

Inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services

Blackpool Council

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About this inspection

1. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services in the local area 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. The inspection team consisted of three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one inspector from the Care Quality Commission. The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004.

2. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:

- a range of evidence and reports including a review of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP), performance data, information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and regulated provision and the evaluation of a serious case review undertaken by Ofsted in accordance with '*Working Together To Safeguard Children*', 2006
- a review of over 40 case files for children and young people with a range of needs. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision making undertaken
- the report of the most recent annual unannounced inspection of local authority contact, assessment and referral centres undertaken in June 2009
- discussions with children, young people and parents/carers receiving services, front line managers, senior officers including the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, elected members and a range of voluntary sector representatives.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

3. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding (Grade 1)	A service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good (Grade 2)	A service that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate (Grade 3)	A service that only meets minimum requirements
Inadequate (Grade 4)	A service that does not meet minimum requirements

Service information

4. Blackpool borough has a resident population of 141,900, including 33,700 (23.25%) aged 19 years or under, living in an area of 35 square kilometres. Recent estimates identify that approximately 95.9% of Blackpool residents are white; 2.7% of school age children have English as a second language. Blackpool benefits from a cosmopolitan mix of residents, but actual numbers from each constituent group are very small. Recent migration from European Union Accession States has resulted in an increasing Polish population; services have been developed specifically for this group. According to the 2007 index of multiple deprivation Blackpool is ranked as the 12th most deprived authority in England, which is a significant increase since 2004 when it was ranked 24th. Consequently almost 9,000 children and young people live within the 20% most deprived areas in England which covers 40% of the town's geographical area. Blackpool residents earn the lowest average wage in the United Kingdom. Children's services operate in a challenging context, with a high number of families moving in and out of the borough, sub-standard housing, high levels of drug and alcohol misuse, and the additional presence of several million visitors annually.

5. Blackpool has a number of strategic partnerships. The Children's Trust was established in May 2006, and includes a broad representation from Lancashire Constabulary, Blackpool NHS, adult services, schools and further education, the community and voluntary sector, and private enterprise. The Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board, established in the same month has been independently chaired for the last three years and brings together all statutory partners including schools and Blackpool Coastal Housing.

6. Children's social care services are delivered through four locality teams, one children with disabilities team, an emergency duty service, permanence, fostering and adoption teams, a leaving care service, and the youth offending team. This provision is supplemented by multi-agency specialist provision for children experiencing domestic abuse and children at risk of sexual exploitation. A wide range of multi-agency early intervention services are available under the banner of a 'Think Family' approach. Over 1100 children and young people have been supported by the Common Assessment Framework which underpins this approach. Twelve children's centres are all linked to extended schools. One children's centre is co-located with a special school. Blackpool young people's services, provides support for those aged 13 years and over. At the time of inspection there were 344 looked after children and young people, 254 of whom are placed with foster carers, 239 of these are placed with local carers. The local authority provides a wide range of short break activities; 41 children and young people benefit from overnight provision. One hundred and seventy one children were subject to a child protection plan, which reflects a rising trend over the last two years.

7. Blackpool has 16 nursery, 29 primary, 8 secondary and 3 special schools. Post-16 education is provided through one sixth form college, one sixth form school and one further education college. There is one federated pupil referral unit, Educational Diversity, which encompasses a range of services including the home education service and supports over 230 children. Blackpool's early intervention strategy is focused around its schools and all schools in the borough currently deliver the full core offer for extended services including wrap around care, parenting support, study support, play opportunities and community access.

8. Commissioning for national health services including primary care, are carried out by Blackpool Primary Care Trust. Acute services, including emergency care are provided by Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre NHS Foundations Hospital Trust. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services are provided by the Blackpool Primary Care Trust (PCT) with clinical psychological services provided by the Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust.

The inspection outcomes: Safeguarding services

Overall effectiveness

Grade 3 (Adequate)

9. Good action is taken by all agencies working effectively in partnership to ensure children are safe and feel safe. However, the quality of provision for the most vulnerable children, those in need, on the edge of care, and subject to child protection plans is inconsistent and therefore adequate. In particular, the quality of assessments and care planning although satisfactory overall, is variable with inconsistent use of chronologies. The quality of recording does not always reflect the quality of assessment and planning. This is recognised by the council and action has been taken to strengthen managerial oversight of front line practice. However, a comprehensive audit across all children's cases is yet to be fully embedded. Participation in assessments and reviews of their care plans by children in need and subject to protection plans is less developed than for children looked after.

10. The Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board is increasingly effective, but is yet to encompass a fully comprehensive performance management approach within its remit. The process for conducting serious case reviews has been improved following receipt of an inadequate evaluation from Ofsted early in 2009. A thorough re-examination was conducted and the resubmitted action plan was judged to be satisfactory. New procedures and improved quality assurance arrangements have been introduced. Learning from this review has been implemented well across the relevant agencies.

