

Report into Children's Services in Blackpool following inspection

**Report for the Secretary of State for
Education by Helen Lincoln and Essex
County Council, Commissioner for
Children's Services in Blackpool**

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1. Introduction - The Role of the Commissioner

1.1 The Secretary of State in March 2019 appointed Helen Lincoln, Director of Children's Services at Essex County Council, as DfE Commissioner for Children's Services in Blackpool.

1.2 The role of the Commissioner is:

- a) To issue any necessary instructions to the local authority for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the authority's delivery of children's social care; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements.
- b) To bring together evidence to assess the council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the council.
- c) To advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the local authority, taking account of local circumstances and the views of the council and key partners.
- d) To report to the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State by 28th June 2019.

1.3 This report is my review of Blackpool Children's Services, based on my work, and the work of my colleagues from Essex, with Blackpool Council over the last three months. In this report, I do not seek to repeat Ofsted's inspection or to check on Blackpool's specific response to that inspection, but rather to consider the building blocks that Blackpool needs to put in place to achieve long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care and to assess whether Blackpool can do this.

2. Executive Summary and Recommendation

2.1 The 2018 Ofsted inspection of Children's Services in Blackpool judged the LA to be 'Inadequate' overall. The Ofsted inspection has provided impetus to political and executive leaders to hasten the pace of change and find additional resources to support leadership capacity and frontline staff. The LA recognised in 2017 that Children's Services were deteriorating and instigated their own internal review and recruited a new experienced Director of Children's Services from a social work background. The new DCS instigated an improvement programme from a low base prior to the inspection and has responded positively, with the full political and senior leadership support of the LA, to the challenges highlighted by Ofsted.

2.2 There is agreement that some children in need of help and protection and their families have not been provided with the quality and consistency of effective support that they needed. The concerns raised by Ofsted have a considerable history and have persisted over time. There was improvement between 2012 and 2014, but when the DCS who led that left and up until 2017 there has not been the leadership with the necessary expertise to understand or shape a strategic response to the issues that confronted Children's Services in Blackpool, and the improvement since then has not been sufficient.

2.3 This is all in the context of the significant challenges that children and families face in Blackpool. Very high levels of deprivation, seasonal employment, poor housing, transient families, low levels of educational attainment in some areas and a high level of special educational needs all contribute to very high demand on Children's Services. The LA has over the last decade embarked on an ambitious programme of economic and infrastructural development that is bringing investment and jobs to the town. However, the LA has not developed the same level of strategic plan with partners for its children.

2.4 The LA was already on an improvement journey for its children's services prior to Ofsted inspection and it has responded robustly and at considerable pace to the challenges posed by the inspection. New Head of Service appointments have been made and recently a strategic head of service for social work and targeted intervention post has been created and filled, bringing much needed social care leadership capacity to the service. Significant additional financial resources of some £5M have been found in the wake of Inspection. The LA is committed to Children's Services having the resources it requires to meet children's needs. Additional resources have been used to increase frontline social work and manager capacity. Social work salaries in Blackpool compare well with the North-West and recruitment appears to be effective, with good links to the two local university social work courses.

2.5 Staff have reported substantial improvement since January this year with clearer guidance, better training and support and good communication and engagement. Since April this improvement has become more rapid with the creation of two more assessment teams, moves to integrate the early help hub into the MASH (to be renamed the child and family hub) and the creation of another head of service post solely for safeguarding. It is still early days to see the impact of these changes, but end of May figures show a small drop in the number of referrals which have been high and rising since the inspection.

2.6 Changes have been made to the focus and remit of the already existing improvement board which has an experienced independent chair. Pan-Lancashire plans are well advanced to implement new multi-agency safeguarding arrangements led by the current Blackpool LSCB chair, and Blackpool LSCB and its future incarnation has agreed to lead on developing stronger children's strategic partnership arrangements for practice.

2.7 A new approach to quality assurance and case audit has been developed and implemented with staff. This is being used to enhance learning and share good practice. There is a staff shadow improvement board and feedback from staff suggests that they are well communicated with and are engaged in improvement work. An improved ASYE and workforce development offer has been developed and support has been available from Stockport as a Partner in Practice.

