Empowerment Charity Lancashire

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Blackpool Autism Partnership Board Meeting

June 2026 Minutes

Meeting Details

Time: 13:30 to 15:30

Date: Monday, 8th June, 2026

Location: Bickerstaffe House, Talbot Road, Blackpool, FY1 3AH

Attending

Andrew Speight – Co-Chair and Coproduction Sessional Worker – Blackpool Council

Jack Smith - Area Manager – Autism Initiatives

Lindsay Barlow – Chief Executive Officer - Disability First

Graeme Dow – Assistant Director of Education – Blackpool Council

Gillian Mellor – Further Education Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Inclusion Manager – Blackpool & the Fylde College

Stuart Harper-Reynolds - Lead Nurse for Dementia and Learning Disabilities – Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Lisa Greenwood – Deputy Manager - Blackpool Advocacy Hub

Grace Dolan – Operational Manager – Solace - Empowerment Charity

Daniel Mckibbin – Project Officer – I Am Dylan – Empowerment Charity

Lauran Cook – Service Manager for Housing Options – Blackpool Council

Liz Russell – Interim Assistant Director for Adult Social Care – Blackpool Council

Councillor Neal Brookes - Deputy Leader of the Council (People) and Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care

Chris Upton – Representative from the Integrated Care Service Oversight Board and Modern Matron Specialist Autism Services - Lancashire & South Cumbria Foundation Trust

Amy Butler – Director of Strategic Partnerships – Empowerment Charity

Sarah Tommany – Senior Community Inclusion Coordinator – Empowerment Charity

Apologies

Mike Crowther – Co-Chair and Chief Executive Officer – Empowerment Charity

Andrew Heath - Associate Director of Nursing & Quality - Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Daniel Nicholson - Principal Social Worker & Head of Service - Adult Social Care - Blackpool Council

David Williams - Head of Additional Learning Support – Blackpool Sixth Form

Sarah Jackson - Consultant Nurse (Specialist Autism) - Lancashire & South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust

Rob Lee - Assistant Director -Autism Initiatives

Rachel Chadwick – Clinical Lead for the Forensic Autism Service – Lancashire and South Cumbria Foundation Trust

Hannah Hardman - Service Manager for Learning Disability and Autism – Blackpool Council

Toni Pagett - Assistant Head of School and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator

Claire Ainsworth – Probation Service

Colin Taylor – Carer representative

Lisa Roberts - Coastal Partnership Manager – Department for work and Pensions

Spencer Gibbons – Director – Independent Living

Service Spotlight: I Am Dylan

Presented by Daniel Mckibbin – I Am Dylan Project Officer

"I Am Dylan" is a peer support service created in memory of Dylan Holroyd, who died by suicide. It is part of the Empowerment Charity and sits within their Solace service.

The service supports people who are neurodivergent, whether they have a diagnosis or not. It focuses on mental health and recognises that issues like housing, work, and daily stress can all affect wellbeing.

The service is led by people with lived experience. This means the support comes from people who understand what others are going through firsthand.

The support is about meeting people where they are, being flexible and building trust over time. The service listens to feedback and adapts to improve.

There is no formal sign-up or referral process, which makes it easy for people to get involved. Information is available on the Empowerment Charity website.

Case examples included

- "Jill," who found peer support for her autism diagnosis journey.
- "Jack," who engaged via text before attending in-person due to anxiety.

The service offers different ways for people to connect, including:

- A relaxed weekly group with activities
- A walking group
- A boardgame group
- A monthly writing group
- Drop-in sessions in the community

The Adult Social Care service have asked that Daniel come speak to their teams to raise awareness of the service.

Minutes

We have made the decision to change the way we record the minutes. We will no longer be doing a video recording, instead we will record the meeting using written minutes. The reason for this is that we want to encourage more open conversation and participation.

In the past, we approved meeting minutes at the next board meeting, which delayed sharing information by three months. We will change this by writing the minutes immediately after each meeting and sending them out as soon as we are able to. This will enable us to actively share updates and encourage open, two-way communication with local residents. Once we have written the minutes, board members will have one week to raise any questions, concerns, or suggested changes before we distribute them.

Actions from the last meeting

Some of the actions will be discussed in more detail in dedicated sections in the meeting.

The actions that we discussed here were:

Action 2**:** The adult autism diagnostic pathway has now closed. This has caused confusion for some people who were waiting for an assessment.