11. Children's safeguarding needs are strongly prioritised. The Children's Trust has a track record in securing demonstrable improvements to service provision. Workforce planning is of good quality. The quality of multi-agency early intervention, such as the Emotional Well Being in Schools initiative is strong and reflects a particularly effective role for schools. Integrated working has produced improvements in sexual health and responses to domestic abuse. Intensive attention to the high rate of teenage conceptions has resulted in a comprehensive, creative and well-targeted range of services, with some encouraging signs that this is beginning to have a positive impact.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 3 (Adequate)

12. Capacity for improvement is adequate. The Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board appropriately fulfils its statutory duties. It has recently been successful in recruiting to the key business manager post. This has increased capacity to progress work quickly. The board has accurately evaluated its performance and has strengthened business planning. All partner agencies meet statutory requirements for services at least adequately and no services are deteriorating. Early intervention provision and partnership work are effective and are resulting

in positive outcomes for many children with good early identification of their needs for safeguarding and protection.

13. Good progress has been made in relation to most recommendations of the Joint Area Review (JAR) in 2006. Access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has improved. However, the introduction of multi-agency case audits by the Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board and the development of a fully resourced and comprehensive strategy for young carers have been slow. Good and timely action has been taken to respond to the areas for development identified through the recent unannounced inspection of contact referral and assessment arrangements. Additional staffing has been provided to reduce caseloads and the numbers of assessments undertaken by unqualified workers in social care. Staff welcome the improved quality assurance arrangements as they contribute positively to improving the quality of practice and recording.

14. Performance against safeguarding performance indicators is almost all in line with similar authorities and the national average. The exception is that the timeliness of initial and core assessments has been consistently well below similar areas and the national average. Although monitoring arrangements and management oversight have been strengthened, the required improvements in the timeliness of assessments are not yet evident. Arrangements for reporting performance to the Children's Trust are good and effective.

15. The Director of Children's Services and senior managers in the PCT and partner agencies provide effective and determined leadership. While elected members are clearly committed to improving services, scrutiny of safeguarding performance and practice is insufficiently developed. The track record in relation to the development of early intervention provision is strong. Partnership working is successful at all levels. Children with particular needs, such as those vulnerable to sexual exploitation, are very well served. Children with disabilities receive a good integrated service.

16. The views of children and young people are taken into account very well at the strategic level. However, the involvement of children in need and those subject to child protection plans in assessments and planning is variable.

17. There is a sound platform for further improvement as leadership is strong and priorities are ambitious, owned by all partner agencies and integrate equality and diversity issues well. Services also provide good value for money. The council and its partners have a very good grasp of the key challenges, for example management support to newly qualified staff has been increased.

Areas for improvement

18. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Blackpool, the local authority and its partners should take the following action:

Immediately:

- Ensure that every child's file includes an up to date chronology.

Within three months:

- Ensure that the quality of recording in social care files reflects the quality of assessment and planning that has taken place.

Within six months:

- Build on existing good practice to enable all children in need and subject to child protection plans to participate fully in care planning, according to their age and understanding.
- Improve training and awareness-raising for elected members in relation to the scrutiny of safeguarding policy and practice.

Outcomes for children and young people

The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe. Grade 2 (Good)

19. The effectiveness of services in Blackpool to ensure that children and young people are safe is good. Inspectors were impressed by the awareness of all staff of their safeguarding responsibilities and their ability to identify promptly safeguarding needs. For example, staff in the Accident and Emergency department pay good attention to the possible risks to children attending for treatment posed by adults visiting the department. Children at risk of harm are promptly identified and referred for further assessment. Most General Practices have a safeguarding lead which supports good information-sharing.

20. The proportion of good or better safeguarding judgements in Ofsted inspections of primary schools and regulatory inspections of fostering, adoption and children's homes exceeds national averages. Safeguarding in secondary schools is satisfactory overall. Private fostering arrangements are judged

satisfactory; effective steps have been taken to update and re-launch information for carers, children and agencies.

21. Agencies work well together to share information. ContactPoint is developing in line with requirements. Safeguarding information-sharing protocols are used well by health organisations. The Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference protocol is a particularly robust example of high quality multi-agency communication to promptly address children's needs. Children missing from education are robustly tracked and monitored. The allocation of key workers helps to ensure that local intelligence is used to support a timely return to education. The missing from home policy has been recently revised to include a requirement for all children to be routinely seen when they return home.

22. The Common Assessment Framework underpins the delivery of all early intervention provision. It is confidently and widely used as a referral pathway and to provide support through the 'Team around the Family' approach. Staff from all agencies are enthusiastic advocates for its effectiveness. The quality of completed Common Assessment Frameworks is good. They are highly valued by parents who appreciate this positive approach. One parent told inspectors, 'I feel in charge of what's happening'. The Early Action Forum offers effective professional challenge where multi-agency support plans require additional support. A well evaluated and cost-effective budget-holding lead professional model has been mainstreamed to provide practical assistance to families engaged in support plans.

23. Specialist provision is good. The multi-agency services for children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation provided by Awaken have a good track record in protecting very vulnerable young people, which results in a 92% success rate in the prosecution of perpetrators. The new Victoria Centre is an excellent facility. It provides a safe and calm environment to assess and examine children and young people who have been sexually abused. The Springboard project, working with 60 families who have the most complex needs is producing very good outcomes. Incidents of domestic abuse reduced by 74% and the numbers of children missing from home by 86% in the first group of families involved with this project.