2.8 In carrying out this review, the Commissioner and those supporting her from Essex have posed considerable challenge to the LA at strategic and operational level. This challenge has been received openly, listened to, thought about and incorporated into Blackpool's improvement plan. However, change is still at an early stage and the measures taken are yet to show positive impact. There has been a tendency of the LA to focus on actions rather than shape a strong and consistent strategic approach.

Some big issues faced by Blackpool are to:

- Develop a strong strategic partnership with Police, Education and Health that has an unrelenting focus on improving outcomes for children and young people
- Develop a consistent model of practice that allows social workers to support families to provide better care for their children, and ensure this model is supported by appropriately shaped policy, procedure, practice guidance and the ICT applications
- Align resources and systems in early help and front door services so that children and their families get an effective response proportionate to their needs
- Develop services that assist in ensuring the right children and young people are in care with good planning to support timely exit from care

The LA is tackling these big and fundamental issues. It has been responsive, open to learning from elsewhere and prepared to make significant changes strategically and operationally. It has many committed and experienced staff.

2.9 Given this level of political and officer led progress in the last five months, I consider that Blackpool Council does have the political and officer commitment and capacity to achieve long-term sustainable improvement for its children's services. Any move to an alternative delivery model (ADM) is likely to divert political and executive leadership attention away from the substantial improvement changes it is now making and thereby slow down improvement.

2.10 Therefore, I conclude and recommend that an ADM is not the best way forward in Blackpool at present.

2.11 However, it is still very early days on a challenging journey of strategic and operational change which needs to be consistently and clearly articulated and embedded. Therefore, I also recommend that:

- Commissioner oversight should continue with further assessments of progress every 6 months for at least a year
- Commissioner receive relevant improvement reports and performance data and other relevant information regularly, and will meet with leaders, staff and partners from time to time
- Commissioner report 6 monthly to Secretary of State on Blackpool's progress
- If, during this time or at the end of year, progress is not delivering sufficient necessary change, the commissioner revisit options for the delivery model for Blackpool

3. The Local Authority Area – Blackpool

3.1 Blackpool is Britain's most famous seaside town. Like all coastal communities it has experienced significant economic decline since its post war heyday. However, it still attracts over 18 million visitors a year and is undergoing substantial economic and infrastructure development led by the Council.

3.2 Blackpool has a population of 140,000 in a small densely populated urban geographic area. There are **28,800** children and young people under 18 in the town. 96% of the population are white, largely British and Irish, and the next largest ethnic group are Asian/British Asian making up 1.6% of population.

3.3 Blackpool became a unitary authority, responsible for its children's service in 1998. Previously it was part of its large neighbour, Lancashire County Council, with whom it retains many links (for example, shared child protection procedures). Partner services such as Police and Health are either pan-Lancashire or cover a wider area than Blackpool.

3.4 38.3% of Blackpool is in the most deprived 10% of all areas in England and by this measure Blackpool is the 7th most deprived local authority in England. However, rather astoundingly 20.2% of Blackpool is in the 1% most deprived areas of England. By this measure Blackpool is by some way the most deprived local authority area in England, with over fifth of the population being in the 1% most deprived nationally. In part this high level of deprivation is driven by the availability of poor quality and relatively affordable accommodation in houses in multiple occupation which attract people in poor circumstances from other parts of the North-West and beyond.

3.5 Blackpool has a very high number of referrals, child protection plans and children in care per 10K children, even when compared to authorities with similar features and levels of deprivation. For some years now Blackpool has had more children in care per capita than anywhere else in England.

3.6 There has been stability in the leadership of the Council for several years; the Leader Simon Blackburn has been in office since 2011; the Chief Executive Neil Jack has been in post since 2011; However there have been several Directors of Children's Services in that period until Diane Booth DCS took up her post in May 2017.

4. Ofsted Inspection

4.1 In 2012 Ofsted inspection Blackpool was judged 'Inadequate' in all categories with particular concern about the front door, quality of practice, quality assurance and leadership. In 2014 Ofsted recognised there has been progress and rated children's services as 'Requires Improvement' in all categories. This progress was not maintained and at the Ofsted inspection in November 2018 Children's Services were judged 'Inadequate' overall and for Leadership and for Help and Protection. Children in Care/Care leavers were 'Requires Improvement'.

