

31 January 2025

Victoria Gent, Director of Children's Services, Blackpool Council
Neil Jack, Chief Executive, Blackpool Council
Kevin Lavery, Chief Executive, NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board
Sacha Hatchett, Chief Constable, Lancashire Constabulary
Clive Grunshaw, Lancashire Police and Crime Commissioner
Steve Chapman, Independent Scrutineer

Dear Blackpool Local Safeguarding Partnership

Joint targeted area inspection of Blackpool

This letter summarises the findings of the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to identification of initial need and risk in Blackpool.

This inspection took place from 18 to 22 November 2024. It was carried out by inspectors from Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS).

Headline findings

A strong, caring leadership ethos, based on doing what is right for children in Blackpool, means that a large majority of children get the right help when they need it. The high quality of both strategic and operational partnership in Blackpool ensures that there is an effective identification and response to children's needs and risks. Over the last year, the area has moved from joint Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) with other neighbouring areas to a specifically place-based MASA with a single focus on children in Blackpool. While this has resulted in a period of transition, the creation of a new business unit, the appointment of an independent scrutineer and refreshed governance arrangements have strengthened partnership focus on safeguarding children in Blackpool.

The place-based approach has enabled the partnership to become much more responsive to the very high levels of need and risk within the local population and children of Blackpool. Throughout the partnership arrangements there are many examples of effective multi-agency working. The development of high-quality family support hubs based in local communities is ensuring a range of universal and targeted support which is easily accessible for children and their families. Better collaboration with, and training for schools has improved the quality and timeliness of the referrals they make, but high levels of temporary and permanent exclusion in some schools reduce safeguards to children who are not in school.

What needs to improve?

- How well partnership performance information and quality assurance are used to support effective multi-agency working.
- The effectiveness with which the partnership engages with schools to reduce the very high rate of permanent exclusions that is currently exacerbating the vulnerability of children.
- The accuracy of decisions that children's needs have been sufficiently met, and positive change sustained, to a point that it is appropriate to step down and end the ongoing involvement and support of agencies.
- The consistent and timely provision of up-to-date, accurate information to support professionals to find children who are missing from home or care.
- How consistently police officers gather and record the views of children when attending incidents.

Strengths

- Strong strategic and operational partnership working that supports a more joined-up and proactive approach to supporting children at the earliest opportunity, and which prevents many children's needs from escalating.
- A shared open learning culture which supports staff to do better for children.
- An effective and equitable offer to homeless children is leading to positive outcomes for these vulnerable children.
- The effective identification and response to children at risk of, or experiencing child exploitation, in particular from the multidisciplinary Awaken team.
- The safeguarding of children who are electively home educated, and the support provided by many schools and school nurses to support and meet children's needs.
- An effective partnership response to reduce risks when children are victims of domestic abuse.

Main findings

When concerns about children are identified, the multidisciplinary Request for Support Hub (RfSH) ensures children receive a timely and mainly effective response, including outside office hours. Thresholds are well understood by professionals making referrals. Better collaboration with, and training for schools has improved the quality and timeliness of the referrals they make. While strong working relationships and a solution-focused approach minimise the need for escalation, there are some professionals who do not always feel listened to when they want to share concerns.

During the inspection, leaders agreed the need to review their approach to escalation.

The police force control room has effective systems to identify and respond quickly to vulnerable children. Officers make timely referrals for children who are victims of domestic abuse. The neighbourhood officers work closely with other early help hub practitioners to disrupt domestic abuse perpetrators. When children are victims of domestic abuse, highly skilled independent domestic violence advisers (IDVA) co-located in the RfSH and in the hospital Emergency Department (ED) provide a timely and proportionate response. This has strengthened the service for these children. Operation Encompass is very effective in helping schools to identify children who need rapid support, due to exposure to domestic abuse. This information results in additional support outside term time through effective joint working with the early help education link workers.