24. A robust approach to safe recruitment ensures that pre-employment checks are effectively undertaken. Staff files provide good evidence of these and are audited regularly. A good process ensures that all information is rigorously considered before an offer of employment is made. Planning for the introduction of the new vetting and barring scheme is well advanced. The local authority designated officer ensures that the appropriate arrangements are in place to consider allegations in respect of adults who pose a risk to children. Decision making is appropriate although it is recognised that greater clarity is required in the recording of meetings and decisions. A positive aspect of this work is the ongoing action to ensure that voluntary and community sector

organisations are aware of and fulfil their safeguarding responsibilities in respect of the adults they employ and use as volunteers.

The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people feel safe. Grade 2 (Good)

25. Good action is taken to ensure that children and young people in Blackpool feel safe. The inspection team was able to meet over 75 children and young people in a variety of settings. All confirmed that they feel safe in schools and in their communities and that they value the support offered by adults they trust. Inspectors were impressed by all the children and young people they met during fieldwork who presented as confident and motivated. This positive picture is confirmed by the survey undertaken as part of this inspection; 94% of looked after children and young people state that they feel safe or very safe. An important contribution to young people's well-being and safety has been made by young people themselves. For example the Young People's Council effectively campaigned to prevent a lap dancing club from opening in the town.

26. The voice of Blackpool's children is at the heart of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) where their concerns and priorities for safeguarding are reflected well. A good focus on the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people has built on effective partnership working between the council and the national organisation Stonewall. Pro-active work by the LGBT worker within schools means that more young people seek advice and are connected to support groups.

27. Good action is taken to combat bullying. The 2008-09 Tellus survey identified that 50.3% of children in Blackpool reported bullying during their last school year, which is lower than in similar areas. Local consultation highlighted the particular concerns of primary school children and these are being responded to well. The Bully Free Zone is appropriately commissioned to support anti-bullying work, through a telephone helpline, mediation and school and home visits.

The quality of provision Grade 3 (Adequate)

28. The quality of provision is adequate. The quality of assessment and care planning for the most vulnerable children and those in need of protection although satisfactory overall, is too inconsistent. This means that some children's needs are not fully addressed. At the same time, effective integrated working is having a good impact on outcomes for children and young people with a lesser degree of vulnerability. For example, permanent exclusions are very low and recent local data identify an improvement of 1% in secondary school absence in the last two years.

29. Thresholds for the completion of a common assessment are well understood by all agencies. The Common Assessment Framework is effectively used by all partners to make well-evidenced referrals to children's social care. Social care teams make generally consistent responses. Initial and core assessments are completed to a satisfactory standard. However, a small proportion lack sufficient detail or analysis and do not identify the individual needs of all children in a family. Assessments of children with disabilities and/or learning difficulties and those in contact with specialist domestic abuse provision are good. The timeliness of assessments, however, is significantly below similar areas and the national average. A recent analysis identified that many assessments were out of time by only one or two days and that this was due to a delay in finalising the recording. Team level action plans are now in place to tackle this. Incomplete assessments are robustly risk assessed and monitored by managers. This ensures that children are properly safeguarded.

30. Effective early intervention, in the context of high local levels of need and a transient population, results in increasingly high numbers of children correctly referred for further assessment or protection. Risk of significant harm is responded to promptly and effectively. Strategy discussions and child protection enquiries are conducted in line with statutory requirements by qualified social workers and police officers. These are thoroughly undertaken and lead to timely initial child protection conferences.

31. Case planning is satisfactory and is well supported by multi-agency partnership working. However, the quality of child protection plans is variable. Most are satisfactory, and some demonstrate imaginative and good child-centred practice. However, a small minority of plans show a lack of clarity about the changes required to safely reduce risks before discontinuing plans. Children subject to child protection plans are visited regularly and are seen alone by social workers. Child protection conferences and reviews are held in line with statutory guidance. Most are well attended by partner agencies. The capacity of the independent reviewing service is stretched due to increasing numbers becoming subject to plans. Systematic audits have identified that in a small number of cases challenge from protection conference chairs has not been sufficiently robust. This has led to recent improvements to strengthen consistency of chairing and quality assurance arrangements. Planning for children who require protection through a court order is satisfactory. Capacity in the council's legal team has recently doubled and cases are now being progressed in a timely way.

32. Case notes and reports are completed in a timely way but the quality of recording is variable. The quality of recording for children with additional needs, in specialist projects, and within Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferencing is good. Nevertheless, a small proportion of cases tracked by this inspection did not sufficiently provide evidence in social care files of the quality of the work that had been undertaken or include a clear analysis of risks. Overall the standard of recording, including the consideration of children's racial, cultural and religious needs does not do justice to the quality of the practice seen by

the inspection team. It is of concern that not all children's case files contain an up to date chronology of key events and decisions. This is due in part to problems with the council's management information systems and a resolution to this problem has recently been achieved. Management oversight to ensure that chronologies are routinely completed is yet to make sufficient impact and the current position is not fully compliant with statutory requirements and the council's own guidelines.