4.2 Some of the key concerns highlighted in the inspection were:

- Strategic Leadership
- Quality of social work practice, assessments, plans and recording
- Partnership working at a strategic and operational level
- The identification and response to neglect and to vulnerable young people
- Management oversight
- Workforce development including around family court proceedings
- Quality assurance and performance management

These issues around practice and leadership, albeit expressed in slightly different language are all there in the 2012 inspection report and it is clear that the improvements demonstrated in 2014 were not embedded or built upon.

4.3 Ofsted acknowledged that the DCS, Diane Booth, was recruited after the Council had become aware of and concerned about the deterioration in children's service and that she had brought improvements over the last 17 months, but these improvements were not sufficient.

5. Review Methodology

5.1 As commissioner, I and my colleagues have undertaken the following activity to gather information and inform this review:

- a) A series of structured individual interviews with key senior officers and political leaders within the LA, with the chairs of LSCB and the Improvement Board, and with senior leaders within partner organisations.
- b) Meeting with members of the Children in Care Council
- c) Attendance at improvement board and staff shadow board

- d) Diagnostics with teams from Families in Need, Assessment and Planning, Safeguarding and Permanence
- e) Quality Performance and Review meeting/challenge with corporate centre (senior officers from HR, Legal, Finance, IT with chief executive and DCS)
- f) Quality Performance and Review meeting/challenge with children's services managers
- g) Children's services managers have also visited Essex to explore how social care could be delivered differently
- h) Improvement reports, audit reports, performance data, and many plans and policy documents have been read and considered

5.2 I am grateful for the time people have given to engage and express their views, which have helped us gain an understanding of the strengths and challenges in Blackpool. I and my colleagues have been welcomed and ably supported throughout.

6. Key issues identified

6.1 Blackpool Council's Children's Services Self View 2018, published in November 2018, states:

'We have identified a need to change the culture in Blackpool, and the need is twofold.

Firstly, there is a culture of "service need" in Blackpool, where there is a desire from all sectors to provide a service solution to a problem, rather than to seek to support individuals, families and communities to seek to draw on their own assets first and seek a service response where this is insufficient.

Secondly, our approach to supporting families and determining the capacity for change is process driven, with not enough focus on the application of professional judgement and developing creative and effective interventions that reduce the need for formal intervention.'

6.2 This review strongly supports the statement above. In the wake of the Ofsted inspection, Blackpool has understandably instigated a large number of actions and plans to address the deficits highlighted by Ofsted, including a series of detailed '12 week' plans led by current and newly appointed heads of service who have brought expertise from outside, however it is not yet evident that these actions and plans collectively will address the two key strategic challenges identified above.

There is a need in Blackpool for a strong and effective **Strategic Children's Partnership** which has an unrelenting focus on improving outcomes for all Blackpool children. Such a partnership would be able to:

- Ensure that proportionate and collaborative work with families by all partners shape early help responses to children's needs

- Develop a strong culture of inclusion that seeks to keep children within families, within school and within the community
- Develop shared partnership values – meeting children’s needs in the least intrusive effective way
- Ensure that public money and resources across the partnership are always used effectively to improve outcomes
- Endorse a strategic approach that encourages and supports *‘the application of professional judgement and developing creative and effective interventions that reduce the need for formal intervention.’*

Such a Partnership would also help address deficits in the Youth Offending and Special Educational Needs services and support more inclusive and problem-solving approaches in schools. A Strategic Children’s Partnership is able to reframe strategic purpose and values, and shape and give permission to whole system change. This is not a partnership led by children’s services, although the DCS is a key partner. It is a partnership led corporately by the Council in its role as system and place leader together with other key public sector bodies, notably Police, NHS and Schools and Colleges.

6.3 This need for clear purpose and values shaping a strategic approach is also required with the Council’s Children’s Services itself and particularly within children’s social care. Children’s social care is overwhelmed by demand, multi-agency thresholds are not clear, and the resources in Early Help are not used effectively to support children and families to reduce the requirement for social work intervention. The ‘Risk sensible’ model appears to be a deficit model that does not focus positively on family strengths or protective capacity and does not encourage a problem-solving approach.

