



MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 11 October 2012 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Mashari (Chair), Cheese (Vice-Chair) Aden, Al-Ebadi, Kansagra, Mitchell Murray, Pavey, Mr A Frederick, Ms E Points, Dr Levison, Ms J Cooper, Mrs L Gouldbourne and Brent Youth Parliament representatives

Also present: Councillors Arnold

Apologies for absence were received from: Councillors Mrs H Imame

1. Declaration of personal and prejudicial interests

None declared.

2. Deputations (if any)

There were no deputations.

3. Minutes of the last meeting held on 19 July 2012

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a correct record subject to the following amendments: -

- Under declaration of personal and prejudicial interests, it should read that Councillor Cheese was a member of the committee for the Kilburn locality, not Chair of the committee.

4. Brent Youth Parliament update

Thivya Jeyashanker (Co-Chair of the Brent Youth Parliament (BYP)) advised that the 2 year term of office for the current BYP members was drawing to a close and elections would be held on 17 November 2012.

Amer Hajan (Youth Worker) informed the committee that he had been undertaking work to strengthen the relationship between the BYP and Brent's schools. Visits by BYP members to the schools had been received very well and as a result, there had been a greater number of nominations made for candidates for the forthcoming BYP elections. Work was also being carried out to strengthen the role of the BYP executive by creating greater clarity and focus around their duties. The committee was further advised that a new, state of the art, youth centre for young people aged 13 to 19 would be opening in Brent at the start of November 2012. There would be two opening events for the Roundwood Youth Centre and members were reminded that should they wish to attend the event on 1 November 2012, they needed to respond to their e-invites. A further opening event for young people would be held on 2 November 2012.

Thivya Jeyashanker provided a summary of some of the recent key activities undertaken by the BYP. At its meeting on 21 September 2012, representatives of the NHS and Safeguarding team attended in order to consult young people on various related issues including access to mental health and medical advice in schools. Bullying had been raised as an issue of particular significance and the links between this and mental health difficulties had been discussed. Councillor Van Kalwala had also attended this meeting to discuss the issue of gangs in Brent. A UK wide activity run by the UK youth Parliament, in which young people were asked to vote on the most important issues to them, would culminate in a debate in the House of Commons on 23 November 2012. The issue receiving the highest amount of votes would form the subject of a campaign run by the Youth Council. Thivya Jeyashanker concluded by reminding the committee that the last session of the current BYP would be held on 27 November and the attendance of councillors would be welcome.

The Chair thanked Amer Hajan for his hard work and several members of the committee expressed their thanks for the contribution of the BYP representatives at the Children and Young People O&S meetings. The Chair noted that the BYP would have its own office at the new Civic Centre.

RESOLVED – That the oral update on the work of the BYP be noted.

5. Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection Action Plan

Graham Genoni (Assistant Director Social Care Division) presented a report to the committee setting out the progress achieved by Brent Social Care against the action plan which had been developed following the recent Ofsted and Care Quality Commission Inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children (SLAC) provision in Brent. Brent had been awarded an adequate grading overall and a good grading for four service components. The adequate rating meant that there had been no major concerns about the safety of children in Brent, but that it had been felt that some additional aspects could have been improved. 50% of local authorities across the country had achieved an adequate rating, 25% had achieved inadequate and a further 25% had achieved a good or outstanding rating. The committee was advised that a new inspection regime was currently being designed for May 2013 and a new temporary inspection framework had been put in place for the interim period. Under this interim regime, those services which had been awarded inadequate and adequate ratings could be subject to a further inspection. The evolving inspection regime reflected a heightening of the expected service standards and it was recognised that it was becoming increasingly difficult to achieve ratings of adequate and above.