33. Strong local ambitions, through the 'Think Family' approach are translated into an increasing and creative range of early interventions with children's centres and schools at the centre of delivery. The use of the Common Assessment Framework as a passport to provision has steadily increased. Over 1,100 have now been completed and 94% of these currently result in multi-agency action. All secondary schools are effectively supported through an integrated multi-agency team which includes police officers and health mentors. Good examples of timely and holistic support were seen by inspectors. Young people report that they value this provision. Adult services are also well engaged; mental health practitioners are placed in the central parenting team. This ensures that emotional health needs are well supported and that access to specialist provision is good. Strong partnership working and communication are a feature across all health care services. For example, intoxicated young people attending Accident and Emergency are routinely referred to specialist drug provision. Sexual health services are comprehensive and well-targeted. Intensive action to address a high rate of teenage conceptions has resulted in fewer young women aged 16 or under becoming pregnant.

34. Multi-agency specialist projects successfully address local challenges. Springboard offers high quality support to families with complex and multiple needs and the Family Prescribing Pilot project enables drug misusing parents to access all services through children's centres. Agencies, including the police, are enabling young men increasingly to access sexual health services and have improved the rate of screening for Chlamydia by 4.5%.

35. Advocacy services for all children are underdeveloped as take up has been low, particularly in relation to children in need and subject to child protection plans. This has been recognised by the council and a thorough review has been undertaken. As a result a new provider has been commissioned in September 2009 and the scope of the service has been widened. At present children and young people involved with social care do not routinely receive information about access to advocacy and complaints.

Leadership and management

Grade 3 (Adequate)

36. Leadership and management of safeguarding services are adequate. The Children's Trust demonstrates a strong collective ambition and vision for locality working with children, within which safeguarding is rightly prioritised. A

commitment to support vulnerable children and young people is integrated well with equally strong ambitions to raise attainment. Officers from adult services, housing and neighbourhood services are well engaged in this agenda, along with private enterprise. Partnership with health organisations is strong. A senior manager for health has been a member of the children and young people's department management team for the last three years and this has had a demonstrable impact on the quality of joint planning. An additional positive feature is that the DCS is a member of the PCT Professional Executive Committee further enhancing the links between the two organisations. Imaginative solutions are devised to address local concerns. The Pit Stop go-kart project is a good example of the Trust responding well to parental concerns through a partnership between the public and private sectors. Clear structures and accountabilities are in place to ensure delivery against ten key priorities. The CYPP is based on a sound analysis of safeguarding performance alongside a very good understanding of local challenges. Priorities are clearly aligned to needs and they reflect children and young people's issues and views very well.

37. Joint commissioning is established and is particularly well supported by the high level of collaboration and integration between health organisations and the children and young people's department. A good range of early intervention and specialist provision has been commissioned. Good action has been taken to respond quickly to emerging priorities resulting in jointly funded provision. The new domestic abuse catalyst police and social work team is already showing impact in improved prioritisation of referrals which is in turn significantly reducing pressure on locality social work teams. Contract monitoring is regular, outcome focused and robust.

38. Performance management and evaluation arrangements are adequate overall. Many aspects are good. Performance against national indicators is regularly reported and scrutinised by the Children's Trust. Elected members receive regular information about safeguarding issues and concerns but the level of scrutiny is insufficiently challenging. Good progress is being made in ensuring the CYPP is increasingly outcome focused. However, performance management and quality assurance in some key areas, such as children's social care, and in respect of the performance that is reported to the Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board, are adequate.

39. Systematic audits of planning for children subject to child protection are embedded and have improved the quality and timeliness of plans. They have been recently extended to include contact, referral and assessment arrangements. However, a comprehensive management audit involving all levels of managers across all social care services is only very recently in place. The PCT undertakes regular audits of the quality of frontline health practice. In 2006, the Joint Area Review recommended that the Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board should regularly undertake multi-agency case audits. Action to implement this was slow. The board has taken very recent action to improve the range of data it receives. Some innovative service developments, such as

the Springboard project have been well evaluated and demonstrate effective impact. Early intervention is also proving effective for many children and families. However, although improved outcomes are recorded for individual children there is further scope to collate and aggregate impact to produce a systematic understanding of which of the many early interventions are most effective and why.

40. Policy and procedures are in place and up to date, including joint working arrangements, for example between maternity services and social care. Gaps such as the lack of procedures for the completion of serious case reviews have recently been addressed.

41. The Children's Trust oversees a continually developing workforce strategy which is led by an enthusiastic and energetic group of managers with specialist experience in children's services. The strategy is well focused on local need. The challenge of recruiting sufficient numbers of experienced social workers, given Blackpool's geographical location, is being effectively tackled. The Grow Your Own strategy has produced 10 new workers in the last three years and several more are currently undertaking training. An appropriate recruitment strategy is in place which includes attractive benefits. There are low numbers of vacancies in key posts such as health visitors and frontline social workers. A high proportion of social workers is recently qualified and is offered suitable training, support and managerial oversight.

42. A good approach to meeting learning and development needs results in a comprehensive range of single and multi-agency training provision across the area. A robust learning programme delivered through the Children's Trust supports integrated working. Uptake of child protection training in health organisations is also good. Multi-agency safeguarding training is well focused on key priorities, including increasing awareness of the risks of parents sleeping with small babies. Training is appropriately mapped against core competences and registration requirements. Staff seen by inspectors confirm that access to, and quality of, training are good and that have enhanced their confidence in recognising and responding effectively to safeguarding concerns. Most are able to take advantage of the wide range of opportunities available.