6.4 A new well-articulated ***children’s social care practice model*** – *‘this is the way we do targeted early help and social work in Blackpool’* – needs to be developed, not just as a document, but as an approach that informs how staff work throughout the system, that is reflected in the QA system, in policy and guidance, in recruitment and workforce development.

6.5 Without such a focus, current improvements in Blackpool run the risk of being compliant but not effecting positive change in the lives of children and young people. Simply escalating increasing numbers of cases through and into the child protection and care system is not good for children and families and spend will continue to increase in high cost placements without improving children’s outcomes. The development and implementation of a strengths and relationship-based practice model and system must be a priority. I recognise that work is already underway to enhance the tools, skills and resources available to the workforce to address the challenges children and families are experiencing.

7. Governance and Scrutiny

7.1 One of the key concerns about Blackpool is that, given the serious failings in its Children's Services in 2012, lessons do not appear to have been learnt at political and corporate leadership levels and effective systems of monitoring and scrutiny were not in place to notice and respond to deterioration after 2014. The new DCS in 2014 was internally appointed across adult and children's services. It would appear that she had a strong focus on commissioning and partnership, especially with Health, and successfully attracted programmes like Headstart and Betterstart to Blackpool, however she did not have a strong knowledge of children's social work and much decision making about policy was left to the children's social care assistant director and heads of service. By 2017, the Council realised that children's services was deteriorating and initiated an internal review which resulted in the appointment of the present DCS and the establishment of the improvement board. The current improvement journey in the Council started in mid 2017 from a very low base.

7.2 It can be argued that the senior leadership of the Council took their eye off the ball between 2014 and 2017 and additionally did not provide the DCS with sufficient leadership support and capacity between 2017 and the inspection to ensure that progress was sufficiently rapid. It would appear that the Council's corporate focus in those years has been on much needed economic and infrastructure regeneration of the town. However, I have seen evidence and continued commitment to Children's Services being a corporate political and executive priority since the inspection. The following changes have been made:

- Lead member's (who is also Deputy Leader) portfolio amended to focus primarily on Children's social care (with a deputy lead member appointed for education and skills)
- New member scrutiny arrangements in place, following an external review of scrutiny arrangements, to enable greater member focus and challenge, particularly on children's services
- Improvement Board remit has been sharpened to scrutinise children's social care progress more effectively. Membership has been reduced and made more strategic. The improvement board should help develop and own a clear model of social work practice and monitor its implementation and the extent it is delivering the outcomes aimed for. The Board can also usefully identify and help remove barriers to progress.
- Blackpool supports the developing pan-Lancashire multi-agency safeguarding arrangements (MASA) which will replace the LSCBs. The chair of the Blackpool LSCB will chair the pan-Lancashire arrangements and the more local sub-group covering Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre

- Blackpool LSCB has agreed to take the lead, from the improvement Board, on strengthening partnership arrangements for children across Blackpool, freeing up the improvement board to have a stronger focus on internal improvement
- In the current 19/20 budget the Council has found an additional £5M to support its children's social care, particularly focused on increased leadership, manager and frontline social work capacity
- The Council now has the right expertise to ensure members and senior officers have access to a meaningful monthly set of performance data, enabling them to make appropriate challenge and to see quickly when performance is dipping

7.3 The leader of the Council and the chief executive have responded positively to my challenge as commissioner and have marshalled support and resources for the DCS. They accept that this is an area too which they did not pay sufficient attention prior to 2017. They have now strengthened governance and scrutiny arrangements further since the inspection. For these reasons, I consider that Blackpool Council can continue to make the improvements required.

8. Partnership

8.1 One big challenge to the corporate leadership of the Council is developing and exercising systems leadership across the children's partnership. Again, post-inspection there has been a stronger discussion about working together arrangements between partners with challenge from the DCS and the chair of the LSCB among others. Multi-agency systems leadership events have been held concerning new MASA. Multi-agency solution focussed leadership events are planned for September and October with Council, Health and Police. Blackpool are at the beginning of developing a shared partnership strategy for children. Some recent developments include an updated Inclusion strategy for schools alongside an Inclusion charter.