Graham Genoni explained that in preparation for this potential further inspection, the council was working hard to address the issues raised in the recent SLAC inspection and those challenges that would be faced by the service in the immediate future. At present the council was working on its own assessment of its SLAC services and would be writing a report to identify the existing strengths and weaknesses. Independent challenge and support was also being sought from colleagues in other local authorities. The council was in the process of developing its early help services. A council-wide project around early help services had just

progressed to the initiation stage and work was also being done to explore how the borough's children's centres could be developed as a resource for children of a wider age range. It was envisaged that Children's Centres could provide a medium through which various preventative services could be delivered to families to provide early-stage support, prior to social care intervention. It was hoped that such actions would help to reduce the number of Looked After Children (LAC) in Brent. Work was also being undertaken to reduce the number of irrelevant referrals being dealt with directly by Brent Social Care via the development of a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, which would ensure that the most appropriate service acted on each referral. The Council was also seeking to support social workers in accessing greater learning development opportunities and had also recently conducted a survey to better understand the views of Brent's social workers, particularly in relation to work pressures.

In the subsequent discussion, the committee raised several issues and queries. Councillor Pavey noted that children's centres were now forming a key focus in the development of early help services and queried why the children's centres had been subject to significant funding cuts in recent years. He further noted that the government had recently reduced early intervention grant funding by £436m and queried what impact this would have on the provision of early intervention services in Brent. Councillor Cheese sought further information in relation to early help services and sought assurances that children would not be allowed to stay in unsafe family surroundings. Councillor Cheese also advised that monitoring would be essential in ensuring that children whose families were in receipt of early help support services were not at risk of harm and queried whether the council had sufficient resources to enable effective monitoring. Councillor Al-Ebadi sought clarity regarding the responsibilities of the council to Looked After Children following their eighteenth birthday and raised a concern about the impact of the changes to the welfare system on vulnerable young people and, particularly, the removal of housing benefit from those aged under 25 years old. Councillor Mitchell Murray sought details of the percentage of social workers who were permanent members of staff against the percentage of locum staff. Councillor Kansagra queried whether social workers were able to gain any practical experience prior to graduating and sought further information regarding the regular inspection cycle and the possible outcomes that could be awarded to the council. The Chair noted that an independent audit of the council's decision making regarding Child Protection Plans had recently been conducted and sought details of the outcome. The Chair also raised a concern that the voices of LAC in Brent were not being adequately heard, noting that at present there was no LAC representation on the BYP. The Chair further requested that officers highlight the key differences between the previous and new Children and Young People Plans and explain how these differences addressed the issues raised by the Ofsted inspection.

In response to the queries raised by the committee, Graham Genoni advised that the SLAC inspections usually took place on a three year cycle. There were four possible outcomes; inadequate, adequate, good and outstanding. With the introduction of the new inspection regime it was expected that more and more authorities would be graded as inadequate.

Graham Genoni further explained that the Children's Centres had suffered following the loss of sure start funding and that budgets had been reduced in response to this loss of central funding; however, the council had worked hard to keep Brent's

Children's Centres open. The recent reductions to the early intervention grant were indicative of the current tensions between central and local government. Funding from the troubled families initiative would be used to offset the reduced early intervention funding but overall there would be less money for early intervention services than there had previously been. It was envisioned that early intervention services would help to reduce the number of LAC in Brent but children would only be supported to remain at home where it was safe and appropriate for them to do so. Due to the high costs associated with maintaining children in the care system, the council could afford to put a lot of support and monitoring in place for a family without exceeding the level resources that might otherwise have been expended. The Council maintained responsibility for LAC until the age of 18; however in some circumstances had an enduring responsibility of care up to the age of 21, or 24 if the individual was engaged in higher education. The support provided to those care leavers included social worker support, assistance with accommodation and general advice and guidance. Tony Hirsch (Head of Policy and Performance) advised that at the present there was limited information from the government regarding their plans to reduce housing benefit to those aged under 25; however, it was expected that there would be exemptions and it was possible that these may include care leavers.

Graham Genoni informed the committee that Brent no longer operated a course for Trainee Social Workers as it had been considered to be more cost effective to recruit qualified social workers. The Council was acutely aware that newly qualified social workers did not have the broad experience and skills base to draw upon and, in line with the professional framework for social workers, a probationary first year of employment, or 'assessed supported year in employment' (ASYE), was obligatory and ensured that the council put effective support in to place for these members of staff. Social workers were able to gain some experience prior to graduating which they obtained by working for local authorities with appropriate supervision. Often those social workers would apply to work for the local authority with which they had their placement. Up until recently, 85-90% of social workers in Brent had been permanent staff, this had recently started to decline and actions were being taken to address this issue. There was a greater number of agency staff concentrated in the LAC team than in the front-line Safeguarding team. The council was seeking to better understand the motivations behind social workers moving between different authorities. It was known that salary was not the only key issue and that workloads could also form a significant determining factor. Brent currently worked with other West London boroughs to promote the benefits of working for West London authorities and to provide a joint training programme for social workers.

