

**MINUTES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING -
THURSDAY, 22 APRIL 2021**

Councillor Hugo (in the Chair)

Councillors

Clapham	Critchley	Stansfield
D Coleman	Mitchell	Wing

Dr Elaine Allen, Roman Catholic Co-opted Member

In Attendance:

Councillor Maxine Callow, Chair of the Scrutiny Leadership Board
Councillor Kath Benson, Cabinet Member for Schools, Education and Aspiration
Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council (Children)
Mr Robert Arrowsmith, Performance, Systems and Intelligence Manager
Ms Victoria Gent, Director of Children's Services
Ms Sara McCartan, Head of Adolescent Service
Ms Jeanette Richards, Interim Director of Children's Services
Mr Philip Thompson, Head of SEND and Early years
Mr Paul Turner, Assistant Director of Children's Services - Education
Mrs Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser

Mr Stephen Ashley, Independent Scrutineer for Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool and Lancashire Children's Safeguarding Assurance Partnership.

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Stansfield declared a personal interest in relation to Agenda item 6 'Children's Social Care Improvement Plan – Child Exploitation and Homelessness' due to his volunteer work undertaken with Streetlife, supporting homeless young people in Blackpool.

Councillor Hugo declared a personal interest in relation to Agenda item 6 'Children's Social Care Improvement Plan – Child Exploitation and Homelessness' due to her position of employment at Streetlife, supporting homeless young people in Blackpool.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 28 JANUARY 2021

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 28 January 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.

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**4 YOUTH OFFENDING TEAM IMPROVEMENT PLAN - CHILDREN IN SECURE
ACCOMMODATION**

Ms Sara McCartan, Head of Adolescent Service updated the Committee on the progress of the Blackpool Youth Justice Service Improvement Plan theme area of 'Children in Secure Accommodation'. She explained that early in 2020 the Youth Justice Board had requested that all Youth Offending Teams complete a self-assessment based on the updated Standards for Children in Youth Justice Services (2019). Five self-assessments had been completed, one of which had focused on 'In Secure Settings'. Ms McCartan summarised the findings of the self-assessment and subsequent audits and sought any questions from the Committee.

With regards to the cited concerns raised over children at the Secure Training Centre which had been visited by Ofsted, the Committee sought assurance around the interventions put in place by the Youth Custody Service to address the issues identified. Ms McCartan reported two custodial cases currently and advised that recent concerns were around Covid-19 related restrictions, with young people being detained in their rooms for long periods of time. She reported that this had been challenged by the Council to ensure that suitable provisions were in place during times of isolation due to the pandemic. The Committee requested that regular updates be provided in order that the situation could be monitored going forward. Committee Members noted the significant reduction in the use of custody and recognised the hard work of the Youth Offending Team for the progress made in this area.

The Committee welcomed the reported reduction of unnecessary court appearances for young people under 18 years of age and sought clarification around the greater use of community interventions which had been introduced as an alternative and asked how successful they were proving. Ms McCartan explained that a multi-agency panel had been established to identify a range of options tailored specifically to meet the needs of the young person and their family. She provided a number of examples of the interventions in place, such as wraparound support for the whole family aimed at diverting the young person away from their offending behaviour; a caution with conditions to include the writing of a letter of apology; or active community service with an element of restorative justice.

Further to the reported disproportionate number of our children who were open to the Youth Justice Service, the Committee sought details of the work that was underway to address the situation. Ms McCartan identified a coordination of service areas across the Council to raise awareness of any cases where our children had been identified as being at risk of offending and subsequent measures put in place to plan positive interventions following any resulting release from custody. She further highlighted work aimed at reducing criminalisation of our young people by encouraging alternatives to the reporting of anti-social behaviour immediately to the police. Ms Jeanette Richards, Interim Director of Children's Services reported that the disproportionate number of our children known to the Youth Justice Service, whilst unacceptable, was an issue reflected nationally and as such more proactive care planning was underway to identify and address the holistic needs of our children with the aim of diverting them away from criminal activity. Ms Richards reiterated the need to influence wider partners, including the police, to provide appropriate support to our children.

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The Committee agreed: To request regular updates in relation to the concerns raised around children at the cited Secure Training Centre.

5 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT PLAN - CARE LEAVERS

Ms Sara McCartan, Head of Adolescent Service introduced a report on the progress of the improvement journey in respect of services for Blackpool's young adults who had experienced care. She informed the Committee that during the Ofsted inspection of Children's Services in December 2018 the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers had been judged as 'Requires Improvement to be good'. The inspectorate had stated that a strategic and coordinated approach to providing support for care leavers to improve their outcomes, including in education, employment and training was required. Ms McCartan reported that this had been a key priority within the Children's Social Care improvement plan and outcomes for Blackpool's care experienced young people had improved as a result.

