

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

Recent regional analysis and national publicity has pointed to increasing demand pressures on children's services, with particular pressures in the North and North West. The North generally has seen rising numbers of children in care over recent years, with particular pressure around children and young people in older age groups with very complex social and behavioural issues. During 2017, Blackburn with Darwen moved towards the regional norm with a marked rise in the number of children in care placed in the most costly residential placements. During 2018 there was a slight fall in the number of children in care in external residential placements, but this has been off-set by a recent rise in the number of children in care placed in independent fostering agency placements.

There has been a surge of work coming into Children's Social Care through the latter part of 2018. The number of Children in our Care is 387, a return to levels similar to early 2018 following a fall in the spring and early summer of 2018. The number of children subject to child protection plans remains high and has risen to 267, and the total number of children and young people open to Children's Social Care remains high at 1,883. In addition, over 600 children are being supported by Early Help services, 10 children have been adopted since April 2018 and 21 children are currently placed in adoptive placements.

MAKE YOUR MARK CAMPAIGN

Young people in the borough came 10th nationally for percentage turnout in the annual Make Your Mark campaign making 'Votes at 16' and 'End Knife Crime' the top two issues debated nationally. Following this, the Youth Forum attended a residential in London, where Blackburn with Darwen Youth MP Elle Walsh, along with 270 UK Youth MPs, attended the UK Youth Parliament annual sitting in the House of Commons.

Elle was successfully chosen by the Speaker of the House, John Bercow, in the final debate on knife crime and she spoke about educating young people through a youth work curriculum which would include the consequences and repercussions of knife crime. Elle's key aim is to work with the Young People Services staff to develop a curriculum to prevent knife crime, which could be delivered in youth clubs and schools in Blackburn with Darwen.

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (CSE) AWARENESS WEEK (5TH-9TH NOVEMBER)

For Child Sexual Exploitation Week in November, a range of Council teams including Engage, Young Peoples Services, Youth Justice and Early Years plus partners, delivered awareness raising activities across their settings with children, parents and professionals. This year the focus of the discussions was the sexual exploitation of boys and working with young people aged 16+ who are transitioning into adulthood.

Engagement activity reached 240 professionals across a number of sectors and over 1000 pupils via themed assemblies at Westholme School, Blackburn Central High School, Cheethams Youth Group and the Young Peoples Services boys group at Audley Community Centre. Primary and secondary schools were encouraged to promote the week across their settings and share resources with parents.

YOUTH TAKEOVER CHALLENGE

The Blackburn with Darwen Youth Forum organised and led the annual Takeover Challenge at King Georges Hall in November when 65 young people were given the opportunity to influence the people who have the power to make decisions.

The chosen topics for this year were “End Food Poverty’ and ‘End Period Poverty” and partner agencies including Food Power, Brook and Femcura supported the young people to deliver interactive workshops. The challenge was a fantastic way to empower our young people, encouraging them to discuss issues and explore solutions which could make a real difference where they live.

This national initiative is led by the Children’s Commissioner of England and gives children and young people valuable insight into real life decision making, while organisations benefit from a fresh perspective on their work.

ROAD SAFETY WEEK

The Children’s Centres network delivered a whole host of learning through play activities with groups and nurseries during November to mark Road Safety Week. ‘Bright Day’ encouraged parents and children to wear bright and florescent clothes and the Community Safety Team supported by providing fluorescent resources for the children to put on their coats to support them being seen in the dark. Parents made pledges to adopt the road safety messages including continuing to teach their children about road safety, holding hands and the importance of wearing a bike helmet.

OFSTED FOCUSED VISIT

Children’s Services received a two day visit from Ofsted in November focusing on ‘Help and Protection’, particularly children in need and children subject to child protection, including children on the edge of care and those subject to pre-proceedings interventions. Inspectors concluded that children in Blackburn with Darwen who are at immediate risk are protected and that the quality of help and protection services they receive has remained the same since the last inspection in September 2017, with improvements to some aspects of the service. Some children benefit from the good-quality work by individual practitioners, however the service remains too variable. The department is dedicated to making improvements in line with the inspection action plan and despite pressures of high caseloads and complexity of cases, progress has been made.

CHRISTMAS ROUND UP

Thank you to all the individuals and businesses who donated to the local charity, Secret Santa, which has worked over the past 12 months to provide 900 new Christmas gift bundles to children and young people in need across the borough. The children’s centre network was used as a distribution point with age appropriate gift sets wrapped for children and young people aged 0-16+.

o Children’s Centres Activities

Each children’s centre enjoyed a Winter Wonderland event where parents and carers were invited to sing along with their children and the community cafes served Christmas lunches. In addition, the Kingdom Outreach charity co-ordinated and delivered 145 food hampers to Children Centres and Apple Trees on Christmas Eve to provide ingredients for a Christmas meal for families in need.

- *Christmas Parties*

Foster Families enjoyed a visit from Santa at their annual Christmas Party at Longshaw Sports & Social Club. Highlights included a fantastic entertainer with party games and a very generous raffle with an Xbox as the top prize!

The Special Education Needs & Disabilities (SEND) Forum Christmas party at Cherry Tree Cricket Club was a celebration of the hard work and commitment of all the Forum Members and their families, and a wonderful opportunity to share the film that they have been working hard to produce to encourage other young people to join the Forum. After lots of fun entertainment, dancing and eating, the children all received a gift from Father Christmas.

Thank you to all the Children's Services staff who were on hand throughout the festive period to support children and families.

EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Recent publication of national performance tables shows that achievement in the borough's Primary schools in 2018 was very strong, with two thirds (66%) of local children at or above expected levels in Reading, Writing and Maths. This compares with a national average of 64%. December also saw the publication of provisional performance tables for Secondary schools. The tables showed that young people in Blackburn with Darwen schools, on average, made better progress than their peers in the region or nationally. Several schools had particularly strong progress, with some amongst the top 10 schools nationally, although there were others with much room for improvement. We continue to work with all local and national partners to improve local schools and ensure that our children and young people receive the best possible education.

ST THOMAS'S CENTRE IS OUTSTANDING

The St Thomas's Centre (Pupil Referral Unit) was delighted to be judged as 'outstanding' in all areas at their Ofsted inspection in June. In praising the quality of teaching and learning the Inspector commented that *'the great majority of pupils in each of the key stages make good or better progress from low starting points, not only in English and mathematics but in other subjects too. The vast majority of leavers move on successfully to sustained further education, employment or training'*.

Since the inspection, a £500k full refurbishment of the former Cedars Infant School site has been carried out to accommodate the needs of pupils, and this premises is now part of the St Thomas's Centre network.

CELEBRATION OF ACHIEVEMENTS AWARDS

More than 50 children in care from across the borough were presented with special awards at the Children in Our Care Celebration of Achievements ceremony at Ewood Park in November. I, along with Jayne Ivory, Director of Children's Services, presented Special Achievement Awards for The Arts, Science, Sport, Behaviour, Academic Achievement and 'Making a positive contribution'.

The audience was entertained by singing performances from four young people in care and X Factor contestant Jake Quickenden presented prizes. Blackburn Rovers, as well as hosting the event, provided match tickets and gift vouchers to all of the winners.

The Virtual School co-ordinated the event with sponsorship support from Blackburn Rovers Football Club, the Blackburn Rovers Community Trust, OSMIS Education Limited and the John Bury Trust.