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MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Wednesday 21 October 2020 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor M Patel (Chair), Councillor Conneely (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Gbajumo, Kansagra and Thakkar (all attendees were present in a remote capacity)

Also in attendance: Councillor McLennan (in remote attendance)

1. **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

RESOLVED: that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the duration of the meeting, on the grounds that the attendance of representatives from the council's Children in Care council, necessitated the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 2, Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, of the Act, namely: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.

2. **Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members**

Apologies for absence were received from Carolyn Downs (Chief Executive, Brent Council).

3. **Declarations of interests**

None.

4. **Deputations (if any)**

None received.

5. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 15 July 2020 be approved as an accurate record.

6. **Matters arising (if any)**

None.

7. **Update from Care In Action and Care Leavers In Action Representatives**

S (Care Leavers in Action) informed the Committee that Onder Beter (Head of Looked After Children and Permanency, Brent Council) had encouraged care leavers to take walks during the lockdown which they had been doing. S had become a care experienced assessor and was part of a project helping young migrants settle into the UK. S was also in the final year of university completing a dissertation about care leavers' experiences during COVID-19. S had won £2000

from the Agency Project with a podcast for care leavers. Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) was working with S regarding using Brent as a space for the podcast. The London Children in Care Council had invited S to be a part of their advocacy board and S was an active member of Care Leavers in Action, which had recently completed a financial guide. S was part of the Care Leavers in Action events team who were looking to create some online events for Care Leavers Week. S had also been part of the Brent Youth Offending Service Panel and was a trustee for a mental health charity. S advised that Brent had been supportive through the Black Lives Matter movement and held discussions about how care leavers felt. S highlighted the online engagement with Gail Tolley for their Care Leavers in Action session.

M (Care Leavers in Action) updated the Committee that he had been applying for apprenticeships, and was looking at opportunities in the film industry. M had been camping with another care leaver who was in the care leaver Whatsapp group, which he advised had helped through the pandemic. They had learnt how to set up a tent and bush craft. M was also part of the events team for Care Leavers in Action helping to plan events for Care Leavers Week, and advised that the financial guide Care Leavers in Action had created was very concise and eye catching. They had also fed back on the Care Leavers Charter.

Michelle Hassett (Quality Assurance and Learning Service Manager, Brent Council) gave an update on behalf of a member of Care in Action. The young person was enjoying having the Care in Action sessions back in the Civic Centre. The young person had contributed to one of the sessions with an idea that the group could work on. The young person celebrated their 18th birthday and was happy that the group had remembered.

L (Care in Action) attended the Care In Action Group sessions and enjoyed having them in person again. L had returned to school and started GCSEs and was working on an individual creative project, and had joined a local football team.

The Committee thanked the representatives for their updates, noting how brave speaking in a virtual meeting was. They could see the benefits of being able to start sessions in person again and noted how well they had all supported each other during the difficult time.

RESOLVED: that the updates by the representatives of Care in Action/Care Leavers in Action be noted.

8. Update on Support Provided to Care Leavers During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Onder Beter (Head of Looked After Children and Permanency, Brent Council) presented the report which provided an update, following on from the previous report in July 2020, about the support provided to Children in Care and Care Leavers during the period from July 2020 to October 2020. Particularly the report was requested due to the risk of loneliness as a result of further restrictions in place in London.

In considering the report, the following points were raised:

M informed the Committee that during lockdown there had been an increase in the amount of money received from the Council which had helped with food and other expenses. The increase would last until the end of March 2021. Ouder Beter advised in response to a query that Brent had increased the weekly subsistence allowance to match the increased universal credit rate introduced temporarily by Central Government. Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader, Brent Council) advised that her expectation was that when the settlement and spending review was done in December there would be flexibility and she would speak with the Director of Finance.

There were 43 young people in Further Education, including university, who had all been supported as required. The service was aware how many students were staying in London, how many students were staying in university accommodation, how many students were thinking about returning home, and all necessary support was being provided to ensure the young people felt safe wherever they were.

RESOLVED: to note the content of the report.

9. **Closure Report on Leaving Care Improvement Plan Post-Ofsted Focused Visit in November 2019**

This report provided a summary of the actions completed following the recommendations arising out of the Ofsted focused visit on arrangements for care leavers that took place between 13 and 14 November 2019.

RESOLVED: to note the content of the report and actions undertaken by the Children and Young People's Department.

