

Report on progress made in Blackpool Children's Social Care 2022-2023

Blackpool Council



Overview

The last 12 months following the Ofsted ILACS inspection has seen continued pace and change. This report sets out that work and the changes we have made since the inspection. It will make specific reference to the ILACS inspection (concluded December 2022 and published February 2023) and cover other areas of development to improve the support we provide to children and families in Blackpool – specifically our focus on improving the outcomes of children known to Blackpool Children’s Social Care.

The overall aim of Children’s Services

This year in July we held a whole service event to be clear about the core aims of Children’s Services in Blackpool for our staff, and to help our staff fully understand their roles and collective purpose. As a leadership team and service we are aware of the issues within our town, the deprivation and the challenges in terms of the poor engagement in education. The impact of deprivation and poor educational engagement plays a part in the high level of demand for statutory services in Blackpool. This has led over a number of years to large volumes of children experiencing high levels of statutory intervention, often with limited impact on improving their outcomes.

Consequently, we set ourselves two broad aims which could be clearly understood and articulated by all our staff: **More children in Blackpool supported to remain in their families**, and **more children in Blackpool to engage positively in education**. These two aims are the focus and the foundation of all the work we are doing in Blackpool.

The issues identified in the ILAC inspection

The inspection of December 2022 identified four broad issues:

- The multi-agency response to children suffering domestic abuse or long-term neglect, and to those children with complex needs.
- Work with partners to strengthen their contribution to Early Help and neglect.
- Sufficient placements to meet children’s assessed needs.
- The timeliness of meeting children’s dental and emotional needs.

In addition a number of other areas we identified where we needed to improve:

- Work around Private Fostering
- Work around the Public Law Outline (PLO), pre-proceedings processes
- Further developing our Blackpool Families Rock approach
- Monitoring of unregistered placements and evidencing decisions around such settings

The multi-agency response to children suffering domestic abuse or long-term neglect and to those children with complex needs

There have been significant changes that have occurred in the last 12 months to improve the multi-agency response to children suffering from domestic abuse and long-term neglect and to those children with complex needs.

Since the inspection, we have revised our safeguarding partnership arrangements. We have moved from pan-Lancashire arrangement to a Blackpool specific placed based approach. The pan-Lancashire arrangements did not allow for granular focus on the specific issues and needs of Blackpool as a town. Whilst the changes are broader than a focus upon domestic abuse and neglect, they will have a significant impact upon these two key areas of need in our town.

The DCS has led on setting up these arrangements and bringing partners on board. A partnership development day was held in March 2023 to gain buy in from partners on what the partnership approach in Blackpool needs to look like. We have developed from March, where the arrangements and focus was agreed, to the setting up of direct delivery groups and the initial meeting in July 2023. New governance arrangements, that are significantly more focused, have been developed to drive a shared plan to improve outcomes for children in Blackpool. It was agreed that following a period of transition earlier this year, formal place-based arrangements commenced in September 2023.

Direct delivery groups have been set up and specific focus groups for both neglect and domestic abuse. We have held the first sets of partnership meetings for these groups and been well supported by partners. There is a collective understanding that addressing neglect and domestic abuse is not just the sole responsibility of Children's Services, but requires a partnership effort to improve outcomes for children and families.

We commissioned a wide-ranging audit of the partnership response to domestic abuse and its impact upon children and families. A plan has been developed as a result of this Scrutiny report governed via the new structures for CSAP.



8. Domestic Abuse Scrutiny Draft Report

Operationally we have already made a number of changes as a result of our own self-assessment, the Ofsted inspection and the audit mentioned above. In the inspection we were rightly criticised for focusing too much on adult needs, and as a result lost sight of the children involved. We have reviewed and implemented a new approach to MARAC. This has involved us developing our role in MARAC that ensures focus on the needs of a child. We have invested in a domestic abuse specialist social worker in our transformation work to improve our response to domestic abuse. One that moves beyond simple responses such as trying to keep away from a partner seen as a risk, but that recognises the complexity in relationships, understands the impact of past experiences and trauma, and importantly is focused on ensuring children's safety not just in the short-term but in the longer-term. There is some early evidence that this approach is working as we have seen a small **reduction** in the number of children supported by a Child Protection Plan due to domestic abuse. Our future challenge is to embed this improved response and have practitioners who respond consistently to domestic abuse.