43. The quality of user engagement is adequate. Children and young people's views are not consistently recorded in assessments and care plans. However, the views of children with additional needs are taken into account well. Too few children and young people participate in child in need and child protection meetings. This limits the opportunity for them to influence safeguarding practice and is recognised as a key area for improvement. Children, young people and their families are not currently involved in the work of the Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board, although they are very effectively engaged with the Children's Trust. Children and young people are very active participants in the development of safeguarding priorities through extensive consultation and through the very effective shadow board, Blackpool's Light, who offer good challenge and scrutiny. Young people are also active commissioners of health

care provision through a good and empowering initiative by the PCT which has allocated £150,000 for young people to commission health projects. Parents of disabled children involved with the Aiming High initiative feel listened to and are confident that they have a key role in reshaping council provision. However, they are critical of lack of access to occupational and speech therapy and physiotherapy. This is accepted as an area for improvement by the council and the PCT, and plans are in place to address this.

44. Partnership working is adequate overall. The Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board has been independently chaired for the last three years. It fulfils its statutory duties and provides a satisfactory level of leadership. Its committed membership includes all relevant partners and takes an honest and self-critical approach. The capacity of the board has been recently strengthened through the appointment of dedicated business manager support. It has been recognised that the quality of recording of meetings does not fully reflect the quality of discussion and decision making. There are satisfactory links between the Children's Trust and the board, through a clear delineation of roles and overlapping membership. These have recently been strengthened in the light of forthcoming legislation. However, the relationship is not underpinned by a written protocol. The role of the Child Death Overview Group in respect of child deaths and its relationship to the Blackpool Safeguarding Children Board is clear. Data collection and administration have been strengthened but not all cases of children referred to the panel are discussed in a timely way.

45. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The need to challenge discrimination is rightly incorporated within the CYPP safeguarding priorities. The corporate equality and diversity strategy is well linked to the children's agenda. The celebration of difference is supported by an increasingly successful Diversity Fortnight within which children and young people are key partners. The work of the participation team is a strong example of joined up thinking which benefits young people from minority groups by raising their self-esteem and helps to keep them safe. A thriving group is driving a successful campaign to raise awareness of the issues faced by lesbian, gay and bisexual young people. BIFFY, the Blackpool Inter Faith Forum for Youth, is having positive impact, for example the development of a Mosque based support group for young women. Schools, children's and family centres and locality teams have good knowledge of their local communities and they work well to meet diverse needs. Work with the Polish community, through the engagement worker, is particularly effective in ensuring that children receive additional support when they need it, and often to access provision for education and learning. The travelling community receives good educational and welfare support. Children with English as an additional language are generally achieving higher than their peers. There is good tracking of all vulnerable groups, including those with special educational needs. Parents and carers of children with disabilities are confident that their children are treated with dignity and respect.

46. Safeguarding services provide good value for money. Good partnership working, joint commissioning and budgets aligned through the Children's Trust

ensure that resources are well linked to priorities and that key priorities are soundly translated into service delivery. New initiatives have been trialled and evaluated and where successful, mainstreamed. A prudent approach to forward financial planning is in train to ensure where possible that this approach can be maintained. Good use is made of the considerable short- term grant funding and where this is insufficient to fulfil ambitions, additional funding has been provided. If resources are needed quickly, this is provided. For example, the introduction of peripatetic social workers posts following the recent unannounced inspection. Service remodelling has improved provision. For example, the creative use of the school capital grant to develop the much valued overnight short breaks service. Good use has been made of the council's internal audit to provide support and advice in relation to pressure points or current challenges. Efficiency savings have been made; expenditure on agency staffing in social care, achieved through filling permanent posts, has reduced from £538,000 in 2005/06 to £185,000 in 2008/09. Service co-location and shared administrative resources have produced economies of scale. Contracts with providers include a clear focus on safeguarding alongside value for money.

The inspection outcomes: Services for looked after children

Overall effectiveness

Grade 2 (Good)

47. The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children and young people are good. The CYPP underpins a shared and ambitious multi-agency vision for looked after children which seeks to improve provision further. The Children's Trust provides effective leadership. Demonstrable improvements in provision have been secured. No looked after child has been permanently excluded from school for two and a half years. Alternative provision is available from day one of exclusion and fixed term exclusions are reducing. Placement contracting arrangements are robust and good action is being taken to increase provision to meet needs.

48. Good actions have been taken to tackle recommendations from the Joint Area Review in 2006. All children and young people up to the age of 18 years, including those subject to voluntary arrangements, have suitably experienced and qualified social workers overseeing their cases. Corporate parenting has been strengthened resulting in a shared responsibility across all agencies. Elected members demonstrate a strong commitment to corporate parenting and offer appropriate scrutiny and challenge in respect of performance, and they meet regularly with some looked after young people. However, they recognise that there is further scope to meet with foster children.