We have contacted the former head of this service and learned that the adults' diagnostic pathway was not officially funded at Blackpool Teaching Hospitals and they had to make the decision to close it.

They wrote to all patients and GPs about this. The information that was sent out explained that they could still seek an assessment through the Right to Choose pathway by getting a referral from their GP. Patients have also been signposted to mental health and neurodiversity services.

The former head of this service doesn't know who has taken the Right to Choose pathway, as that's arranged between the patient and their GP.

We would need a way of communicating with all GPs and coordinating this information to find out if everyone has the support they need to do this. In addition, we asked whether there was any way of ensuring that people get the support they need after an assessment on the Right to Choose pathway. People were also interested to learn about people's experiences of accessing the Right to Choose pathway.

It was suggested that it would be a good piece of work for quality improvement and would be something where the impact could be measured. Our representative from the Integrated Care Service Oversight Board is going to take this to the Autism Best Practice Group and see if there is any possibility of someone doing this work.

We are also going to find out whether there is a local GP or Primary Care forum, and discuss whether it would be appropriate to take this to the Place Based Partnership.

We will follow up with this between now and September and provide an update at the next board meeting.

Action 3: The Board seeks assurance on addressing long waiting times for assessments for autistic people following this being reported in the Care Quality Commission (CQC) report. We had a couple of questions about the data that was shared in the last board meeting.

The update from Adult Social Care is as follows:

We asked whether the data we received was the initial contact with the person after the referral has been made for an assessment, or whether it is the completion of the assessment.

We heard that it is the completion of the assessment. The waiting times that were shared at the last board meeting were taken from the date that the person has been through the full assessment process.

We also asked about how this data compares to the data that the CQC report was based on. We wanted to know whether the data the CQC reported on was the initial contact for care assessments, or whether they were reporting on the completion of the assessments.

We learned that it was neither of these two things. The CQC inspectors reported this after talking to someone in the community. The Council did not share any data about waiting times for autistic people with the CQC inspectors.

The representative from Adult Social Care also shared additional information with us for assurance. They shared that in their current data the top ten people who have waited the longest include no autistic adults.

Action 5: Partners can share information about training offers with us by contacting us at blackpoolapb@empowermentcharity.org.uk.

The future of the Board

Empowerment Charity have funding and support from Blackpool Council to continue to coordinate the Autism Partnership Board.

We talked about the importance of making sure that the voice of people with lived experience is central to the work of the Board and the steps we have taken so far to ensure this.

Conversations have been started across the Fylde Coast to find out what opportunities there are already for people to have their say and be involved in the development of services.

There is a lot of enthusiasm from everyone who we've talked to so far. Everyone is keen to have collaborative and joined up working to support this.

There is already a lot of great work happening around this and providers are ensuring the voice of the people who use their service is central to their work. For example, internal forums, and creative ways of speaking with people and asking the right questions. They are keen to share emerging themes that highlight local priorities and also to discuss the work we are doing as a Board. This opens a channel for good quality two-way conversation.

We will make sure that the key points we have discussed today in this Board meeting are readily available for discussion and collaboration.

It was stressed that one of the best places we can really hear what people are thinking is through online communication, such as social media. We need to look at the possibility of exploring that and how it would be managed.

We reminded everyone that there is also a feedback form on the Empowerment website, for those who wish to share feedback in this format. We perhaps need to look at how we can get this, or an alternative to this out to people who may wish to use it.

We heard that there is a new provider in this area called Change, Grow, Live. They provide free and confidential treatment, support and information about drug and alcohol use, smoking, homelessness, justice and probation, and employment. They are working with a number of autistic people. We need to consider how we can work with them as a Partnership Board.

Update from the Working Group

The project to create video resources on autism has stalled due to significant GDPR challenges related to filming, data storage, and editing. A GDPR consultant will attend the next working group meeting, later in June, to offer advice on how the project can move forward. A full update will be shared at the September meeting.

The working group requested board support for sharing information about recruiting for participation.

The working group will put together a leaflet that will explain what they are asking of participants and share this with partners.

The working group also wanted assurance that the Board partners will share the videos within their service across all sectors. All agreed to this.

We also asked who will be responsible for the videos – storing, sharing and promoting – following the completion of the videos.

The working group will also discuss this.