The Committee noted that five per cent of Blackpool's care leavers had been identified as living in accommodation defined as 'unsuitable' and sought clarification of what the term meant and how long care leavers were permitted to remain in such accommodation for. Ms McCartan informed Committee Members that the majority of those cases reported as 'unsuitable' were young people in custody. Further to those cases, there were also a small number of young people who elected to stay with friends rather than securing their own accommodation and this would be deemed as 'unsuitable'. She also noted that whilst Blackpool would always aim for 100 per cent of its care leavers to be living in suitable accommodation, at 95 percent the service was performing above the national average of 86 per cent. Committee Members appreciated the clarification and suggested that such an explanation be recorded alongside the data to improve clarity.

The Committee raised the reporting of those young people who left care in another local authority area and then moved to Blackpool, questioning whether such cases would be included within Blackpool's data. Ms McCartan advised that in such cases, the data would be included within the figures of the responsible authority which the young person had move from and likewise, Blackpool Council maintained responsibility for any young people leaving care who moved to another part of the country. Further to this, the Substance Misuse and Sexual Health element of Blackpool Council's Adolescent Service would receive referrals for any young person living in Blackpool up to the age of 25 years, which would include care leavers who had moved to Blackpool from other areas of the country and the service would link up with the young person's personal adviser from their responsible authority.

With regards to the noted figure that half of all Blackpool's care leavers were not in employment, education or training, the Committee sought further details of any plans in place to improve the situation. Ms McCartan assured Committee Members that assisting young people into education, employment or training remained a key priority for the service and reported a number of interventions being introduced to help achieve this. These included, a financial support package for care leavers wishing to pursue higher and further education routes; employment vacancies within the Council being ring fenced, with priority given to our young people; 'Kickstart' placements were being targeted

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towards our young people and close working with the Council's wholly owned companies continued to provide work placement opportunities for Blackpool's young people.

Members discussed the findings from the recent Ofsted focused visit, with the Committee questioning the stability of the Children's Social Care team due to vacancies across the service and reliance upon newly qualified social workers. Ms Jeanette Richards, Interim Director of Children's Services acknowledged that recruitment remained a challenge and a key priority but that progress had been made from the service's previous recruitment position. In response to a question on whether staff who left Blackpool decided to leave the profession entirely or if they sought employment at another local authority, Ms Richards reported that due to the current high demand within the sector nationally, a current trend was being experienced of staff leaving to become agency workers. Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council (Children) highlighted that whilst recruitment remained a national problem, Blackpool was increasingly being recognised as a supportive authority in which to work, in addition to the attractive financial packages being offered to prospective applicants.

The need, as identified by the findings of the Ofsted monitoring visit, to improve the consistency and quality of work for children subject to child protection plans in order to reduce drift and delay was highlighted by the Committee as being essential to address. Ms Richards agreed that continuing to improve the quality of practice delivery to children was Children's Social Care's priority, pointing out that input from other key partners was also a prerequisite for continued improvement.

6 CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING ASSURANCE PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT

Mr Stephen Ashley, Independent Scrutineer for Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool and Lancashire Children's Safeguarding Assurance Partnership (CSAP) attended the Committee meeting to present the CSAP Annual Report, explaining that the report covered the period of time from CSAP's inception on 29 September 2019 to 30 September 2020. Mr Ashley advised that an interim report would be produced at the end of the year and that future annual reports would cover either January to December or April to March.

The Committee was informed of the three priority areas identified by CSAP as being contextual safeguarding, neglect and domestic abuse and the annual report focused on the work undertaken by the partnership over the year in relation to these areas. Mr Ashley highlighted how the impact of Covid-19 had affected the working environment around these priorities and noted that the full repercussions of the periods of lockdown on Blackpool's children were not yet fully understood.

With regards to the data on the rates of hospital admissions for mental health conditions, the Committee queried why Blackpool's rates were considerably higher than both the rest of Lancashire and the country. Mr Ashley reported that a response document in relation to mental health had been requested from the Clinical Commissioning Group and he agreed to circulate additional findings to Committee Members once available.