10. **The Brent Pledge for Looked After Children and Brent Care Leavers' Charter - 2020 update**

This report provided information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee on the revised Pledge for Looked After Children and the revised Care Leaver's Charter. The pledge and charter detailed the services and support that children in care and care leavers could expect from Brent Council as their corporate parent. Both the pledge and charter were informed and developed with Care in Action and Care Leavers in Action.

S (Care Leavers in Action) summarised the refresh of the Care Leaver's Charter. The Committee heard that 12 care leavers provided feedback in face to face sessions and also through the Whatsapp group chat. Care Leavers in Action requested specific reference to support for careers and employment goals and specific reference to physical and mental health. The group also suggested design assets and colours for the document.

L (Care in Action) advised that the Care in Action group had provided feedback for the Brent Pledge for Looked After Children. The group had asked for carers to be the very first promise as they felt it was important for children to connect with their

carers. The group had also suggested less complicated wording to increase understanding and for real pictures instead of silhouettes on the posters.

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that the Committee were being asked to sign off the content of the documents. The Partnership Group had commented on them, CMT had agreed them and now they were coming to the Committee for endorsement. The documents would then go to the Council's design team for colour and illustration as per the feedback from CLIA and CIA, before being sent to the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Committee for sign off and produced with her signature.

The Committee were happy that the documents had been co-created with Care in Action and Care Leavers in Action and that both groups' feedback had been incorporated into the revised documents. As a result, the Committee RESOLVED:

- i) To endorse the revised Brent Pledge for Looked After Children and the revised Care Leavers' Charter.

11. Fostering Service Quarterly Report, Quarter 1 (July 2020-September 2020)

The purpose of this report was to provide information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee about the general management of the in-house fostering service and how it was achieving good outcomes for children for the period from July 2020 to September 2020.

Onder Beter (Head of Looked After Children and Permanency, Brent Council) drew the Committee's attention to section 4.3 of the report, in which Brent Council had seen a drop in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC). This was partly due to a number of UASC becoming care leavers post 18th birthday in Brent. As a result this had added to the number of care leavers previously UASCs in Brent, making up 31% of the total leaving care population. At the time of the meeting the Council only had comparable data from neighbouring Boroughs and it was confirmed that Brent had more over 18 UASCs than neighbouring Boroughs. In general, Brent supported 100 more care leavers the current year in comparison to the previous year as young people were now in receipt of support until the age of 25 as per legislative changes. Onder Beter advised the Committee that this would result in additional financial pressure.

The Committee heard that the business case for the Joint Fostering Project had been made to the DfE and officers were awaiting the outcome of the decision. There was an agreement in place between the other 2 Boroughs involved in the project, Hounslow and Ealing, which was subject to further agreement once more tangible aspects of the project were developed.

Regarding how foster carers had coped with the COVID-19 specific demands placed on them, such as managing contact, Onder Beter advised that they did face that challenge which was being faced across London as to how foster carers could support contact for families. West London Family Court had complimented Brent for their support around contact, noting that Brent had been more accommodating with contact. He added that he believed Brent were providing foster carers the right

amount of support with fortnightly Zoom support groups of around 20-30 foster carers.

In response to a query as to whether Brent had been encouraged to accept more children from other areas of the country, Nigel Chapman (Operational Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) clarified that they had been contacted by the Home Office asking whether they would consider taking on additional young people from Kent and Portsmouth. He advised that they had reluctantly declined for the moment but there was a wider conversation ongoing about the national transfer scheme with a strong message from London that other local authority areas should take a reasonable share of young people. In addition Brent had been unable to take additional young people as the Home Office had placed a large number of adults seeking asylum in a hotel in Brent and at least 12 had subsequently approached the Council stating they were under 18 and wanted to be considered as children which the Council were reviewing.

In response to a query about marketing activity in section 5.2 of the report, Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that the fostering service was advertised in the Brent Council Magazine and this would be clarified in the next report.

RESOLVED: to note the content of the report.

12. **Six-Monthly Adoption Report - Adopt London West (April-September 2020)**

The report provided a briefing to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee in relation to adoption performance data for the six month period from Adopt London West (ALW) and was presented by Debbie Gabriel.

