



EXECUTIVE BOARD DECISION

REPORT OF:	Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education
LEAD OFFICERS:	Strategic Director of Children & Education (DCS)
DATE:	Thursday, 10 October 2024

PORTFOLIO/S AFFECTED:	Children, Young People and Education
WARD/S AFFECTED:	(All Wards);
KEY DECISION:	Y

SUBJECT: Children's Services Improvement Journey

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The previous report to Executive Board in September 2023 updated members on the progress and improvements made since the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) in January 2022 and Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) in May 2023.

This report provides an update on our improvement journey over the last 12 months, including the recent ILACS Focused Visit conducted by HMI Ofsted Inspectorate – on Care Leavers.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Executive Board:

1. Notes the progress and improvements made over the last 12 months
2. Notes the findings of the OFSTED ILACS Focused visit for Care Leavers.

3. BACKGROUND

Since the report to Executive Board in September 2023, we now have a full complement senior leadership team within the Children's Services and Education directorate, with:

- An Interim Deputy Director of Children's Social Care, substantive Deputy Director currently seconded to the Department for Education (DfE)
- Two new Heads of Service in Social Work and Specialist Support, and Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

Together with senior leaders in the directorate, we continue to drive our improvement journey to ensure we are delivering services that are compliant, inclusive, value for money and of the highest quality, providing positive outcomes for our children, young people, and families.

The Strategic Director meets with Blackburn with Darwen's link Senior HMI bi-monthly as part of our Ofsted engagement sessions, to provide updates and reassurance around practice and improvements across children's social care.

We deliver and share updates corporately for scrutiny and assurance, this includes:

- Corporate Assurance Board which meet on a monthly basis
- Children and Young People Scrutiny and Overview Committee which meet quarterly

Since the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) in May 2023, we have engaged with further external scrutiny, this includes:

- Two LGA Peer Reviews both conducted by North Tyneside; Quality Assurance (November 2023) and Children’s Advice and Duty Service (CADS) (March 2024)
- Utilising Warrington Borough Council and other local authorities as our Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP) to establish processes and implement targets effectively.

Children’s Services Focused Visit

In April 2024, a focused visit on care leavers was conducted by Ofsted. The inspection found positive improvements since the ILACS (2022) within our leaving care service.

“Since the last inspection, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to be requires improvement to be good, there has been effective and focused action by senior leaders, elected members, and partners to improve services for care leavers. Leaders have invested appropriately in the care leavers’ service to improve the care leaver offer and to ensure sufficient capacity in the workforce. Systems and processes have been established to enable leaders to fully understand the experiences of young people leaving care and to be clear about the quality of practice undertaken. External scrutiny, challenge and meaningful consultation with care leavers have been actively sought and responded to effectively by senior leaders. As a result, leaders know themselves well, including their strengths and areas for development, and care leavers are well supported to achieve their best outcomes.”

Please see Appendix 1 to view the Focused visit outcome report.

In addition to external scrutiny, we continue to seek assurance with the support of our Local Government Association (LGA) advisor Linda Clegg via our stocktake, which takes place three times a year. Our most recent stocktake, held in July 2024 gave a positive insight into our improvements as a directorate and within each service area. The Directorate self – evaluation is updated on a quarterly cycle, along with the improvement plan. This is now an established working document which is updated by heads of service and service leads, reviewed by the Deputy Director and DCS, before being shared with the Strategic Improvement Board.

The Children’s Services Improvement Board, now meet on an 8 weekly cycle, with a midpoint check in with the DCS, to ensure concerns are identified and escalated. Our LGA advisor Linda Clegg supports and challenges the improvement board as the independent chair. There is a focus on priority areas of practice, impact, and the inspection framework, with the support and challenge from wider corporate directors including Finance and HR. This gives the Council’s political leadership and Chief Executive a clearer overview of the directorate as a whole and the support needed to improve. With this approach, we are confident we are building the strong foundations to move the directorate to an outcome our children, young people and families deserve.

Departmental improvements over the last 11 months include:

- **Fostering Recruitment Hub** - The Fostering Recruitment Hub ‘Foster with Us’ went live in May 2024 and now has a full complement of staff. There has been a focus on increased social media campaigns to reach a wider audience, along with increasing presence at recruitment events across the Lancashire and Cumbria footprint. The target for responding to enquiries is 24 hours however this is currently being responded to well within this target and allows us to mirror Independent Fostering Agency’s (IFA). The number of enquiries that have progressed to Initial Visit since our opening is 9 households and 3 have progressed to application which is a positive start for BwD. There is a target of reaching well above 7 foster carer approvals within

the year exceeding last year's figure. The launch and celebration events are planned to take place weekly throughout August 2024.