Ms Jeanette Richards, Interim Director of Children's Services described a number of tools which had been introduced to assist with the early identification of neglect. In relation to domestic abuse, Ms Richards reported that improvements had been made to staff

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training around the use of risk assessments to identify domestic abuse and the need to establish safety plans around both the victims of domestic abuse and also any children and young people in the household. She agreed to present a more detailed overview of the work in this area to a future meeting of the Committee.

Further details of Operation Encompass were requested, with Ms Richards explaining that it was a national initiative which had been adopted across Lancashire and which allowed the police to share information with a child's school in respect of any incidences of domestic abuse which had occurred in the child's household prior to the start of the next school day in order to ensure that the child's school was fully aware of their experiences.

With respect to the protection of women, the Committee asked Ms Richards if she felt that the Council was suitably proactive in lobbying government to drive the protection of women. Ms Richards described the issue as having two components: the protection of women in their own homes from domestic abuse and the wider issue of protecting women in the community. In relation to domestic abuse, she reported that education around appropriate relationships had been added to the curriculum in schools which would assist in raising awareness of the risks of negative relationships. With regards to improving safety within the community for all women, she reported that the Council gave a consistently strong message of zero tolerance of harassment and threats to women.

The Committee extended its thanks to Mr Ashley for the work undertaken by CSAP and the presentation of the partnership's annual report.

The Committee agreed:

1. To receive further data on Blackpool's mental health hospital admission rates from Mr Ashley once available;
2. To request that further work on the Council's response to domestic abuse be brought to a future meeting of the Committee.

7 CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IMPROVEMENT PLAN - CHILD EXPLOITATION AND HOMELESSNESS

Ms Jeanette Richards, Interim Director of Children's Services presented an update report on progress in relation to the Children's Service's improvement journey in respect of services for vulnerable children and young people, with particular focus on children at risk of or experiencing exploitation or going missing and young people who were at risk of homelessness.

Ms Richards informed the Committee of a new pilot initiative scheduled to begin in April 2021 which would focus on out of hours contextual safeguarding disruption. She explained that it would be a collaboration between the Community Safety Partnership and Awaken social care staff. The Committee was informed that most activity involving young people occurred at weekends and evenings and that the pilot would provide an additional window into the lived experience of children and young people. The pilot would include a visible presence in areas and locations of concern including arcades, train and bus stations. The Committee requested that further information and initial results from the pilot be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee.

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The Committee requested clarification around the term 'intentionally homeless' in particular in relation to families whereby children could not in any way be held responsible for the actions of their parents in becoming homeless. Ms Richards reported that the Council's support services had been working in conjunction with housing services to provide support to families to avoid situations of homelessness and her understanding was that no family in Blackpool had been made homeless in recent times as a result of the commitment to protect children, with support put in place where necessary. With regards to the phrase 'intentionally homeless', the Committee questioned whether the definition would include incidences whereby a family had chosen to vacate a property in another part of the country and then moved to Blackpool seeking accommodation. Ms Richards advised that the responsibility to house such a family would lie with the originating local authority.

Committee Members sought details of the continuing support offered to vulnerable young people on turning 18 years of age. Ms Richards reported that Blackpool's young people who had experienced care remained the responsibility of the Council, with the Care Leavers team offering support. In relation to young people who had not experienced care, but who were in receipt of support from Children's Services, Ms Richards informed Committee Members that only a small proportion would be eligible for support from Adult Services but she advised that offerings of transition support were in the process of being reviewed, along with housing support services. The Committee requested that more specific data around the support given and the number of vulnerable young people accessing services be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee.

In terms of child exploitation, the Committee questioned if any liaison was undertaken with local business partners, in particular taxi firms, in order to identify any suspected cases of child exploitation. Ms Richards acknowledged the critical importance of sharing intelligence in order to disrupt such activity and to help to safeguard Blackpool's children and young people, assuring the Committee that any such information received would be considered in a multi-agency setting within the Awaken team on a daily basis. In relation specifically to taxi services, Ms Richards advised that robust arrangements were in place around the licensing of such firms, including the condition that all taxi drivers must complete safeguarding training prior to the granting of the licence. In addition, in cases where concerns had been raised in relation to potential criminal exploitation, Community Safety Officers had engaged with taxi companies in order to open lines of communication and gather intelligence from taxi drivers. Discussion occurred around incidences whereby local taxi firms had deliberately circumvented Blackpool's requirement to undertake additional safeguarding training by applying for their licence to another authority in a different part of the country. Ms Richards agreed to highlight the issue to colleagues in Community Safety to investigate further. Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council (Children) acknowledged the identified issue and noted the importance of all local taxi firms adhering to the guidance around child exploitation.