Our new partnership arrangements have placed a Blackpool focus on our response to neglect. Neglect is the biggest reason for contact with Children's Services in Blackpool and is correlated to the deprivation in the town.

At an operational level we have started to more effectively use tools including the Graded Care Profile to get a more objective measure of neglect and of the impact of that neglect. There are challenges in all partners accepting this tool as useful given its detail. However, having a consistent tool and approach being used across Children's Social Care and

the whole partnership is vital. Consequently, we are exploring a less detailed tool to be potentially adopted across the partnership. This work is monitored through the new CSAP structures.

Our co-produced Born into Care work has continued and been gathering pace. This significant piece of work supported by Lancaster University has been co-produced with care-experienced parents. Whilst not specifically focused on neglect or domestic abuse, the reality is that most unborn children become known to Blackpool Children's Services is due to these factors. There are a number of work streams that are exploring and delivering practical solutions to better support mothers and fathers to reduce the likelihood of their unborn babies entering our care. Part of this is looking at recurrent care and how we can reduce episodes of recurrent care which is high Blackpool. Some work streams are still in early stages, but others have delivered some outputs, such as a map of the Children's Social Care system to help navigate our system, and this map is currently being trialled. We are seeing some early indicators of success, with a slightly **reduced number of unborn being involved with statutory services**. Anecdotally, we are also receiving reports of more positive experiences of parents and positive outcomes for children. Further audit of this work will occur in 2024.

We have invested and developed an All Age Team. This is a piece of partnership work with colleagues in Adult Services. The focus of this team is that it does hands on work with families to improve their physical environment and their response to the needs of their children. It has a practical, yet social pedagogical base and attempts to support parents to improve their situation. The work is long-term but always aims to support families to greater independence. This team can provide up to 120 hours per week to one family or to a number of families.

There is some early evidence of impact with all this work. We have seen a **6%** reduction in the number of children supported by a Child Protection Plan due to neglect. The evidence for both neglect and domestic abuse is that **fewer** Child Protection Plans are lasting over **18 months** indicating that effective work is enabling the Child Protection plan to cease if required, or that we are taking decisive action when there is evidence the plan isn't working. Further evidence from recent audits show a clear improvement in the outcomes we are achieving for children (**previous audit cycle 29% good this is now 35%**).

Further transformative work is required to have greater impact on neglect and domestic abuse. The DfE has supported us with funding to implement a Family Safeguarding approach, this work is progressing well and these teams will go live in April 2024. Substance misuse and mental health issues are often linked to both neglect and domestic abuse and most, if not all the families Children's Social Care work with have multiple interacting issues. Having multiagency teams with the adult professionals and skill set to address these issues will clearly have a positive impact on our response to neglect and domestic abuse. Some of the DfE funding is in the form of support from Hertfordshire's Centre for Family Safeguarding and involves working with experienced DCS Lou Williams to support us in how we bring the partnership along with the changes we are putting in place. There are a set of KPI's that we are agreeing with the partnership to measure success within Family safeguarding.

Children with complex needs are the most vulnerable children we work with. We accept the concerns in our approach that the inspection identified. We have invested in our Children with Complex Needs Team, increasing the capacity to create two teams. We have separated out the functions of each team to allow them to focus on specific areas of work, one team supporting children who have short breaks, and the other team supporting children who require the intervention of statutory services (CIN, CP, or CLA). This has resulted in an initial improvement of assessment timeliness from **55%** in timescales to **76%**. We have invested in an additional Team Manager

In July 2023 an independent audit of the work in our Children with Complex Needs teams looked at 9 children. Two were graded as **'good'** and the rest graded as requiring improvement. The independent audit also noted that **"children subject to safeguarding concerns and/or progression to child protection procedures are managed by the same social worker and there is compliance with procedures, reports are well written and reflective of the broader needs of the child and impact on the child. In this small sample of cases, the threshold for escalation to CPP and PLO was appropriate."** It did however note that there is still work to be done to ensure a greater degree of consistency of approach for children supported in this team.

