

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

The Education response team have continued to support all our schools and settings throughout the borough this term. Following discussions with the Director of Public Health local arrangements to assist the National track and trace system were put in place. Schools advised parents of children who had mixed closely with a positive case to take their child for a PCR test. Schools responded well to this system. The Education response team have worked closely with schools to implement the DfE contingency framework – Education and Childcare settings when managing outbreaks. If a school or setting meets the trigger point of outbreak as indicated in the framework, the team meets with the Headteacher /senior leader of the school or setting to agree next steps. Measures including more regular testing of children and families, the return of ‘bubbling’ where appropriate and other Infection, Prevention and Control measures have been recommended to limit the spread of the virus. The service the team has provided to schools continues to be invaluable.

Although many of our schools and settings have continued to be hit by the pandemic, attendance remains above 90%, this is consistently higher than the national average.

Ofsted inspections resumed this term for schools and settings, our School effectiveness team works with maintained schools who are within the inspection timeframe. Our School improvement board continues to ensure our school improvement groups work together to address the needs of each group of schools. The focus being on recovery from pandemic lockdowns and school closures.

Blackburn with Darwen has agreed to take part in a ‘pilot’ of the Annual Conversation with OFSTED. This entails rather than a single meeting, a number of single conversations taking place for:

Early Years

Schools

SEND and Children in our care

Post 16.

We have hosted three of these meetings this term. They have been productive meetings of sharing the excellent work taking place in BwD, whilst also making the challenges we face clear to OFSTED.

SEND

Late November Blackburn with Darwen council and CCG took part in a pilot ‘methodology testing’ with OFSTED and CQC.

The purpose of the Methodology Testing was to:

- Test out some new ways to gather evidence about the way children and young people with SEND are supported
- Provide the inspectorates with valuable information about how well possible new approaches work in practice and help them to identify where further improvements or thinking is needed.

As this was not an inspection there is no formal report to share. However OFSTED and CQC gave some feedback regarding positive practices within BwD. The team also indicated two areas for the local area to look at in further depth. The process lasted three weeks with all meetings taking place virtually. The methodology testing provided an insight into future local area inspections and gave opportunities for the council and CCG to test our Self Evaluation.

NUMBERS OF CHILDREN IN CARE & CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE INFORMATION

The number of cases open to Children's Social Care is 1,235, with the number of children subject to child protection plans at 116. The number of Children in our Care is 389.

It is pleasing to report from our recent data that our re-referral rate remains categorised as 'good' at 17% which is lower than the regional and national average. This indicates that from the front door Children's Advice and Duty Service the right children are progressing as referrals for assessment which then determine the most appropriate planning to safeguard or support the children within our borough.

Children in Need plans have remained steady over the past 6 months – 258 currently compared to 250 at the end of July 2021. However, our children subject to child protection plans has decreased from 152 to 111 over the same period. This story may seem a concern, but is reflected in the increase in those children becoming looked after detailed in the next paragraph. Also capacity within our safeguarding teams is resulting in more meaningful work being able to be completed with children and families which indicates less firefighting and more capacity to make a difference. So for some children, they have remained (although complex) at child in need level, but for others steps have had to be taken to place children before the courts to adequately safeguard them and plan for legal permanency. Some of these children are accounted for as living in neglectful situations as larger sibling groups where, despite intensive support, little positive change has been achieved.

Since July 2021, there has been an increase in the number of children becoming looked after for some of the reasons accounted for above. Our current cohort of children subject to interim care orders pending final outcomes from court proceedings is 84. This compares to 63 at the end of July 2021.

From November 2021 we have been piloting Systemic Teams which focus on children and families having one social worker/team manager from the front door up until a plan of permanence is achieved. For many this will mean step down or closure but for the minority this will mean retaining children through care proceedings to determine final legal permanence when, for some, the care plan may be one of adoption or them remaining looked after more longer term. This model is in its infancy, but there is enthusiasm within our workforce in terms of building relationships/families telling a single story/achieving trusting working relationships. This way of working is also upskilling our workforce and offering a broader experience in child care social work for our staff. Evaluation of this pilot will be fully explored in six months' time.

CORPORATE PARENTING

As previously stated there has been an increase in the numbers of Cared for Children in the borough which has been a proportionate response to the circumstances of risk that children and young people are experiencing in their families. We have an embedded and timely response to ensure where possible children and young people remain with their extended family members during this period with support from the Permanence Team. This in turn means that children and young people are likely to minimise change in terms of education and health professionals that know them.

The theme around embedding the Corporate Parenting Strategy continues with the Strategy on a Page being aligned with the training for members and partner agencies, to assist with easy reference and remain mindful of our pledges.

ADOLESCENT SERVICES

BwD Youth Forum

Deputy Youth MP Muhammed Bapu was awarded the One Voice young person of the year award in recognition of his commitment and dedication in ensuring young people's views and issues are heard and acted upon - in particularly during the Covid pandemic. Muhammed has been filmed having his vaccination to promote the take up with 15/16 year olds and has proved an effective advocate for vaccinations and testing.

The Youth Forum also visited the Rock FM studios to record two 30 second adverts to promote lateral flow testing and vaccinations to support peer-to peer education and support. The recording will be aired 4 times a day beginning from 4th January.

This year's youth elections will be held from 25th January till 12th February 2022, with the outcome announced on Monday 14th February. The young candidates will develop their manifesto's and campaigns in early January with a residential planned on 7th-9th January to finalise campaign videos and posters.

Holiday Activity & Food Program (HAF)

YPS and adolescent services delivered a successful winter holiday provision for vulnerable children and young people. Young people were able to participate in a range of activities including centre based crafts, games and sensory activities as well as bush craft, outdoor activities and trip and visits.

Engage Service

The team are planning to deliver a briefing to all Members in the New Year following a positive piece of work around neighbourhood mapping, which is helping to inform an understanding of contextual risks to young people in respect of the places and spaces where they spend time. The mapping exercise is providing valuable intel in supporting a multi-agency approach to disruption and prevention.

The SEEDS – Adolescent Support Unit

The SEEDS service has continued to support vulnerable families and young people over the Christmas period. Holiday and family time can be a difficult period for families to manage, hence there has been a collective response to ensure families and children are supported effectively.

Adolescent services have supported the SEEDS and Lytham Road Children's Homes to manage staffing capacity impacted by sickness, demand and Covid.

Youth Justice Service

The Youth Justice Service (YJS) are currently developing a joint post to sit alongside the Engage team, initially as a fixed term contract. This would improve links between services to support and intervene with young people identified as possibly becoming involved in criminality that may be underpinned by exploitative influences, in the hope of preventing them from being criminalised. Plans for the post have been put forward to Workforce Management for approval.

The YJS are also developing conversations with Lancashire and South Cumbria Foundation Trust (LSCFT) to obtain Speech and Language support for young people open to the YJS, an issue widely acknowledged as prevalent for both children and adults within the criminal justice system. It is hoped that acquiring this service will improve children and young people's journey, to better understand and navigate their way through the system, and equip them to avoid returning through reoffending.