The following key points were raised in relation to the report:

- ALW had approved 12 adopters in the reporting period with a total of 22 adopters since the service went live on 1 October 2019. 40% of those were from BAME communities and 36% were from LGBTQ+ communities.
- ALW were supporting 31 Brent families, with feedback from the families in section 9.1 of the report.
- In relation to Brent children, 2 children had been placed and 6 children had Adoption Orders.
- There was a growing range of support on offer to families. The WAF talks programme and webinar programme had received good feedback. There were ongoing support groups for adopters and special guardians, with educational psychology support. The online delivery of Foundations for Attachment, a 6-week virtual training programme, was due to begin.
- There was a range of support ALW was able to offer through COVID-19 funding, with adopters in one Borough receiving Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) 'Child to Parent' Violence training which had been well delivered through online training and made easy to attend.
- Specific services ALW purchased for special guardians were growing in momentum, such as Grandparents Plus. It was noted that it took time to build special guardians' confidence when many of them had not been through any preparation or training.

- The national recruitment campaign had begun in September 2020 with a lot of online activity, and the service was ready to respond to those additional enquiries they hoped to receive. There was a specific drive to support more BAME adopters which the service was supporting through the 'Meet the Adopter' events ran by the multi-faith based organisation "Home for Good".
- A recent meeting with Body and Soul, an arts based organisation in North West London, had resulted in the commissioning of programmes from them to do direct work with young people.
- An all staff training event delivered by Professor Beth Neil from University of East Anglia had helped to formulate provisional plans for the new birth family counselling service due from next April 2021. There was a "meet the market" event the following day to meet organisations interested in tendering for the service.
- The website continued to be developed with more user friendly content and was more visibly attractive. There was now content where interested families were guided through some self-help processes before they went to Adopt London West.

Debbie Gabriel informed the Committee that an increase nationally and in London had been seen in the number of enquiries for adoption, but noted that people interested in adoption were likely to spend a few years exploring before they were ready to make the progression to a formal assessment and there were no specific statistics to evidence this.

The Committee highlighted that Adopt London West received less allocation from the total government funding than some other Adopt London regions and queried why they received less, asking for reassurance that Adopt London West had maximised as much of the money as was possible. Debbie Gabriel advised that the settlement was based on the government funding formula for Councils. The funding allocated for Adopt London East and West was very similar but Adopt London North and South were bigger therefore allocated more. ALW had made the decision early on to pool as much money as possible to have a wider reach. Aside from annual subscriptions, which they encouraged adopters to make use of through social workers and weekly newsletters, funding was very time limited. Debbie Gabriel informed the Committee that some therapeutic support had continued until the end of the month and funding for the Grandparents Plus subscriptions services would last for a year. They had also made a commitment to give a grant allocation to the WAF Webinar Programme prior to receiving COVID-19 funding so they would continue to support that through the grant allocation. Nigel Chapman (Operational Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) added that they would include information on the adoption support fund and emergency funding at the next meeting and more information on the impact of adoption support, drawing out how Adopt London West had made a difference to children's and adopters lives.

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) offered further reassurance to the Committee that all 4 Directors of Children and Young People's Services from the 4 partnered Boroughs sat on the Adopt London West Board that provided robust challenge on the deployment of funds.

The Committee asked for further details in relation to section 11.2 of the report, regarding turnaround times for applications to the Adoption Support Fund for specialist therapeutic services. Debbie Gabriel informed the Committee that normally the administration process of the fund was much slower than they would like, with an average wait of 3 months for therapy to start from the time an application was submitted. Adopt London West were confident that the applications by the social workers were submitted promptly, and there was no waiting list for a social worker to conduct an assessment, but it was after the application was submitted and the process of ensuring funding was agreed that caused the lengthy wait. However, as a result of receiving COVID-19 funding Adopt London West were able to commission the services and families could self-refer and see a therapist within a week, so it was much more responsive and Adopt London West would like to see that remain in the future. The Government were not due to make any formal announcements but there was a likelihood it would continue, therefore devolving an element of the budget would be hugely beneficial. Adopt London West were lobbying for this.

Regarding the monthly panel activity, the Committee highlighted that there was less matching in Brent. Debbie Gabriel advised that activity would appear small as there was a small number of children across Adopt London West and a small number of agreed adoption plans. There were a few children in Brent in the process of being linked with families so the next update would be able to confirm that they were matched. Onder Beter (Head of Looked After Children and Permanency, Brent Council) added that there were around 5 children currently in the process of family finding and 6 adoptions had been achieved in the reporting period, in comparison to 3 for the entire year the previous year.

RESOLVED: to note the contents of the report.

13. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 6:32pm

COUNCILLOR MILI PATEL
Chair

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