Menopause

In the last board meeting an enquiry was made around what is being done in Blackpool to support autistic people going through the menopause. There is some work happening in Blackpool around this and a menopause working group is acting on research that was carried out locally.

We heard about the work that is happening and the research it was built on.

The research was done by working closely with public health and many different people, including women, employers, health staff, and families. They gathered views from a large number of people using different methods.

This work has led to:

- Local peer support groups for women going through menopause.
- A working group to take forward improvements.
- Working with the ICB over the last two years to make sure people experiencing menopause symptoms can have the coil fitted. Previously, this was only funded if the person said they needed it for contraception. These changes aim to stop women feeling they have to give incorrect reasons at appointments.

We discussed how evidence shows autistic people may experience menopause symptoms more strongly, and current support may not meet their needs.

People talked about how neurodivergent women rely on coping strategies that are affected when hormone levels drop. This can make symptoms harder to manage. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is very helpful for some women, but not suitable for everyone.

Some autistic people find it difficult to recognise or describe physical and emotional changes, which can make menopause harder to understand and manage.

We said that many autistic people find it hard to recognise or explain their menopause symptoms.

One suggestion was to create videos where women share their real-life experiences of what they would have wanted other people, employers and services to know about how they experienced menopause. Also, what they would have wanted to know themselves to support them during this.

It was noted that menopause can show in unexpected ways, such as changes in behaviour or physical symptoms like joint pain, which are often not recognised as menopause.

We heard that the menopause working group has a toolkit for employers. We need to check whether there is any reference to autistic people and their experience of menopause.

The menopause working group will look at this as it may be a gap that needs addressing.

A question was asked about whether the menopause working group had done any work with Blackpool Council adult autism team.

The menopause working group will speak with the adult autism team to see how they can work together.

It was said that better information is needed for carers and care providers so they have a good understanding of menopause symptoms. They need to notice changes in the people they support, especially those who may not be able to explain what they are experiencing. It is important for care providers to look at how symptoms may be connected and to recognise when several symptoms together could mean the person is going through menopause.

The menopause working group will work with adult social care to discuss how they can ensure carers and care providers have a good understanding of menopause symptoms.

We heard that each GP practice has a menopause-trained nurse who can support patients and prescribe treatment.

The menopause working group will find out who the menopause-trained nurse is at each surgery and invite them to attend the working group meetings.

It was mentioned that Autistica has a page about menopause and they have done a good webinar too.

We will add this webinar to our training information.

We learned that the menopause working group is an open group that anyone can attend. The menopause working group will share when their next meeting is and we will send it out to all partners of the Board.

In addition, the following points were noted:

- Most GPs have very little training in menopause, but training is improving.
- There are skilled menopause nurses in Blackpool, but there are not enough of them but nurses may need more training to support autistic women effectively.
- Many women still feel embarrassed and hide their symptoms at work.
- Employers need to normalise support and offer reasonable adjustments.
- A free support group called "Menopause Matters" runs every Tuesday (2–4pm) at Lancashire Women Blackpool Hub on Church Street.

Families navigating Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) education

A new project has been proposed to better understand the real-life experiences of parents and carers of autistic children, including those waiting for assessment, within education and SEND services.

The work will focus on answering three key questions:

- How families currently experience education, SEND services, and assessment processes.
- When and where families feel supported, and when they feel excluded or not listened to.
- What information, openness, and support parents need but are not currently receiving.

A more detailed discussion will take place at the September Board meeting. It was agreed that it is important to involve the right people in this conversation.

We made a list of the people we need to invite to the September meeting to have this conversation.

In addition, it was suggested that the Local Offer website could provide a way of people giving feedback. It was noted that this would need careful planning to manage potentially high numbers of responses and ensure there are enough resources to handle and respond to feedback effectively.

Lancashire and South Cumbria All-age Strategy for Autism and the Integrated Care Service Oversight Board

The Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB developed an autism strategy in 2022 with five key priorities, co-produced with people with lived experience.

The Board's task is to localise this strategy by identifying which of the five priorities are most important for Blackpool residents.

We need to open this for discussion across Blackpool. The work we are already doing is in line with some of the priorities in the strategy.

It was agreed that the priorities should be determined through ongoing conversations and consultation with Blackpool residents, using existing networks to gather feedback.

One person highlighted that it is important to follow a personalised strengths-based approach. At the same time, we acknowledged that in doing so, we need to avoid inadvertently setting expectations that are, or feel, unobtainable.