Partnership work is increasingly focused on early prevention. As a key part of the wider early help offer, the establishment of family support hubs has provided a valued community-based integrated support for children and their families. Early help is preventing many children's needs and risks from escalating due to the availability of wide-ranging tailored specialist support and evidence-based programmes. Staff are highly trained in evidence-based interventions and workloads are kept at a level that helps to enable them to offer children and their families the right level of support.

When there are concerns about children being at risk of significant harm, effective multi-agency strategy meetings lead to thorough child protection enquiries which identify the impact of the risks and the child's needs when the threshold is met. These result in joint decision-making for next steps to safeguard children. An example of effective and child-centred practice is the internet child exploitation team, who work closely with relevant partner agencies by holding child protection strategy discussions and joint investigations to prevent risk and harm for children. They work closely with neighbourhood police officers, who go into schools to teach children about online safety and what to do if they are victims.

When children are arrested, police custody officers appropriately challenge arresting officers to justify the need to detain a child to ensure that children are not detained unnecessarily. Children's needs are considered well by healthcare professionals, and liaison and diversion staff. However, police officers do not always make a referral for all detained children, which leads to the needs of a very small number of children not being known about by partner agencies.

The offer to homeless children has been strengthened. While this leads to much more positive outcomes for these very vulnerable children, housing quality and availability in the area remains a concern. Children who go missing from home or care receive an effective multi-agency response which includes timely and supportive

return home interviews to help keep them safe. The police automatically notify the RfSH, but multi-agency tools and procedures designed to support professionals to find children are not consistently used by all children's homes and foster carers. This means up-to-date, accurate information about the child is not always available at the earliest opportunity.

Child and family assessments are of a good quality. Social workers get to know children and families well, which enables them to be insightful about the issues which children face. Social work assessment tools are used to good effect to help social workers understand the cumulative harm to children who are living with neglect. Support ends too soon once an assessment is completed for some children. This results in missed opportunities to ensure these children's needs are fully addressed and sustained. As a consequence, a small minority of children are re-referred as their needs continue to be unmet for too long.

Professionals across much of the partnership are aware of the need to hear the voice and lived experience of children. There is less consistency about how the voice of children is captured when contacts are screened in the RfSH. Many frontline health practitioners know their children and families well. When attending incidents, the police do not always consistently gather and record the child's views. The force responded immediately during the inspection and reissued guidance and instructions for officers to record the voices of children.

The health visiting service offers an enhanced model of support to families with children from pre-birth to five years old. In addition, they provide a varied range of therapeutic services from direct work in schools to more specialist services when required. Effective and sensitive collaboration between partner agencies and the midwifery team has improved the experience of families when their child has come into care at birth. Frontline police use force guidance on their mobile devices to respond effectively to vulnerable children. For example, they are prompted to check the sleeping conditions and availability of appropriate food in households when there are children under the age of three years.

When children are identified as being at risk of child exploitation, they benefit from the support of a multidisciplinary specialist team called Awaken. This is a highly valued team whose members are making a positive impact in the support and reduction of risk for these highly vulnerable children and young people. It is impressive that the service has expanded to offer support for young people up to 24 years old. The reach and accessibility to children and young people is widened by the provision of outreach support out of office hours and at weekends. The Awaken team has a culture of learning and high ambition and is led by capable, knowledgeable and experienced managers. Effective systems are in place which include daily and weekly meetings to review risk and progress. Through these, professionals make sure that complex risks to children receive continued multi-agency oversight. The recent addition of a single point of contact for schools and

alternative educational provisions has made a positive start to offering prevention as part of the 'front door' response to child criminal and sexual exploitation. Primary schools are not currently included to help ensure that younger children are identified at the earliest opportunity.

