



**MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Thursday, 10 February 2011 at 7.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Gladbaum (Chair) and Councillors Aden, Harrison, Hector, Oladapo and HM Patel and Mrs Hawra Imame, Dr Levison, Ms J Cooper, Ms C Jolinon and Brent Youth Parliament representatives

Apologies for absences were received from: Mrs Shabna Abassi and Dr Kumar

1. Declaration of personal and prejudicial interests

None declared.

2. Minutes of the last meeting held on 9 December 2010

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the last meeting held on 9 December 2010 be agreed as an accurate record of the meeting.

3. Matters arising

My Place Project

The Chair asked for an update with regard to the My Place Project. In reply, Councillor Arnold (Lead Member for Children and Families) explained that the business case was about to be submitted and the outcome with regard to the funding bid would be decided soon after.

16-19 Agenda

Councillor Hector sought clarification with regard to funding avenues for those over 19 years of age. In reply, Councillor Arnold advised that the Young People's Learning Agency was responsible for funding of 16-19 year olds, whilst for those over 19 years the Skills Funding Agency was the relevant authority. Members noted that the council did have a responsibility for those over 19 years who were vulnerable or have learning disabilities. In addition, the council provided the Brent Adult and Community Education Service (BACES) for this age group and the council also worked in partnership with colleges. Councillor Arnold agreed to clarify this matter further with Councillor Hector directly.

Safety at the school gates task group follow up

Andrew Davies (Policy Officer, Strategy, Partnerships and Improvement) advised that efforts continued to be made to encourage parents to become involved in the task working group led by Nicole Rush (Community Safety Officer, Environment and Neighbourhood Services), looking at improving safety around schools.

Genny Renard (Interim Head of Community Safety Team, Strategy, Partnerships and Improvement) added that meetings with parents had been offered during the evenings, mornings and also during the weekend, however there had been little take up so far. London boroughs as a whole were experiencing similar problems and changes were being considered to simplify arrangements to increase parents' involvement. Genny Renard advised that Transport for London would continue to provide funding next year although it had been reduced by 40%.

Ms J Cooper reported that Oliver Goldsmith Primary School had been successful in involving parents to address road safety issues and children had given presentations to parents at the school on this matter. Councillor Arnold agreed to put forward Oliver Goldsmith Primary School's initiative as a good example to the Primary Headteachers Group.

4. Children's safeguarding services in Brent

Graham Genoni (Assistant Director – Children's Social Care, Children and Families) and Elzanne Hook (Head of Looked After Children Services, Children and Families) gave a presentation to Members on this item. Graham Genoni began by outlining the Children's Social Care structure, explaining that it was a comparatively large service area of approximately 450 staff and held a significant budget. One of the key aims was to increase the number of Brent Council foster carers which would also save the council money as it would reduce the need to rely on foster agencies who charged higher fees. Graham Genoni then provided information on the Brent Locality Service which worked with children in need, child protection, children in care and initiated care proceedings. Members heard that the worker allocated at the point of referral would remain with the child throughout their involvement with the service. The service now benefitted from being 100% permanently staffed in contrast to 30% two years ago and other social services units had experienced similar increases in permanent staff. The Children in Care unit consisted of two teams of young children in care and two teams of older children in care and cared for children unable to return to their parents and unaccompanied young people seeking asylum. Children were supported until they were 21 years of age or 24 if they were in full time education and the unit also provided an expert service for court proceedings. The unit was 90% staffed with council employed qualified social workers.

Graham Genoni explained that since the Baby P case in Haringey, social care activity nationally had risen considerably. Brent had experienced a 25% increase in referrals between 2008/09 and 2010/11 compared to 17.3% nationally and a 55% increase in children becoming subjects of child protection plans as of April 2010 compared to a 33% increase nationally. Of the referrals, the council had achieved 88% of initial assessments being completed on time as against a target of 75%, 87% of core assessments completed on time against a 80% target and a national average of 70%, 87% of child protection investigations progressed to conference

within timescale against a national average of 66% and a 17% re-referrals rate against a national average of 24%. The figures illustrated that the council was performing well, including in comparison with other London boroughs and that it had improved significantly in the last two years. In terms of child protection plans, there was a high rate of emotional abuse which was linked with domestic violence between partners. The child protection plan figures were similar to the council's statistical neighbours and although the number had peaked in August 2010 at 271, there were no signs that numbers were falling to any significant extent.