8.2 In discussions with Headteachers, senior Police, the CCG and Blackpool Hospitals Trust (which also provides Blackpool's community health services) there is an acknowledgement that the challenges of high deprivation and low aspiration in Blackpool are faced by all agencies and that there is the need to develop more open and respectful partnership relationships and shared accountability. Partners recognise that the DCS has been initiating challenging discussions and similar discussions about more restorative approaches are also taking place in Lancashire.

8.3 Between the CCG and the Council there is a long history of good relationships around commissioning, with a range of children's community health services, including CAMHS, provided locally with encouraging results. The community branch of the hospitals trust is committed to ensuring only appropriate referrals are sent to social care and to making sure health undertake their early help commitments. It is recognised that at senior leadership level the hospitals trust has been in some difficulty.

8.4 The Police recognise the pressure that high Police referral brings to children's social care but consider that a more corporate response from the Council to children's needs is required, including from the Community Safety partnership.

8.5 Schools expressed concerns over thresholds and worries about not being sighted on child exploitation which is a significant concern. They also talked about other pressures on them such as the high numbers of children in care from a large number of other local authorities (e.g. 40 CiC from 15 LAs in one school). But schools are also developing new approaches to inclusion and recognise that troubled young people need different forms of support such as mentoring.

8.6 Overall, all partners expressed a willingness to work with the Council and the DCS to develop a different and more restorative partnership ethos that was not about escalating children through reactive processes based on perceived risk, but rather developing shared models of intervention and support that can keep children wherever possible in inclusive settings. Thus, the partnership conversation is changing and open dialogue is actively taking place. Now is the opportunity for the Council to exercise system leadership and bring partners together to develop a strategic partnership plan to improve long-term outcomes for all Blackpool children.

9. System, structure and service mix

9.1 Children's social care, from targeted early help to leaving care, needs to operate as **one whole system** in which all the different parts and staff work together to make the best possible use of all available resources to help disadvantaged children achieve their best and grow into responsible adults. To achieve this, the structure of the service must enable collaborative working across boundaries, good communication especially at points of transfer, and clarity about how each part of the service contributes to the whole.

9.2 The review found that, despite the small size of the LA, there was still silo working in some service areas and a tendency for heads of service to develop their own approaches separate from other service areas. In the past, this may have been necessary to protect their own services but is no longer appropriate if Blackpool is to build an effective whole system.

9.3 This said, Blackpool has responded with pace to the feedback and challenge from myself as commissioner. The Council moved quickly to appoint a strategic head of social work to address the issues above and has also moved quickly to simplify team structures and reporting arrangements as well as creating more resource at the front door. There is evidence that concerns raised by Ofsted about neglect are being better responded to with an increase in child protection plans for this category. Review of the use of assistant social workers and family support workers has begun. The offer from the Families in Need service, making it more targeted, is being refined. Two more

assessment teams have been established with a remit to provide short-term child in need interventions for up to 3 months.

9.4 Blackpool is a small LA some distance from large population centres and university social work courses. It has a good offer for social workers in terms of pay and support, but it needs to work hard to maintain good recruitment and retention. It needs to ensure that the changes it is making are well explained and take staff with them, by ensuring changes are well thought through and embedded. The task here is to build long-term sustainable practice model and systems and structure that support that model; therefore, thinking, planning and time are needed to get the details right.

9.5 The review identified the current needs and challenges for Blackpool:

Early Help, Front door and Assessment

- A stronger more targeted offer to families, sitting just below the social care thresholds, based on solution-focused intervention needs to be developed (Families in Need)
- Consideration of where the management and oversight of both the Youth Offending Service and the Leaving Care team should sit, to improve performance management and links to other teams
- All agencies need to be supported to develop their early help offer and plans and reminded of the need to seek parental consent to refer children where there are not child protection/ significant harm concerns
- Ensure systems at front door allow referrals to go straight to early help/ Families in Need where this is the appropriate response
- More capacity is needed in assessment to undertake solution-focused child in need interventions
- Consider with Police how domestic abuse and similar police notifications can be more effectively triaged

At present the management of need, risk and demand and a clear practice model at the front-door and in assessment is the biggest immediate challenge facing Blackpool children's services

Safeguarding

- Ensure that purposeful work is actively undertaken with children and families in Safeguarding – that children on CP plans and their families are visited at least every 2 weeks; the plans are purposeful, and parents understand what is required of them and what support they will get
- Explore models for more strength-based child protection conferences, that give children and families a stronger voice
- Consider how long a child remains in Safeguarding team once they have come into care
- Develop an effective Edge of Care service and review the Link residential support service
- Develop more senior manager challenge and oversight of decisions to bring children into care or to instigate PLO – strengthen pre-PLO work with families

- Consider the availability and range of evidence-based local parenting support services for families on CP plans/ pre-PLO.