- **Safeguarding Children Partnership (SCP)** - From January 2024, the BwD Safeguarding Children Partnership (SCP) transitioned back to a place based approach. In December 2023, the 'Working Together' guidance, including statutory requirements for safeguarding partnerships was published. For the transition back to BwD, this has involved new governance and secretariat arrangements and determining local work required across the three priority areas of Neglect, Domestic Abuse and Contextual Safeguarding (revising policies, processes, data collation, assurance, communications, and co-production), as well as ensuring the recommendations from 2023 Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) are being implemented. In terms of the changes to the statutory guidance, extensive work is ongoing so that timescales set by the DfE are met for publication of an annual review (September 2024) and implementation of the new safeguarding partnerships governance arrangements (December 2024). In September 2024, the SCP will hold a Development Day where partners will develop and agree a 2025-28 Safeguarding Children Strategy for BwD.
- **Family Help** – Since the DfE published its Stable Homes, Built on Love, strategy in February 2023, BwD have been working on identifying an approach to develop a way to rebalance children's social care. The Early Help service and Child in Need, Duty and Assessment teams are testing a new delivery model for Family Help, where Family Help workers are the lead practitioner for children eligible for support under Section 17(CIN). This will allow us to understand 'how' to operationalise, integrate and embed reforms and to gather evidence on the costs. From June 2024, teams of Social Workers, Family Support workers and commissioned services, SPARK and WISH have been delivering Family Help services from Darwen and Shadsworth Family Hubs. The ambition is that every child's right to a family life is prioritised wherever possible and families have access to universal and the right support, at the right time in the communities where they live. A families first culture, which engages family networks throughout decision making, with greater use of family networks, and earlier use of family group decision-making throughout family help and child protection. Family Help workers have the skills, knowledge, competence, and experience to work effectively with the child and their family. There are two locality-based teams delivering services through Darwen and Shadsworth family hubs, providing intensive, non- stigmatizing and effective support that is tailored to the needs of children and families. Children, Advice and Duty Service (CADS) will continue to provide the social work oversight on thresholds. CIN cases will be held by a family help lead practitioner. The Family Help workers will have access to high quality supervision overseen by Social Work Team Manager. If risks to a child increases, then a Social Worker will work alongside the family help lead practitioner and team around the family providing their Social Work expertise to the child and family. By winter 2024, a Knowledge and Skills statement for Family Help workers will be published by the DfE, which will set out a common framework of skills and to demonstrate value and confidence in Family Help workers. This is a longer-term strategy to manage demand and support children with the least intervention. Mid-point review planned for Sept 2024 with a full evaluation in December 2024.
- **Corporate Parenting** - Since the last executive report in September 2023, the Corporate Parenting Partnership has now been revised and is established following a review of two previous boards. The Corporate Parenting Strategy (2024 – 2027) has been co-produced with care experienced children, young people and young adults and is awaiting feedback from the Corporate Parenting Partnership prior to formal sign off at the next meeting in October. Subsequently, an action plan and tracker will be developed to hold corporate parents accountable of their commitments to children, young people, and young adults across the borough. The strategy will also provide opportunities for key partners to work collaboratively to improve outcomes for our children, young people, and young adults.

- **Quality Assurance** – The new Head of Service for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance started in June 2024 and is already having an impact on refining elements of the Quality Assurance Framework to ensure all QA activity is proportionate and meaningful. In March 2023, our routine audits overall grade was judged 26% good and in March 2024 was judged 46% good, this shows our outcomes are demonstrating an improvement in our practice. Our ambition is to aim for 70% of our practice being good or better.
- **Children’s Commissioning** - A restructure of the commissioning team and function across People Services commenced in January 2024. Phase one of this restructure is now complete, and the second phase which includes external recruitment is scheduled to commence in August 2024. This restructure will increase capacity to ensure that the council continues to commission services which deliver the best outcomes for our children, young people, and families, whilst being value for money and delivering efficiencies. In parallel with the restructure, work is progressing to identify and progress key priority work areas related to Children & Families commissioning. Work is also underway to ensure an integrated approach with health commissioning colleagues.
- **Sufficiency Strategy Position** – The interim Deputy Director of Children’s Social Care is finalising the Sufficiency Strategy by October 2024.
- **Inspection Readiness** - On 12th June 2024, we held a staff engagement event on SEND and ILACS inspection readiness, to ensure the entire children’s and education workforce, gain a better understanding of the journey of an inspection from receiving the initial call to the inspectors leaving site. This was a successful event and feedback suggested that following the event, more staff had a clearer understanding of what was required from them to support the department for inspection readiness.
- **Data** – Our data team are working hard towards producing live data via Power BI dashboards which will enable managers to have a more effective oversight of practice and monitor performance which will help inform decisions across social care.