Work with partners to strengthen their contribution to Early Help and neglect

The review of our safeguarding arrangements and a placed based approach for Blackpool enables us to engage with our partners more effectively, specifically around their roles in supporting children. A key element to this is the importance of Early Help in improving outcomes for children and families in Blackpool.

We have revisited our Early Help Strategy and focused on the importance of Early Help for its own sake, not as a demand management approach, rather as an approach in its own right. This is connecting with our partners as **445 staff from across the partnership have attended an EH Workshop** since implementation in 2022 (83 organisations including 17 nurseries, 28 primary and 9 secondary schools).

In the last 12 months we progressed from submitting a bid for support for our Family Hubs approach in December 2022 to opening the doors in July 2023 and delivering services from three Family Hubs, in the North, Central and South areas of Blackpool. Our Family Hubs are key to our aim to support children and families in a timely manner. We are already delivering services from these Hubs and aim to build upon these locations in the next 12 months. The initial evidence is that these Hubs are seen as an important resource in our communities. We are seeing increased registration rates for Family Hubs: **Q1 – 347 children/368 adults, Q2 July-September – 1039 children/989 adults registered**. In addition there is emerging evidence of families coming to Family Hubs following other parents telling them they are places you can get help, and early data around repeat attendance is showing families are coming back to the Hubs.

Our approach to Early Help and engaging partners to understand they are part of Early Help is slowly starting to pay dividends. We have seen a **260% increase** in the number of Early Help assessments. The number of referrals we receive has also **reduced by 12%** in the previous 6 months compared to the 6 months prior to December 2022. This reduction has not resulted in an increase in re-referrals which is settled at **22%**.

Sufficient placements to meet children's assessed needs

We have worked hard over the last 12 months on developing our placement sufficiency. Firstly, developing a culture throughout our services that prioritises children being placed in family settings if they are unable to remain in their own homes or with immediate or wider family.

This has involved working to increase the number of in-house foster carers that we recruit and retain. Increasing the number of carers within a national context of reducing numbers of carers is challenging. We have managed to stabilise the number of foster carers we have, but we have not yet been successful in increasing the number of carers. We have recently been successful in a joint bid with four other local authorities to develop a Regional Fostering Recruitment Hub. The aim of the Hub will be: to improve the journey from enquiry to application and through to approval; to boost the number of quality enquiries and build evidence of effective marketing strategies; establish a shared Local Authority approach to fostering recruitment; and provide a central 'landing page' for the communications campaign, ensuring a good user journey through the system. There will be clear KPI's to help understand the positive impact on fostering recruitment. The ultimate aim is to increase the number of in-house foster carers with a range of skills that can meet the needs of children who have to come into our care in Blackpool. Our Regional Fostering Hub will be in place by **April 2024**.

We are also working on greater placement stability. We have developed the support we provide to children and their carers: we have increased the amount of clinical psychology hours available to carers; we have developed a placement support pathway; we have a Solutions Focused Therapy team as part of our placement support package; and have support offered through CAMHS colleagues. Our pathway of support is based on regular multiagency care planning meetings for our children, ensuring that we spot issues early and address them quickly. This is already having a positive impact. In-house placements stability has improved over the last 12 months from **67% to 80%**. Year on year placement stability is improving and is currently at **66%** up from **62%** percent in the last 12 months. This is having an impact upon our longer-term placement stability, that is children in the same placement for 2 years which has increased from **51%**

to **55%**. We have also reduced the number of children entering residential care due to placement breakdown from an average of **7** every six months to **2** in the last six months to date. Our overall use of residential placements has reduced **17%** in the last 12 months.