High levels of need in Blackpool place additional strains on schools in terms of capacity and resources. Already high levels of permanent exclusion are increasing significantly and are currently almost three times the national average, with a further rapid increase over the last year. This significantly increases risks and safeguarding concerns for children who are not attending school due to their exclusion. Suspensions are also very high. Children who are excluded are overrepresented in referrals for those children who experience neglect and extra-familial harm. For children who are supported to remain full time in school, many schools have stepped up to help meet children's needs by going well beyond expectations. Schools are well supported to develop and maintain effective systems to identify children in need of help and protection and the creation of new support roles has significantly improved the contribution and engagement of education. Regular audits identify gaps or weaker practices across the area, which informs the training offer to schools.

Clear systems are in place which maintain oversight of those who are home educated with a strong focus on identifying safeguarding risks. School nurses have refocused their role to target schools and support children in more deprived areas. However, the amount of time they need to spend undertaking statutory safeguarding work impacts on their capacity to fulfil their wider public health offer.

Most staff working with children across the Blackpool partnership receive regular, high-quality management oversight and supervision. This supports practice which leads to effective multi-agency identification and response to children's needs and risks. When referrals are made to the RfSH, strong and consistent management oversight ensures timely and sound decision-making. Effective systems are in place within the police force, such as the daily police risk management meetings and the monthly tasking meeting which assigns specialist police teams to complex risks. This means specialist and technical police resources are quickly available to help locate children at high risk of serious child criminal exploitation and organised crime.

Leaders and frontline managers are insightful and have a well-considered understanding of the experiences of children and families that need help and protection as well as the prevalence of complex need and risk in Blackpool, in particular neglect and domestic abuse.

It is a strength that an improved understanding of need by partners has already led to a range of partnership developments to meet needs and to improve the help and support provided to children and their families. Examples include: a reduction in the inappropriate use of police powers of protection through improved communication;

analysis of school nurses' workload to target children in schools where needs are higher and extend their role in primary schools; an increase in school holiday support to families and raising awareness in schools about the need for earlier intervention to reduce referrals from schools peaking just prior to school holidays; and the development of the Awaken multidisciplinary exploitation team.

Leaders have embedded a culture of transparent and honest learning across the partnership in Blackpool. Staff are actively encouraged to take up training, which is helping them to work more effectively. This is enhanced through learning circles, group supervision opportunities and multi-agency information-sharing forums. Risk to vulnerable children is being reduced thanks to specific training provided to practitioners within the ED, which is helping them to better identify risk and need leading to early intervention. This is one example of partner agencies jointly understanding the needs of the population that they serve and so putting in place strategies that go on to support vulnerable children and families well.

The MASA has adopted a trauma-informed approach. This is evident in much of the work undertaken by staff across agencies, although not all schools and trusts are fully engaged, which may contribute to the high levels of permanent exclusions. The restructure of the corporate safeguarding team in Blackpool Hospitals NHS Teaching Trust has strengthened the partnership working with the emergency duty team. Seven-minute briefings by the team to staff on topics such as bruising on babies, 'invisible' men in the home and regular walkarounds have improved the skill, knowledge and confidence of ED practitioners to recognise safeguarding risks for children and make appropriate and timely referrals.

Due to the recent creation of the Blackpool MASA, leaders are still in the process of reviewing and refreshing their governance and key strategies, including the workforce and learning offer. A strengthened focus on joint training is beginning to gather pace but specific training for neglect and domestic abuse remains underdeveloped at present. A training needs analysis has been completed, and the MASA is prioritising domestic abuse training. Leaders recognise that there is more to do. While further training is planned on child neglect, leaders have implemented creative workarounds, for example using early help staff who have been trained in neglect tools to work alongside social workers to contribute to the assessment of need and risks in families where there are concerns about cumulative neglect. Despite improvements in joint working with housing partners, the situation for many children who experience neglect is exacerbated by housing pressures and high levels of deprivation in Blackpool.

The scale and complexity of need in Blackpool can over time impact on the well-being of staff. Not all staff across the partnership are fully aware of welfare support schemes. Leaders reflected during the inspection the need to better incorporate this into their workforce offer.