49. Partnership working at all levels and across all agencies is committed, creative and strong. This results in well tailored support packages. The quality and comprehensiveness of educational support are particularly robust. Committed and skilled foster carers and residential staff offer good nurturing day to day care which contributes well to positive outcomes. Staff working to enable children to live in permanent placements are experienced and knowledgeable. They take appropriate action to enable children to return to their birth families or find permanent homes. The situations of individual looked after children are well monitored. However, there is scope to improve further the ongoing analysis of the changing nature and increasing numbers of the looked after population to inform future needs and provision. Staff benefit from good training opportunities, such as that provided to school governors, designated senior persons and foster carers through the Virtual School. This creates a shared understanding on the importance of education.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 2 (Good)

50. The council and its partners have good capacity to improve services for looked after children. Performance against indicators for looked after children are generally better than in similar areas and the national average. The timeliness of adoption performance and short term placement stability are particularly good. Outcomes for the vast majority of looked after children are good. Inspectors were impressed by the high self-esteem and ambitions of children and young people they met during the inspection. Good systems ensure regular multi-agency monitoring of outcomes and detailed attention to early indications of emerging problems. There is strong emphasis on nurturing children's talents, particularly through sport and music.

51. Leadership at all levels is effective. There is a good track record of securing key improvements in the quality and costs of provision. Fostering and adoption services are judged as good by regulatory inspection. Residential provision, including the overnight short breaks service, is of a consistently high standard with effective leadership providing continuous challenge to improve further.

52. Areas for development such as the variable quality of recording are acknowledged by managers. Action has been taken to improve quality assurance and case audit and to add additional management capacity. Where there are gaps in services these are identified and tackled. There is evidence of some outstanding practice with dedicated and skilled staff at all levels working across services to provide a holistic approach to caring for looked after children. The virtual school led by an experienced and committed head teacher ensures that effective strategies support looked after children in school including those placed out of the local authority area.

Areas for improvement

53. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for looked after children and care leavers in Blackpool, the local authority and its partners should take the following action:

Within three months:

- Ensure that the quality of recording in looked after children's social care files reflects the quality of assessment and planning that has taken place.
- Further develop systematic monitoring of the looked after population to ensure that provision responds quickly to variations in need.
- Increase opportunities for elected members to engage with children in foster homes.

Outcomes for children and young people

54. Services to promote good health outcomes amongst children in care and care leavers are adequate. The numbers of health assessments completed within statutory timescales, at 78%, is below the national average but within the adequate range. The quality and comprehensiveness of completed health assessments seen during inspection are good, but not all children currently have a health care plan. Sound plans are in place to ensure that all outstanding assessments and plans will be completed by the end of November 2009. Timely and fully accurate information about children becoming looked after is not currently recorded on a comprehensive health database. Referral pathways for additional health checks ensure a timely response. The Virtual School headteacher directly refers children and young people for audiology and ophthalmic checks. A positive feature is the quality of access to good child-centred dental facilities based in a health supercentre. This service responds effectively to children's anxieties about treatment. Appropriate arrangements enable looked after children and young people to access the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). They are assessed within five weeks of referral. However, as yet they do not have priority access to the service. This is being addressed through the appointment of a designated CAMHS worker, a clinical psychologist, and a specific referral pathway.

55. The named nurse has established good links with those in foster care, children's homes and young people moving towards independence. Effective arrangements are in place for children and young people in external placements. Young people seen by inspectors confirm that they feel well supported and receive good health promotion advice. Health mentors in all secondary schools have a pivotal role in ensuring that looked after children receive good support from the healthy school team and through the social and educational aspects of learning programme.

56. Safeguarding arrangements for looked after children and young people are good. Multi-agency support, such as that provided by Springboard, is effective in improving parenting capacity and supporting children and young people on the edge of care. The first 60 families involved with this service had previously experienced 25 care episodes between them; following involvement with the project, this was reduced to three. Decision making in respect of children becoming looked after by parental agreement is at an appropriate level of seniority. It is currently being strengthened through the additional resource of a multi-agency panel. The safety of children in external placements is effectively monitored through robust contracting arrangements and regular statutory visits from social workers and from the headteacher of the Virtual School.

57. Performance on short term placement stability is good. Although long term stability is below the national average, detailed investigation of the moves experienced by each child has been undertaken; this showed that 34 of 49

moves produced increased stability and better outcomes for children. Foster carers receive good additional support including the effective use of the emotional well being workers and access to a 24-hour telephone advice. Residential staff work proactively with individual children to help them understand the importance of keeping themselves safe. The Missing from Care Policy is implemented well for Blackpool children who go missing from local children's homes and foster care. However, it is recognised that further work needs to be undertaken to secure the arrangements for monitoring children missing from care who are placed in Blackpool from other authorities.

58. Educational support and outcomes for all looked after children and care leavers, including those placed externally, is good. School and college attendance is also good; those in foster placements have better attendance rates than Blackpool school children overall. All looked after children and young people have good quality personal education plans. These are well monitored, with the children and young people's views, including the very youngest, sensitively evidenced. Schools receive strong support through the virtual school to ensure that personal education plans are used effectively to monitor progress.