In the last 12 months we have invested in our commissioning team, appointing a new manager to lead the commissioning of Children's Services placements. This has increased the capacity within our commissioning team to build relationships with our providers specifically IFA's, residential providers, and also providers of semi-supported care. Through building more positive relationships with key providers in our area our aim is to ensure more of our children are placed in provision that meets their needs, and continue to improve on the measures above.

A key issue with sufficiency is demand. We are focused on safely reducing the number of children who enter the care of the authority. We have done this through focusing on practice – practice that is supportive of families, that recognises risk, but works to supporting children and families to mitigate those risks where it is safe to do so. Our moves to implement Family Safeguarding teams will reinforce this approach. Our audit findings show a slow but steady improvement in the quality of work we are doing. The quality of our managerial oversight has improved significantly with nearly **50%** of all audits graded as good for management oversight. This is key to driving the improvements in practice that lead to positive impact and outcomes for children. Evidence of this is that fact we have safely reduced the number of children we look after by **5%** in the last 12 months.

We are re-writing our sufficiency strategy so it captures the work we are doing to achieve our aim of more children in Blackpool remaining in the care of their families. Our strategy will be based on current performance data and audit evidence and be clear on our aims over the next three years to: safely reduce the number of children we look after; ensure more of the children we look after are in placements that support their matched needs; and that we achieve increased placement stability for Our Children.

The timeliness of meeting children's dental and emotional needs

To support the emotional needs of Our Children we have invested in the psychological services we purchase to provide greater access to a high level of support. In addition, our new Head of Service for Our Children is working with Health colleagues and internal partners to develop a clear staged pathway of support for Our Children's emotional health needs.

To help drive this and other health issues Our Children face we have developed an Our Children Health sub group through our Corporate Parenting Board. This group involves colleagues from Health services to improve our response to Our Children's emotional health needs.

This group is also playing a key role in improving the access to dental provision for Our Children and this access is improving. **We have moved from 43% of Our Children having an up to date dental assessment in December 2022, to having 71% of Our Children having a up to date dental assessment in December 2023.** This group will continue to drive those improvements, monitored through our revamped Corporate Parenting Board to ensure that this board and the elected members on it hold, not only council officers, but also Health colleagues to account in regards to meeting the health needs of Our Children.

Other areas noted in the inspection

Private Fostering

There were a number of wider issues identified in the Ofsted inspection. One was our response to children who are Privately Fostered. Since the inspection we have developed our response to these children. We have undertaken further training of staff on Private Fostering and identified 'champions' in all branches of our service. We are changing our MOSIAC recording system to more effectively track these children, and to ensure that all statutory checks are

being undertaken. Whilst this systems fix is in development we have a tracker led by a designated Service Manager to ensure we meet our responsibilities around Private Fostering and achieve positive outcomes for these children.

PLO/Pre-proceedings

During Summer 2023 we had an independent audit of our PLO/Pre-proceedings work by Lancashire Children's Services, focused upon our current practice around PLO/Pre-proceedings.

This audit did not identify anything we were unaware of, and hadn't already started to take measure to address. Specifically, it found inconsistent application of threshold at times and that children could escalate quickly through systems and end up in PLO/Pre-proceedings when earlier support may have made a difference. It found our PLO/Pre-proceedings work with babies was better stating that **"care planning undertaken for babies was much more efficient and without any evident delay. Assessments in this area are strong and decisions taken swiftly with good contingency planning."** This gives us confidence that our work around Born into Care is having a positive impact. In addition this audit found a good level of managerial oversight.

We have a PLO/Pre-proceedings improvement pathway as part of our overall improvement plan. We have some evidence that our approach to PLO has become more timely and focused, a **17%** reduction in the number of children supported in PLO, and the length of time children are supported in PLO/Pre-proceedings is **reducing**.