Elzanne Hook then provided Members with details of Looked After Children (LAC) information and advised that the number of LAC had increased to 376 compared to 350 in December 2009 and this was in line with the increase in referrals. The increase in legal proceedings meant rising costs which placed considerable pressure on the budget. Elzanne Hook advised that 9.2% of LAC children had three or more placements in two years against a national average of 10.9% and 11.9% for Brent's statistical neighbours. This meant that children in the council's care had more time to build an attachment with their carers. The committee noted that 100% of LAC reviews had been carried out in time, whilst 12% and 9% of children had been placed for adoption in 2008/09 and 2009/10 respectively against a national average of 8%. Elzanne Hook advised that in terms of translational adoptions, there was a shortage of prospective adopters in Brent to meet needs, however efforts would always be made to find adopters in within the child's birth or extended family in the first instance. Members heard that 44% of LAC were placed in the borough and 55% outside, whilst there had been an increase of children placed with in-house foster carers of 19% in December 2010 compared to December 2009 and a 21% increase in children placed with family and friends in the same years. Encouragingly, 85% of those aged 19 were in education, employment or training as compared to 61% in December 2009 and this was 20% higher than Brent's statistical neighbours, whilst 23 young people were currently at university.

With the approval of the Chair, Councillor S Choudhary asked officers why emotional abuse of children was high and was this mainly due to parental neglect.

During discussion by the committee, Dr Levison enquired whether streamlining was taking place in respect of working with outside agencies. Ms J Cooper asked whether the number of referrals of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) was in proportion to those who had no SEN. Mrs Hawra Imame enquired what factors were taken into consideration with regard to finding suitable adopters.

Councillor Hector reported of a foster carer who had informed her of late payments or payments never made due to the correct paperwork not being in place and she enquired whether this remained an issue. Councillor Oladapo enquired whether certain trends and patterns had been identified in respect of emotional abuse of children. In noting the rising number of child protection plans, Councillor Ashraf enquired if there was a specific strategy to address this.

The Chair sought details of the steps taken to achieve 100% permanent staff of qualified social workers in respect of the Brent Locality Service. With regard to the lack of in-house foster carers, the Chair commented that this issue was often raised by the Fostering Panel of which she was a member and she asked that councillors and officers promote the cause of recruiting more foster carers.

In reply to the issues raised, Graham Genoni advised that the effectiveness of working with other agencies and partners varied, with a strong partnership existing with the police and schools which was much more effective than before. Working with health partners was complicated by the structural changes currently taking place in the NHS and the lack of stability in the present situation made effective partnership working more difficult. Graham Genoni stated that the reasons why 100% permanent staff had been achieved in the Brent Locality Service could be attributed to the strength and effectiveness of the local social work model, with the idea of being based in the community they worked in and the reduced commuting times appealing to social workers. Other reasons included financial incentives in certain areas, better publicity of what the council did and its successes, sound support of newly qualified social workers and the current economic situation making permanent employment contracts more desirable. Graham Genoni added that the council had gained a good reputation in child protection arrangements and was informing other local authorities about these. Members heard that the high emotional abuse of children could be explained by the large increase in domestic violence between the child's parents or through parental neglect and efforts were being made to improve parenting skills. Abuse was also often linked to poverty, poor housing and substances misuse. Graham Genoni acknowledged that the Fostering Service had not always been as effective as it is now in addition the reliance on independent agencies had sometimes impacted upon timely payments to in-house foster carers. However, a detailed improvement programme had since been implemented and in-house foster carers now received better support and the number of such carers was increasing.

Graham Genoni advised that there was likely to be under reporting of referrals in respect of vulnerable children which would include children with SEN, however the Children with Disabilities Team was joining Children's Social Care which would facilitate a more joined-up and focused approach in addressing this. He advised that there was always an increase in child protection plans after a high profile case such as Baby P and like the rest of the UK, there were no signs of the number of plans falling. There was some debate over what the appropriate care threshold should be and consideration needed to be given as to what the right balance was, whilst cost pressures also needed to be taken into consideration.

Elzanne Hook advised that faith, mother tongue, ethnicity and a whole range of other factors were taken into consideration along with a comprehensive profiling of the child when identifying appropriate adopters.

5. Children in care council - Care in Action

Anne Edwards (Improving Outcomes Manager, Children and Families) introduced the young people in council care to the committee and explained that the presentation would describe the work undertaken by Brent Care in Action (BCIA).