4. KEY ISSUES & RISKS

Workforce recruitment and retention – Since 1st September 2023, there has been 101 new starters to Children’s Services and Education, 67 of these are specifically within Children’s Services. There have been 32 new social workers or advanced practitioners join the department within the last twelve months. On average 1 in 4 applicants are successful at interview. Following a successful Apprentice Recruitment Campaign earlier in 2024, four new apprentices joined as Social Worker Apprentices on 1st September 2024. The calibre of applicants was excellent.

Blackburn with Darwen’s primary source for agency social workers is through a contract with Reed who support across Greater Manchester and Lancashire. A recent report confirms that BwD is currently the lowest user of agency social workers across the geographical area via this contract and this is reflected in the lowest number of posts which are also vacant within the service at this time.

Children’s Commissioning Strategy - We recognise this remains an area of development, our commissioning team are currently undergoing a full restructure, following which there will be a focus on developing a Children’s commissioning strategy, including support around managing children’s commissioned placements.

Power BI Live Data – Improvement of live data will continue to drive informed decisions around practice and performance, to support us to continue to drive progress across the children’s social care system.

Ongoing external scrutiny – In the latter months of 2024, we look forward to two LGA Peer Reviews, focusing on Children in our Care (CIOC) and our Fostering service.

Grant Funded Schemes – As the Executive Board may be aware, funding for the Regional Fostering Recruitment Hub, for which the Council is the lead body, was allocated only for 2024/25. This totals c£728k. At the time of writing, there has been no confirmation of funding for the Hub for 2025/26. In the absence of that funding, some consideration will need to be given to the sustainability of the Hub (if indeed it can be sustained) and the Executive Board has previously resolved that a further report on this matter be considered no later than December 2024. Similarly, the funding made available for the transformation of Children’s Centres into Family Hubs expires at the end of March 2025 with no new funding currently proposed. Again, consideration will need to be given to the sustainability of those Services provided by the Hub, where they are dependent on the funding provided. In both cases, the Council’s Medium Term Financial Plan does not assume any additional funding for these matters.

Costs of Permanence – As with most Councils with a responsibility for Children’s Social Care, the rising cost of caring for children in our care presents a significant risk to the Council’s overall financial position and a key part of the improvement journey remains a need to ensure that, accepting the need to maintain the highest possible quality of care, the cost of doing so represents best value for money.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are no policy implications arising directly from this report. The Council’s policies are reviewed to ensure they align with statutory, government and best practice guidance.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report, however since the ILACS inspection, there has been an investment of c£12.5m (a c34% increase in budget) in the Children, Young People and Education services, specifically Leaving Care Service, to drive improvements.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

We have recruited additional agency social workers to help manage demand for an interim period.

9. EQUALITY AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Please select one of the options below. Where appropriate please include the hyperlink to the EIA.

Option 1 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required – the EIA checklist has been completed.

Option 2 In determining this matter the Executive Member needs to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA link here)*

Option 3 In determining this matter the Executive Board Members need to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA attachment)*

10. CONSULTATIONS

11. STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE

The recommendations are made further to advice from the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer has confirmed that they do not incur unlawful expenditure. They are also compliant with equality legislation and an equality analysis and impact assessment has been considered. The recommendations reflect the core principles of good governance set out in the Council's Code of Corporate Governance.

12. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

All Declarations of Interest of any Executive Member consulted and note of any dispensation granted by the Chief Executive will be recorded in the Summary of Decisions published on the day following the meeting.

VERSION:	1
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CONTACT OFFICER:	Jo Siddle, Imran Akuji, Megan Longworth
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DATE:	September 2024
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BACKGROUND PAPER:	
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