59. Virtual School staff and designated senior persons are successful in enabling children and young people including those in pre-school education, to make good educational progress in relation to their starting point. Individual monitoring and target-setting are robust. The gap between looked after and all children is closing in relation to children achieving Level 5 in English and mathematics at Key Stage 3. Steady progress is being made at GCSE level, despite a high proportion of young people having special educational needs. According to the council's latest data, 79% of the young people taking examinations in 2009 obtained at least 5 A*-G grades, and 21% passed with grades of A*- C awarded. Children and young people report they have very good access to leisure and sport activities. They have priority access to extra curricular activities. Creative use of funding ensures there are no barriers to all children engaging in activities well tailored to their individual talents.

60. Opportunities for looked after children and care leavers to make a positive contribution are good. A strong children and young people's council effectively engages children and young people ensuring their views are listened to and acted upon. Older young people are willing to take on lead roles and represent the views of others. Some care leavers successfully took a lead role in organising and presenting the care leavers achievement ceremony. All partner agencies have children's participation champions who meet regularly to ensure the coordination of children's participation across services, including for looked after children. Consultation with looked after children and care leavers is well embedded. There are good examples of their contribution to service design and delivery, including training to participate in senior manager appointment panels.

61. Rates of final warnings and convictions for looked after children remain in line with similar areas and national averages. The children causing concern

Group makes robust and well targeted plans for young people well in advance of their release from secure accommodation. This ensures they are successfully reintegrated into the community and are given the best possible opportunities to prevent them from re-offending. The youth offending team effectively ensures that looked after young offenders placed in Blackpool by other local authorities are identified and receive a suitable level of support.

62. The impact of services to improve the economic well-being of care leavers is good. The vast majority have an up to date Pathway Plan which is regularly reviewed. Care leavers seen during the inspection were very positive about the support they receive from a stable and well-motivated group of staff. They receive good preventative health support, including in relation to their sexual health and to help them stop smoking. Support for healthy lifestyles is demonstrated in the 'Passport to Leisure'. There is good uptake of this and other opportunities to develop a healthy lifestyle. Care leavers have recently won the regional care leavers football tournament. They receive good advice to become increasingly able to manage their finances. The attendance, punctuality and attainment of care leavers in post-16 education are robustly monitored. All are allocated a learning mentor and receive good additional support as appropriate. Young people not in education are offered a range of alternatives to help them promptly re-engage. The proportion of care leavers in education, employment and training has improved to and is nearing the national average, despite Blackpool's comparatively high rate of unemployment. The council demonstrates strong commitment to act as a good corporate parent to young people leaving care. A pledge to formalise existing arrangements for work experience and employment includes good sign-up from local businesses and priority access to employment with the council. This reflects the community's shared commitment to raise aspirations. Six young people are being well supported at degree level. All care leavers are in affordable and permanent accommodation and receive persistent and well focused help to sustain their independence. An appropriate range of options including supported lodgings and supported tenancies is available.

The quality of provision

Grade 2 (Good)

63. Service responsiveness is good. Partners at all levels work well together to meet individual needs. Stability of staffing means that children and young people have few changes of social workers, residential workers or personal advisers. Care leavers continue with the same social worker when transferring to the care leaving team and this provides good continuity through transition. Staff adopt a proactive approach to managing difficult behaviour and as a consequence children and young people with the most difficulties develop increasingly good self-esteem and high aspirations. Young people seen during the inspection describe how they feel respected and valued even when they recognise that their behaviour has at times been challenging.

64. Good action has been taken to improve the advocacy service with the newly-commissioned service having robust plans in place to respond effectively

to children and young people who raise concerns about their care. All looked after children and young people told inspectors that they know how to access the advocacy service and make complaints. They also explained that they would, however, be more likely to turn to the trusted adults around them for support.

65. A good range of multi-agency universal and specialist initiatives including emotional well being workers attached to social care teams offers good support to those on the edge of care. Assessments routinely include the views of children, young people and their parents. Learning from a recently completed serious case review has been used effectively to ensure that formal risk assessments, including the possible risks posed to other young people, are completed at the point of placement. This is appropriately supported by training and managerial oversight. The council makes appropriate use of adoption, special guardianship orders and friends and family placements. Children are involved well in plans to return home following a successful period of being looked after. Ongoing support is provided to ensure that the transition remains positive.

66. Permanent placements are achieved in a timely way, including careful consideration of the needs of all children in large sibling groups. Children in these placements benefit from skilled direct work. The Children Causing Concern monitoring group is very effective in identifying emerging issues which pose a threat to stability. Timely and well focused additional support is put in place. The impact of this is regularly reviewed to ensure that actions are successful. This approach has enabled young people to remain in education and has reduced the risk of unplanned endings to placements.

67. Children's review meetings are well attended by appropriate agencies who contribute well. Children also routinely attend their reviews. Care plans are mostly implemented within agreed timescales. Recording on children's files is generally up to date. However, although recording is satisfactory overall, it is of variable quality. The standard of recording in children's homes and the short breaks services is good and child-centred. Recording for children subject to permanency planning or placed for adoption is also good. However, recording on case files reviewed during the inspection does not convey a thorough analysis of the relevant issues. Performance in relation to the timeliness of children's reviews is better than the national average. Independent reviewing officers check that actions are progressed, but the level of challenge offered to ensure that all work is of a high standard is variable. This has been recognised by senior managers and improvements have been made to recording formats and to the quality assurance arrangements for reviews of children's care.