The approach to quality assurance does not provide sufficient understanding of the impact of partnership practice for children and families across Blackpool. The partnership approach to quality assurance has been strengthened, but leaders rightly understand that further development is needed. A Blackpool MASA-based Effectiveness Strategic Delivery Group has been established. Currently, there is limited joint performance information data, which constrains the joint partnership understanding of the quality of practice with children and families at the multi-agency front door. Performance data is currently limited to individual agency data which is corroborated with a range of other information. MASA leaders have started to develop a more complete multi-agency performance dataset and dashboard, although this is at too early a stage to have had an impact on further strengthening multi-agency working. It is positive that regular multi-agency quality assurance meetings have been established, which provides greater assurance of quality against the MASA's 'practice obsessions' and standards. Lancashire Constabulary does not have an effective process to check the quality of the content of the referrals its officers and staff make.

A range of effective systems to facilitate information-sharing at key decision points ensures that professionals can act with confidence and knowledge to help and protect children. The RfSH, the family support hubs and Awaken team are good examples of this in practice. Specialist police investigators use information from the force's records to build chronologies with other partners, assisting in a better understanding of risk. The safeguarding and education officer for the disadvantaged has increased capacity and value to wider safeguarding within the partnership increasing the inclusion of schools in partnership working.

Although health agencies are not physically represented in the RfSH, their current location within a busy multidisciplinary health centre, along with their access to patient records systems used by multi-agency partners, means that they provide effective input to decision-making processes, and information is shared in a timely way. Effective multi-agency information-sharing processes are in place between children's and adult services, which means that potentially vulnerable children in the care of adults who are also particularly vulnerable due to their own needs or behaviours are identified, including when these children may also be young carers.

The appointment of an independent scrutineer is starting to strengthen the arrangements for independent scrutiny by the MASA. The MASA does not currently monitor and evaluate the work of the statutory partners as effectively as it should. While some initiatives have been progressed, such as the domestic abuse training offer, a revised missing-from-home strategy and the creation of the three family hubs, partners recognise the need to do more to further strengthen early help and to address the priorities of neglect and domestic abuse. The partnership recognises that this is particularly the case for schools and education providers who are not sufficiently represented on the MASA.

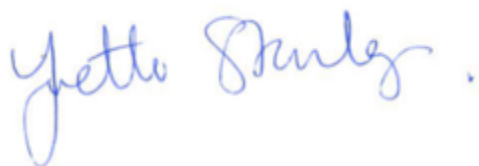
The independent scrutineer has identified the need to strengthen the participation and focus of leaders represented on the MASA. This follows reviews of neglect and domestic abuse. Some progress has already been achieved with the creation of the executive board chaired by the local authority chief executive, but more changes are planned, including rationalising and refocusing subgroups, and increasing the frequency of partnership meetings. It is reflective of the MASA's organisational learning approach that it deferred a final decision about its governance structure so that leaders could reflect on learning from this inspection.

Next steps

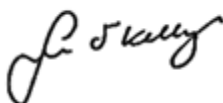
We have determined that Victoria Gent, Chair of the Blackpool MASA, is the principal authority and should prepare a written statement of proposed action responding to the findings outlined in this letter. This should be a multi-agency response involving the individuals and agencies that this report is addressed to. The response should set out the actions for the partnership and, when appropriate, individual agencies. The local safeguarding partners should oversee implementation of the action plan through their local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

Blackpool Local Safeguarding Partnership should send the written statement of action to ProtectionOfChildren@ofsted.gov.uk by 9 May 2025. This statement will inform the lines of enquiry at any future joint or single-agency activity by the inspectorates.

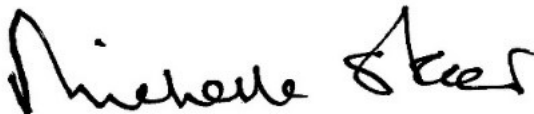
Yours sincerely



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