Councillor Mitchell Murray advised that competition between the London boroughs to attract social workers was extremely counter-productive for London and that Brent should deliver a strong message to the other boroughs that a joined up approach to the recruitment of social workers should be pursued. Graham Genoni confirmed that he would relay this to colleagues in other authorities.

Turning to the queries raised by the Chair, Graham Genoni explained that the independent audit of the decisions taken to remove children from child protection plans had been conducted and the report had been very positive. It had found that Child Protection Conference decisions were robust and the thresholds had been properly applied. Further information would be forthcoming and would be provided

to the committee as an update. With regard to the lack of representation for LAC on the BYP, this would be looked into and addressed. There was a participation worker for LAC, and Care in Action Group (CiAG) meetings were held regularly to look at issues of importance to LAC. These meetings in turn fed into the corporate parenting group. A report could be brought to the Committee on the work of the CiAG.

Anna Janes (Head of Children and Families Policy and Performance) advised that there were some substantial differences between the previous and current Children and Young People plans. A key overriding difference was that the current plan was holistic in intent, focusing on how children could grow and develop in the context of issues affecting the whole family. The Plan referenced and linked in with several other plans and initiatives, including the early intervention and troubled families agendas and the Child Poverty Strategy. It was also applicable to partner agencies that worked with children and families and the council would be holding these agencies to account in terms of their contribution to the priorities set out in the Plan. The new Plan was more streamlined than its predecessor and set out 3 key priorities with 8 outcomes, compared to the 6 key priorities and 42 indicators of the previous plan.

With reference to paragraph 5.1 of the report Ms Points noted that the plans in place to address the high caseloads in Care Planning and Localities included closing some cases down and referring them to emerging services under the troubled families agenda. Ms Points voiced a concern that some of the worst safeguarding cases often had extensive histories of repeated involvement with various services and queried whether closing cases down in this manner would merely lead to worse incidents for these families in the future or would lead to cases becoming lost between services. Graham Genoni explained that Brent tracked when cases entered the system and there was a low level of cases repeatedly entering the social care system; this indicated that decisions taken to close cases appeared to be robust. In introducing a raft of early help services, the council was recognising that not every case required the type of support and intervention provided by a social worker and that in some instances, other professionals would be better suited to assist a family. The handing over of cases between services was always a risk area and the necessary procedures would be applied to ensure continuity between service areas.

The Chair requested a copy of the report of the independent auditors with regard to the council's Child Protection Plans.

RESOLVED: -

That the progress made against the Children and Young People Action plan be noted.

6. Child Poverty Strategy 2011 - 2021

Tony Hirsch (Head of Policy and Performance) introduced a report to the committee outlining Brent's Child Poverty Strategy 2011 – 2021 and detailing the reasons for its development. The Child Poverty Act 2010 required all local authorities to conduct a child poverty needs assessment for their areas and subsequently, to publish a Child Poverty Strategy. Brent's child poverty needs assessment had been

completed in August 2011. Brent currently ranked within the poorest performing 10 per cent against the Child Wellbeing Index (CWI), which measured child wellbeing across a range of different domains, including material wellbeing, education, health and housing. There were currently 34.4 per cent of children under the age of 16 living in poverty in Brent, with the highest rates of poverty being concentrated in the wards of Stonebridge, Harlesden, South Kilburn and parts of Welsh Harp, Barnhill and Alperton. Stonebridge ward contained two of the worst ranked areas in England for the CWI.

