

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

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Ofsted – Council Forum

The Ofsted 'Full Safeguarding' inspection took place 23rd January – 3rd February 2012. The inspection team consisted of 4 inspectors from Ofsted and one from the Care Quality Commission. The purpose of the inspection was to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services towards ensuring that children and young people are properly safeguarded and to determine the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. Safeguarding and services for looked after children were both judged to be good.

Inspectors identified some of our key strengths: partnership working was graded outstanding and they recognised the clear ambition and strong shared understanding of appropriate priorities across the Local Authority and partner agencies. Early intervention and support services – including Children's Centres and Think Family, were highlighted, as were commissioning arrangements in regard to care leavers.

A few areas for improvement were identified, including recruitment processes for volunteers, complaint processes for children and young people, the role of the advocate and also the recording of information to ensure that is fully reflects the activity undertaken. Overall across the full range of judgements in the Inspection Framework, Ofsted graded Blackburn with Darwen as good in 19, 2 adequate, and outstanding in one.

Children's Centre Inspections

During February and March 2012, there have been 6 inspections across the network of Children's Centres, of which; 3 where childcare inspections carried out at Seven Trees, Shadsworth and Livesey. Each of these inspections resulted in an outcome of "Outstanding". 3 where children's centre inspections carried out at Seven Tress, Shadsworth and Accrington Road. Each of these inspections received an outcome of "Good with outstanding Features".

Children in the care of the local authority

The number of children in care reduced to the lowest level in a year (366 currently) and similar to levels in the winter of 2010. An average of 7 children a month entered care over the past 3 months, compared with a figure double that in the preceding 6 months. This decline in the numbers of children entering care was further affected by particularly large numbers leaving care - 16 in December and 21 in January.

Children subject to child protection plans

The number of children with child protection plans has reduced slightly and currently stands at 238. This represents the lowest level since September 2011 (and a fall of more than 20 since the levels at the start of this year.)

This figure does need to be seen in context of the rise of the last 12 months and the fact that in the twelve months prior to that (2009/10) that the number of children subject to plans fell within the range 180 to 210.

Fostering Service

The Invest to Save initiative to recruit more foster carers has been very successful. In the last year, 20 new fostering households have been recruited, providing 35 new placements in all. Recruitment activity has taken place throughout the year with regular information points around the city and positive features in the media. As a result of sustained success over the last 2 years 44 additional children in our care are now placed with Blackburn with Darwen approved foster carers in comparison to those placed in February 2010.

Whilst we recruit foster carers all year round 14th – 27th May 2012 is Foster Care Fortnight, Fostering Network's annual campaign when fostering services around the country join forces to raise the profile of fostering and attract new foster carers. Members of the fostering team and foster carers will be out and about around town spreading the word about the need for more foster carers for Blackburn children.

Adoption

During the last year 21 adoption orders have been granted for Children in Our Care and 19 more of our children have found permanent families through Special Guardianship Orders. Demand for adoptive families is also growing and in the coming months we will be launching a new campaign to recruit more families from all walks of life who can offer a child or a sibling group a permanent home.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

A co-located multi-agency team has been established as part of our First Response, front Door arrangements, to deal with child protection referrals. The Team enables a multi-agency consideration of cases, utilising professional expertise from a range of partners including the police. This new arrangement is proving invaluable in providing a holistic picture of concerns relating to children who may be in need of protection.

Children with Disabilities Short Term Breaks Provision

Children and young people with complex needs will continue to be supported by Children's Services and Education via short term breaks and summer holiday provision for children and young people with disabilities via a framework agreement. Providers will be pre-selected and qualified into the framework and short breaks etc can be provided to meet identified needs across the borough as and when required. Delivery will evidence outcomes are met and value for money.

Annual Celebration of Dance

King George's Hall hosted Blackburn with Darwen's 7th Annual Celebration of Dance festival on the evenings of Tuesday 20th and Wednesday 21st March. The colourful event was organised by the School Development Service and sponsored by Twin Valley Homes.

Good News for Pupils

More secondary school pupils across Blackburn with Darwen were offered places at their preferred school in 2012 than the year before. Parents and carers of children starting secondary school in September this year were asked to list up to three schools in order of preference. A total of 1,919 applications for places were made, compared to 1,995 applications last year.

Of those, this year, 87.2% of children who live in Blackburn with Darwen were offered a place at their first preference school, up from 79.3% last year with 1,673 places offered compared to 1,584 last year. Just under 10% of children received an offer at their second preference school (181 offers) this year which was similar to last year (186 offers) and just under two percent (36 children) were offered their third preference, fewer than last year with 4.3% and 86 children). Twenty nine children (1.5%) were offered a place at a school that was not listed as a preference this year, down from 139 children last year (6.9%.)

Governors Conference

This year's annual Governors' Conference was held on Saturday 17th March 2012 at Pleckgate High School Mathematics and Computing College. The theme of the Conference was 'Learning from the Best' and around 120 governors joined LA officers and guests to consider learning from schools judged outstanding for governance by Ofsted. Amraz Ali (HMI) gave the opening address taking governors through the Ofsted report with the same name, and highlighting the key characteristics that the successful governing bodies chosen all had. The table top discussions that followed captured some of the strengths of governance in the Borough and the important issues and considerations that schools are facing. Gladys Rhodes White and Lisa Bibby both talked about the changing educational landscape nationally. The delegates were all treated to 3 songs from the choir of Lower Darwen primary school who sang wonderfully well and were a credit to their school.

St Silas CE School – New build

St Silas School building, on St Silas Road is now in the final stages of completion. Balfour Beatty Construction have been very active at the site, preparing for handing over the new state of the art building. The move into the new school is taking place on 12th, 13th and 14th April and staff will be in school from 16th April preparing for the children to start their Summer Term from 19th April 2012.

The school are planning to invite the local community in, on the 2 May 2012 from 1-3pm and again from 5-7pm, to look around the new building. Those attending will be encouraged to bring along a plant or a bush which the children will plant in the new school garden.