Leadership and management

Grade 2 (Good)

68. Good leadership and determined ambition for looked after children are evident from the Children's Trust. Managers from all partner agencies

contribute well to the delivery of priorities. The corporate parenting group is effective in monitoring performance and managing key priorities in the CYPP. Good use is made of the council's internal audit function to improve the quality of corporate parenting. All partners are very well engaged, including foster carers and representatives from the wider council. A second corporate parenting group for elected members is well linked to the officers group and provides an appropriate level of challenge.

69. Performance management and quality assurance are adequate. Numbers of children becoming looked after have risen over the last two years. Many of the reasons for this, such as increasing numbers of younger children who have been neglected, are understood. However, the council and its partners accept that there is scope to develop a more systematic analysis of the increasing numbers and changing needs of the looked after population. The increase has been tracked well and good strategies are in place to manage its impact. Additional commissioning of local residential and foster care provision, along with enhanced therapeutic capacity, will enable some children in specialist placements who want to return to Blackpool to do so. The number of foster carers with exemptions has also increased to meet demand. The process for agreeing exemptions and providing added support to carers is robustly managed. Where performance against national indicators has fallen, even where it remains above national averages, such as a recent drop in the proportion of children's reviews held within required timescales, the reasons for this are appropriately investigated and understood. Quality assurance of frontline practice is adequate. The cases of those looked after children subject to care proceedings are audited regularly. However, a fully comprehensive case audit process has only recently been extended to include all looked after children.

70. Looked after children and young people are systematically engaged in service planning. There are some good examples of how their views have made a difference including their contribution to the development of the anti-bullying policy. Work is currently being undertaken to improve the process for review of care plans and young people are playing a key role in this. Children and young people seen by inspectors have reported that they are satisfied with the services they receive; they feel safe in their placements and enjoy good relationships with the adults who care for and work with them. This is confirmed by the survey undertaken for this inspection in which 91% of those responding consider that the care they receive is good or very good.

71. Partnership working is very well established at all levels. Looked after children benefit well from a good range of services jointly commissioned through the Children's Trust, to which they have priority access. For example, the Awaken service provides high quality therapeutic services for those who have been sexually abused. Proactive multi-agency working has led to the effective identification of children whose behaviour indicates that additional emotional support is required. Good partnership working between elected members and the strategic manager in carrying out the visits to children's

homes required by regulations has resulted in changes to day to day care or routine which enable children and young people to feel more settled.

72. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The shadow Children's Trust Board, Blackpool's Light, is inclusive of looked after children who have the opportunity to develop strategic leadership skills. Looked after children and young people are effectively engaged in the successful Diversity Fortnight. Needs arising from racial, cultural and religious backgrounds are generally identified well in care plans and these are sensitively met. A good short breaks service for disabled children and their families is highly valued by children and carers. It makes a good contribution to prevent family breakdown and support disabled children to make friends, stay safe and learn new skills.

73. The contribution of partners to achieving value for money is good. Placement commissioning is strong and well managed. Tendering and contracting processes are underpinned by a clear focus on both costs and quality which enables additional provision to be purchased at an advantageous price. Service specifications outline the required quality and consistent monitoring ensures that this is delivered. Blackpool has developed effective and efficient processes for managing the local placement market. Robust approaches to contracting have enabled placements to be purchased at lower costs without compromising on quality; £525,000 annual recurring savings have been achieved. Regular scrutiny of the services provided has led to the consolidation of transport costs within the overall placement fee. Blackpool has the lowest unit costs for the purchase of residential placements in the north west. Contract monitoring is systematic and effective and is used to challenge providers to make required improvements. Costs of services are benchmarked effectively.

74. Unintended high spending is monitored well and timely action is taken to bring expenditure under control. Rising numbers of looked after children, including those whose needs are best met in external placements, have created recent budget pressures. However, suitable management action has considerably reduced a projected overspend. Strong corporate and cross party political support has identified additional resources to make sure that children are able to remain in stable placements. Additional local capacity has been put in place to enable some children and young people to return to their local area, where this is in line with their wishes.

Record of main findings: Blackpool

Safeguarding services	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate
Capacity for improvement	Adequate
Outcomes for children and young people	
Children and young people are safe: effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe	Good
Children and young people feel safe: effectiveness of services in helping to ensure that children and young people feel safe	Good
Quality of provision	
Service responsiveness including complaints	Good
Assessment and direct work with children and families	Adequate
Case planning, review and recording	Adequate
Leadership and management	
Ambition and prioritisation	Good
Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development	Adequate
User engagement	Adequate
Partnerships	Adequate
Equality and diversity	Good
Value for money	Good

Services for looked after children	
Overall effectiveness	Good
Capacity for improvement	Good
Outcomes for looked after children and care leavers	
Being healthy	Adequate
Staying safe	Good
Enjoying and achieving	Good
Making a positive contribution	Good
Economic well-being	Good
Quality of provision	
Service responsiveness	Good
Assessment and direct work with children	Good
Case planning, review and recording	Adequate
Leadership and management	
Ambition and prioritisation	Good
Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development	Adequate
User engagement	Good
Partnerships	Good
Equality and diversity	Good
Value for money	Good