednesday 12 January 2022, commencing at 5pm.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.40pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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