Tony Hirsch advised that Brent's Child Poverty Strategy applied to the entire council and its partners and had been developed through close collaboration with partner agencies and organisations. It was therefore, a high level strategy which set key priorities and objectives for all of Brent. It was anticipated that this strategy would be referenced in other strategies, such as the Children and Young People Plan, and it was in these documents that detailed actions, developed against the overall priorities of the Child Poverty Strategy, would be set out. The strategy set out 6 key priorities for Brent: reduce the poverty levels of children living low income households; support troubled families; reduce the NEET group; improve the financial capacity of parents; support Looked after children and children at the edge of care; and, improve the health and wellbeing of children with a focus on reducing obesity, tooth decay and poor mental health. The strategy was a long term document reflecting that the intergenerational factors influencing poverty were longstanding, cultural and vulnerable to the performance of the national economy. The strategy would be reviewed annually and would be monitored by Partners for Brent. The action plan and associated performance indicators would be monitored by the Executive of Partners for Brent, as well as the individual service areas and partners responsible for their operational delivery.

During members' discussion, the committee raised a number of issues. Councillor Mitchell Murray commented that the priorities set out in the strategy were very vague and did not adhere to the expected standards of being specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound (SMART). Councillor Mitchell Murray added that it was important not to unrealistically raise peoples hopes and further, queried what the report meant when it indicated that there were 'no financial implications'. Dr Levison further reiterated that it was important to ensure that the use of language was appropriate and not misleading in terms of the council's achievable objectives. Councillor Pavey expressed concern that the report did not adequately address how changes would be made but instead focussed on what changes were desired. Councillor Al-Ebadi advised that the action plan was not sufficient and that the strategy should be far more comprehensive. He further requested that a report be provided by officers regarding the implications of the new welfare reforms, and particularly their impact on child poverty in the borough.

In response to members' queries Tony Hirsch advised that he accepted that the Strategy needed to be developed further and the action plan needed to be more robust. The strategy had not been intended to set out a detailed action plan but rather be a high level guiding document, to which other strategies should make reference. This approach had been employed in recognition of the complexity of the issues contributing to child poverty, but perhaps a stronger emphasis should be placed on child poverty in all council decision making. In stating that there were 'no financial implications' to the report, it was meant that the report did not propose any additional costs for members to consider. The actions encompassed by the strategy

were not new initiatives, rather the strategy was an expression of the work that the council was already doing or planning to do to mitigate child poverty in Brent. The strategy would be revisited and a regular update report on the strategy could be submitted to the meeting to address what actions had been taken and how these contributed towards achieving the objectives set out in the strategy. A report was due to be submitted to the Executive on the impact of welfare reforms on Brent.

Ms Goudlbourn expressed concern that teachers had not been consulted with regard to the strategy and explained that the Brent Teachers' Panel represented all teachers, including head teachers, in Brent and it was therefore important that officers made use of this channel of consultation. Ms Cooper commented on the importance of a joined up and co-ordinated approach to decisions which impacted the lives of children, noting that it had not been uncommon for different departments and organisations to pursue dissimilar and counter-productive approaches to the same issues.

The Chair noted that the excitement that had accompanied the strategy when it had been initially proposed appeared to have died down and that it was evident that further work was needed on the strategy. As much of the detail was contained in other strategies, and particularly, the Children and Young People plan, this should be brought to the committee for further scrutiny. It would also be important for a lead officer to be responsible for the strategy to aid clear lines of accountability. Anna Janes (Head of Children and Families Policy and Performance) advised that the named person would be in the near future.

RESOLVED: -

- i. that the report on the Child Poverty Strategy be noted
- ii. that officers revisit the strategy and the action plan to address the concerns raised by the committee
- iii. that regular update reports on the Child Poverty Strategy be submitted to the committee.

7. Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme

The Chair drew members' attention to the work programme for the committee and welcomed any comments or suggestions. Councillor Pavey suggested that the cuts to the early intervention grant would benefit from further scrutiny.

The Chair advised that a new column had been added to the work programme so that the committee's recommendations could be recorded. This would aid the committee in reviewing the work it had undertaken throughout the year. The Chair further proposed that the committee attend a pre-meeting to discuss any issues and lines of questioning prior to the committee meeting.

RESOLVED: -

- i. that the work programme be amended to include: -
 - a. a report on the impact of the cuts to the early intervention grant
 - b. the Child Poverty Strategy update reports

- ii. that pre-meetings be held immediately prior to the meetings of the committee.

8. Date of next meeting

The committee noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on 11 December 2012.

9. Any other urgent business

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 9.30 pm

CLLR MASHARI
Chair