The Committee agreed:

1. That further information and initial results from the contextual safeguarding pilot be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee;
2. That more specific data around the support given and the number of vulnerable young people accessing services be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee.

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8 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITY LOCAL PROVISION

Mr Phil Thompson, Head of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Early Years updated the Committee in relation to the SEND theme of 'To develop a continuance of local provision and services to meet the needs of children with SEND'.

Mr Thompson reported that the consultation with mainstream schools to open Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision units in their schools had gone well and that five successful applications had been received. The Committee noted that whilst the reported addition of SEN provisions within primary schools was welcomed, it was disappointing to note the lack of applications from secondary schools. Mr Thompson advised that as academies, the secondary schools were not obliged to introduce SEN units but that negotiations were ongoing with the academies to encourage the introduction of SEN provisions.

The Committee requested a further update on the proposed provision of a post-16 special school centre within the Oracle building. Mr Thompson informed Committee Members that unfortunately the proposal had been paused due to an inability to reach agreement with the providing Trust regarding the details of the provision and that as a result further consideration was being given as to the most appropriate use of the building for SEN purposes. The Committee requested detailed plans of any proposals to be brought back to the next meeting of the Committee.

Mr Paul Turner, Assistant Director of Children's Services for Education reminded Committee Members that a new SEND Strategy would be available by July 2021, with considerable consultation occurring before that date. He advised that Members of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee would receive full details of the SEND overview and associated proposals and would be included within the consultancy process for the Strategy.

The Committee agreed: To receive detailed plans of any proposals of SEN provision at the Oracle building at the next meeting of the Committee.

9 BLACKPOOL LITERACY STRATEGY

Mr Paul Turner, Assistant Director of Children's Services for Education presented the Literacy Strategy for consideration by the Committee. He noted the Committee's involvement in the development of the Strategy and assured Committee Members that their previous requests for amendments had been incorporated into the final version of the document prior to being considered for approval by the Executive.

The Chair of the Committee reported that Ms Helen Sage, Co-Opted Member had put forward a request for an amendment to the Strategy and agreed to forward the details to Mr Turner following the meeting.

The Committee agreed: To endorse the Blackpool Literacy Strategy subject to Mr Turner's consideration of Ms Sages' suggested amendment.

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10 COMMITTEE WORKPLAN 2021/2022

The Committee gave consideration to the draft Committee Workplan for 2021/2022, noting that a Workplanning Workshop would be scheduled to take place following Annual Council and would provide the opportunity to further consider the Committee's workload for the following municipal year and to prioritise areas for scrutiny review.

The Committee considered the updated action plans resulting from the review of the School Response to Covid-19 and the review of Inclusion in Education. In relation to recommendation R2 from the Inclusion in Education action plan, the Committee requested that specific numbers of pupils who had returned to school following an initial decision to opt for Elective Home Education be provided. Mr Paul Turner, Assistant Director of Children's Services for Education reported that approximately 350 pupils had currently opted for Elected Home Education (EHE), which was a small reduction from the figure of over 360 which had previously been reported to the Committee. Mr Turner highlighted that many of those children would be appropriately educated at home and that the Council had concerns only for the small number of pupils who were not receiving a good education. The collective message from schools to all families had been that they would welcome back all pupils, with each family being contacted by schools to outline a number of options for their child's education. Replies from parents who had not as yet returned their children to school were awaited. Mr Turner reported that additional funding had permitted the extension of employment for two full time Elected Home Education Officers until at least September 2021, although it was hoped that this would be extended until the end of the following school year.

[Mr Turner lost connection to the meeting at this point.]

The Committee raised a further question in relation to recommendation R7 'To request that Academies consider the reintroduction of Council representation on their Local Governing Bodies in order to allow valuable input from elected Councillors and an additional link with the Local Authority,' which Mr Turner had updated as 'Ongoing'. Committee Members agreed that Mr Turner be asked to update the Committee following the meeting on the progress of the recommendation.

The Committee Agreed:

1. To approve the Committee's draft Workplan for 2021/2022 subject to further consideration at the Workplanning Workshop following Annual Council;
2. That Mr Turner be requested to provide an update to Committee Members in relation to recommendation R7 'To request that Academies consider the reintroduction of Council representation on their Local Governing Bodies in order to allow valuable input from elected Councillors and an additional link with the Local Authority,' in writing following the meeting.

11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting of the Committee was noted as 24 June 2021, commencing at 6pm, subject to confirmation at Annual Council.

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Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.30pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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