We need to open channels of communication across Blackpool that provides the opportunity for people to tell us which of the priorities they feel it is most important to be focussing on and why.

We also said that we would like to hear an update from the second workstream the working group was focussing on. It was around improving the diagnostic pathway and avoiding re-traumatisation. However, there was already similar work happening in the local area so the decision was made to discontinue this workstream in our working group.

Our co-chair will follow-up with their contact who is leading on this work and give an update at the next meeting.

"Tell your story once"

In past meetings, we discussed the possibility of having a way for autistic people to avoid needing to repeat their needs or details about themselves. In past meetings we looked at the possibility of having one tool for all. However, we acknowledged the difficulties in doing this. We made the decision that it would be better use of our time to seek assurance from services that they have a method or tool in place where people can do this, and that this tool is in control of the service user to ensure that information and what the user chooses to share is current. It would be good to share good-practice and learn from each other.

We need to decide whether we want to seek assurance that services have something in place to avoid people needing to repeat details about themselves. If we do, then we need to identify which services we want assurance from. We can also collate examples of good practice across Blackpool and share this.

Actions from this meeting:

Action 1: Monitoring the impact of the closure of the diagnostic pathway at Blackpool Teaching Hospitals

It was suggested that looking into this would be a good piece of work for quality improvement and would be something where the impact could be measured. Our representative from the Integrated Care Service Oversight Board is going to take this to the Autism Best Practice Group and see if there is any possibility of someone picking this up.

We are also going to find out whether there is a local GP or Primary Care forum, and discuss whether it would be appropriate to take this to the Place Based Partnership.

We will follow up with this between now and September and provide an update at the next board meeting.

Action 2: Link in with Change, Grow, Live

We heard that there is a new provider in this area called Change, Grow, Live. They provide free and confidential treatment, support and information about drug and alcohol use, smoking, homelessness, justice and probation, and employment. They are working with a number of autistic people. We need to consider how we can work with them as a Partnership Board.

Action 3: Seeking participation in the raising awareness and understanding video project

The task and finish group that are working on a video project to raise awareness and understanding of autism in society will put together a leaflet that will explain what they are asking of participants and share this with partners.

The group will also discuss who will be responsible for the videos – storing, sharing and promoting – following the completion of the project.

Action 4: Work to ensure that an understanding of and support for autistic people who are going through the menopause is imbedded in the current work that is happening around this in Blackpool

We heard that the menopause working group has a toolkit for employers. We need to check whether there is any reference to autistic people and their experience of menopause. The menopause working group will look at this as it may be a gap that needs addressing.

A question was asked about whether the menopause working group had done any work with Blackpool Council adult autism team. The menopause working group will speak with the adult autism team to see how they can work together.

It was said that better information is needed for carers and care providers so they have a good understanding of menopause symptoms. They need to notice changes in the people they support, especially those who may not be able to explain what they are experiencing. It is important for care providers to look at how symptoms may be connected and to recognise when several symptoms together could mean the person is going through menopause. The menopause working group will work with adult social care to discuss how they can ensure carers and care providers have a good understanding of menopause symptoms.

We heard that each GP practice has a menopause-trained nurse who can support patients and prescribe treatment. The menopause working group will find out who the menopause-trained nurse is at each surgery and invite them to attend the working group meetings.

We learned that the menopause working group is an open group that anyone can attend. The menopause working group will share when their next meeting is and we will send it out to all partners of the Board.

Action 5: Opening channels of two way conversation and increasing representation from people with lived experience at Board meetings

We will work with local services and providers to set up two-way channels of communication so that people can participate in the discussions that are happening at Board level and be the influence that drives Board priorities and change within Blackpool.

We will ask our partners to share ideas and find creative ways to ensure that people are involved in the discussions and have the opportunity to represent the voices of people in their community in Board meetings.

Action 6: Hear an update from the second work stream - improving the diagnostic pathway and limiting re-traumatisation

We want to hear an update from the second workstream the working group was focussing on. It was around improving the diagnostic pathway and avoiding re-traumatisation. However, there was already similar work happening in the local area so the decision was made to discontinue this workstream in our working group. Our co-chair will follow-up with their contact who is leading on this work and give an update at the next meeting.

Meeting close.

The next meeting will be on Monday, 28th September from 13:30 to 15:30.

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