Permanence – Children in Care

- Stronger focus needed on maintaining links with family
- Considerable number of children placed at home – work with families to revoke care order
- Plan and drive is required to implement Research in Practice report on reunification
- Greater co-ordination between commissioning, social care and education placements, social worker and virtual school to reduce numbers of placement moves, school moves and use of high cost residential care and residential school places

9.6 Encouragingly, as stated above (9.3) Blackpool has begun to actively address these issues. The improvements above should create the conditions (manageable caseloads, good supervision and management oversight, workforce development and support) for practitioners to undertake meaningful interventions with families to help them make positive changes.

9.7 Further improvements would be achieved through a corporate plan to bring all the Blackpool social work service from Front door to Permanence/ leaving care and foster care into one building where staff can talk to each other face to face about children's needs especially at points of transfer.

9.8 Blackpool children's services might also consider how professionals from other disciplines could be placed within the social work service to provide specialist advice to social workers, help ease pathways to their own agency and carry out some joint work in complex cases. In some LAs adult mental health, CAMHS, and drug & alcohol practitioners have significantly strengthened the confidence of social workers in their direct work with families. Such developments are connected to both the emerging practice model and the strategic partnership.

10. Quality Assurance, Performance and Workforce

10.1 Since inspection there has been considerable focus on developing improved quality systems, case file audits, and performance data that can be used by teams to identify performance issues. This has included recruitment of experienced heads of service from elsewhere who have quickly had a positive impact. There is a commitment to active engagement and open communication with staff, a pro-active approach to recruitment, the desire to build a genuine open learning culture and a more intelligence led use of performance data. The workforce development offer, aligned to social work practice, is being enhanced and broadened from a focus on ASYEs. This needs to continue and focus on supporting the practice model discussed above.

10.2 The Council has found extra funding for permanent new posts. More managerial, supervisory and quality assurance posts have been developed and experienced practitioners have filled these, leaving vacancies and more agency staff. There is a danger that the best practitioners are being encouraged to move out of practice. It is important that all social workers are clear who their manager is for supervision and decision-making. It is understood that team sizes are being reduced with clear lines of accountability.

10.3 There is a substantial staff resource in Families in Need and in Safeguarding of assistant social workers/ family support workers. These staff seem to do a wide range of tasks, some of which would normally be carried out by social workers. It is suggested that the work of these staff is reviewed and clarified.

10.4 There are well written Practice Standards, however these focus on assessment rather than on effective intervention with children and families and do not distinguish between Child in Need (CiN) S.17 work and Child Protection (CP) S.47 work.

10.5 The Mosaic case recording system is underdeveloped, and although recent work has been done to make it easier to use for social workers, more corporate ICT development of the system is required. The system needs to support the changes in front line practice as well as facilitate the management information required

10.6 Children's legal service now has a more collaborative relationship with children's social work. From April the service has moved back to be part of corporate legal services and the leadership and management of the children's legal team has been enhanced. Children's legal service need to be part of and support the developing practice model, providing better support to social workers in the legal planning process and through better representation in the Family Court.

11. Future Support

11.1 The changes needed in Blackpool are substantial and those changes need to be thought through and carefully implemented with staff, with children and families and with partners. This work has been underway for some time and was accelerated post inspection, supported by diagnostic work from Stockport as a Partner in Practice (PiP), and further refined since the Commissioner started. Capacity has been a big issue for Blackpool, given it is a small LA, and a lot of work is needed to change culture and thinking and get the right systems and structures in place. This involves persistence, repetition, attention to detail and consistency with flexibility to respond to feedback and to what works.

11.2 This is Blackpool's journey and it is critically important the Blackpool politically and corporately own and drive the improvement programme, with support and challenge from their Improvement Board. This should not be done unto Blackpool but done by Blackpool.