Further developing our Blackpool Families Rock approach

We are implementing multiagency teams based on a Family Safeguarding approach to further improve our response to children and families. We see this as a natural development of our Blackpool Families Rock approach, not a replacement of it, with Family Safeguarding being how we work better with families based on the values expressed in our Blackpool Families Rock approach. Our Blackpool Families Rock approach was fully co-produced and we are replicating this co-production approach in developing our multiagency Family Safeguarding teams. We want parents who have experienced our services play a part in the development of our services and our aspiration is that they will have a role in the actual delivery of our services. We want to consider how we can bring lived experience into the workplace to support good outcomes, which is an ambitious aim we believe we could achieve.

Unregistered and unregulated settings and evidencing management decisions

We appointed a new Head of Service for Supporting our Children in the last 12 months. We have put in place a clear pathway for both the approval of unregistered provision, and the ongoing monitoring of children in these placements, to enable us to support them into a regulated provision. Decisions about unregistered settings are now clearly captured on a specific form and are signed off by the Assistant Director. Unregistered settings are reviewed weekly by the Head of Service. The aim of that review is to ensure the child's wellbeing and all necessary support is in place. In addition, this review is focused on achieving registered provision for that child. The Head of Service reports on that progress weekly to the Assistant Director.

The process involves input from colleagues in our commissioning team. In 2022 we had on average **3** children placed in unregistered settings, since the development of this approach we have had on average only **1** child in an unregistered setting. Given the volume of children we look after and the high number who are in residential settings this is a positive position. However, we continue to aim to have no children in unregistered settings.

Enablers to our improvements

Workforce

A key issue in delivering sustained improvement is our staffing, specifically recruiting and retaining staff. Staff stability remains a real challenge in Blackpool as it is an all local authorities. Our DCS has a clear focus on the importance of our workforce, chairing our Workforce Board and in the last 12 months we have maintained a degree of workforce stability. Our agency use remains lower than the regional average at currently **13%**. This is a regional climate where some authorities have agency staffing rates of over **40%**. Our current vacancy rate is approximately **8%**. We maintain a stable leadership and management team that is permanent.

Recruiting experienced staff is a challenge. Consequently, our focus is on increasing our student numbers and supporting those students into permanent positions with us. As a result we have high numbers of ASYE staff. We remained committed to a high level of support for those staff through our PDL Service. This flexible service provides training and support alongside staff to help them grow into experienced workers who remain in Blackpool.

We actively engage our workforce on the improvements and changes we want to achieve and we are proud of our co-production approach in Blackpool. We have a Transformation Operational Board so our staff are involved at the start and will be all the way through our transformation journey. We have parents as part of our Transformation Board and as permanent staff in our co-production team and using their experience and insight is a key part of developing our services to sustainably deliver positive impact for children and families in Blackpool.

We are undertaking a piece of work through into 2024 which considers the profile of our future workforce, ensuring that it meets and delivers on the improvement work we need to undertake and our priorities.

Managerial Oversight-

Clear and effective management oversight is key to driving our improvements. We have a settled senior leadership team with no agency managers at Head of Service and Service Manager level, and only **one out of 21** at Team Manager level.

This settled team has a shared focus with our aims of **more children in Blackpool supported to remain in their families, and more children in Blackpool to engage positively in education**. Managerial oversight is a clear strength, not only in terms of our own audits, but also of the audits undertaken independently of our Complex Needs Team, Emergency Duty Team, and of PLO/Pre-proceedings work. This oversight is having an impact on the quality of practice in our teams, and in turn improving the outcomes for Blackpool's children and families.

Wider Council commitment

We continue to benefit from wider council support. We are, as are all councils, operating in a very difficult financial climate. However, the commitment of the council to maintaining the improvements in Children's Social Care remains strong. We have been supported to appoint a permanent Head of Service for Transformation that provides us with significant capacity to develop multiagency teams based on the Family Safeguarding approach, but also on wider areas of service improvement. We have significant broader corporate support for the development of Family Safeguarding, specifically from our colleagues in Public Health.

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