11.3 Given the size of the LA and the record of the past, Blackpool will want to access advice and support in developing different ways of working. It should be for Blackpool to identify the support that it needs and the form, amount and timing of that support.

11.4 This review identifies two major pieces of work for Blackpool. Firstly, the development of a strengths-based model of social work practice and all that that entails in developing systems, structure, guidance, forms, workforce development and a learning and reflective culture. Secondly, the development of a strategic children's partnership with a focus on working together to improve outcomes for all children and young people in Blackpool. It is suggested that advice and support focus on the development and testing of these two major change programmes.

11.5 I consider that, given the size and breadth of the improvements needed, Blackpool may well wish to draw on expertise from several sources. The DCS has identified the following specialist practice and expertise support that she would wish to draw upon:

- Strategic children partnership development – support to chief exec and corporate delivery unit from and through access to a PIP who has successfully developed a strong strategic children's partnership
- Multi agency solution focused leadership development and practice support for team managers and social workers building on work already begun with Stockport PIP and Research in Practice
- Practice model – Support from a PIP with experience of developing an effective whole system practice model, including clear leadership and management approaches

11.6 I recommend that the DfE supports and facilitates these arrangements. I suggest that a meeting is arranged between DfE and Blackpool with all proposed Partners in Practice to agree a support plan for Blackpool to help Blackpool take forward the issues identified by Blackpool, by Ofsted and by this review.

12. Recommendations to Blackpool

1. Establish a strategic Children's Partnership to shape a more inclusive approach to improving outcomes for all Blackpool children
2. Develop a strengths-based social work practice model that seeks to engage with children and families to enable change
3. Review the middle management structure below Assistant Director to ensure it is coherent with the child's journey through the social care system

4. Redesign the families in need, front door and assessment service so that contacts and referrals are responded to proportionately and children's needs are effectively met at the right level on each occasion
5. Strengthen the challenge to decision-making around entry to care and the focus on care planning to support exit from care, building on the Research in Practice report
6. Develop an Edge of Care service and review the 'Link'.
7. Consider with Lancashire County Council and Blackburn with Darwen Council and partners a review of the pan-Lancashire LSCB continuum of need and threshold document 'Keeping children safe in Blackpool'
8. Continue to embed a strong learning culture, developing social work practice tools and the Mosaic recording system so that it is aligned to the practice model

12. Conclusion

12.1 Blackpool has many strengths not least of which are an able and committed staff group who are well engaged, an open learning culture, and leaders who are committed to improving outcomes for children in the town.

12.2 Blackpool began its improvement journey in 2017 and all agree that the present DCS, Diane Booth, has made a significant difference to that journey. However, this journey has been hampered by lack of senior social care leadership capacity (now rectified), lack of a robust approach to QA and performance data (now rectified), lack of a consistent system-wide strengths-based model of practice and the lack of a strategic children's partnership. Blackpool is now addressing these issues.

12.3 Systems change on the scale required takes time, persistence and unwavering consistency combined with flexibility to respond to events and issues as they arise. It requires confidence and assurance to respond appropriately to children's needs through working with their family and holding and managing risk based on good social work practice. Blackpool has set out on this journey; however, it is early days and it is very important that the Council and partners stay on track.

12.4 Blackpool Council has a track record in developing strategic plans and approaches to deliver economic and infrastructure renewal to the town. What is required now is a similar corporate and partnership approach bringing the same verve and passion to improving outcomes for Blackpool's children through a strong focus on inclusion and on supporting families.

12.5 Blackpool has begun to address the deficits in its children's services. At this stage, I do not consider that moving to a Children's Trust would add additional value or capacity, nor is any other alternative delivery model likely to deliver more effectively than the Council's current response.

12.6 Blackpool will now benefit from a series of Ofsted monitoring visits which should be viewed as further learning opportunities to test out its progress. In the light of the recommendations above, I recommend that the Commissioner oversight continues through 6 monthly progress reports for the minimum of a year until a new practice model and partnership working are well established, and that Blackpool are supported by the DfE to source advice and support from a number of Partners in Practice of their choosing to strengthen their improvement journey.

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