The young people then took it in turns to give a presentation to Members. The committee heard that BCIA consisted of a group of young people in care and care leavers who met twice a month to discuss ways of improving the care system. BCIA was used as a vehicle to help achieve priorities and outcomes in the Brent Children and Young People's Plan 2009-2011, these being:-

- Children and young people will remain safe and protected
- Excellent education and training is available for all children and young people
- Access to the very best opportunities in and out of school

BCIA aimed to encourage young people to take an active part in shaping the services they use to improve outcomes for those in care, provide a forum for them to express their views and influence services and support they receive and develop a partnership with councillors, directors and service managers to work together in ensuring a better experience of being in care. Members' attention was drawn to the number of BCIA objectives as set out in the presentation and it was noted that there were 14 young people, eight male and six female, involved in BCIA, with an age range of 12 to 20 years. The committee then heard details of BCIA's representation at local and regional level, the various consultations it was involved in, learning and development events and building partnerships. As well as the main BCIA, there was also a junior BCIA for children aged 7 to 11 years and a Brent Afghani Youth group, a group of Afghani males aged 15 to 17 years in care who met monthly. The presentation was concluded by outlining BCIA's intended areas for development, which included the development of care leavers' forum/group, training for young people and sustaining membership.

The Chair welcomed representatives of BCIA to the meeting, stating that they had been invited to address the committee to give an insight into the activities being undertaken by looked after children in council care, of which there were 376 in Brent. She reminded Members that all councillors had a role as corporate parents with responsibilities for looked after children and a key council objective was to improve the service in this area.

6. Impact of domestic violence on children and young people

Genny Renard gave a presentation to the committee on domestic violence and childhood. She began by stating that a multi agency forum worked to identify children who were at most risk which was higher where there was domestic violence and this was more prevalent in lower income households. Members heard that domestic violence could take many forms or criminal types identified by the police and could range from property damage and common assault to murder. In the three most recent domestic violence cases of murder in Brent, none of those involved had been known to the council or its partners. Domestic violence could also be of an emotional nature rather than physical and could include for example controlling behaviour, whilst familial violence was also increasing, in particular involving sons attacking mothers. There was no substantive piece of work on the number of children estimated to have witnessed domestic violence in the UK, but the best estimate was around 1.2 million children a year. However, Royal College of Psychiatry research found that children who have witnessed violence were more likely to be either abusers or victims themselves during their adult life and often females ended up with a partner who abused them. Whilst most children would make every effort to ensure they did not make the same mistakes as their parents, they often grew up feeling anxious and depressed and found it more difficult to get on with other people. Other research also suggested that primary school age children may have trouble with school work and in one study, 40% had lower reading abilities than children from non-violent homes. Genny Renard advised that there was a common link between domestic violence and child abuse and Home

Office statistics revealed that amongst victims of child abuse, 40% reported domestic violence and 70% of abusive partners were also abusive fathers. Children who witnessed domestic violence also added 12% extra costs to the NHS for physical treatment and 40% to the mental health budget.

Genny Renard then informed Members of the work of the Brent Community Safety Partnership Unit, which included training teachers and providing learning packs, working closely with Children and Families, GPs and providing a 24 hour helpline to the police and other professionals. The unit also trained the Crown Prosecution Service and magistrates and domestic violence courts had a 40% higher conviction rate than standard courts as victims were more willing to go through the entire legal process. A Violence Against Women strategy was also being developed.

The Chair thanked Genny Renard for the presentation and asked that an update on this issue be provided at a future meeting.

7. School places in Brent - verbal update

Graham Genoni reported that there had been some improvement in respect of school places in primary schools and there were 411 children without a place at school against 460 vacancies. An additional 135 places would be provided by five primary schools although 90 of these would be on a temporary basis. There were a handful of children not placed for each secondary school year, however it was anticipated that they would be placed within four weeks and five schools currently had vacancies. Graham Genoni advised that a common reason for children not being placed was because they had just moved to Brent.

The Chair commented that some planning applications due to be determined shortly would increase the capacity of some schools and she requested that school places remain as a permanent item on the agenda for this committee.

8. Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme

The following requests were made to be added to the work programme within the current cycle:-

- Brent Music Service working with schools
- Welsh Harp Environmental Educational Centre working with schools
- The work of Family Support Services
- Steps being taken to help children who were underachieving

In respect of the last request above, Andrew Davies advised that an analysis of school exam results was reported to the committee on an annual basis.

9. Date of next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting was scheduled for Tuesday, 29 March 2011 at 7.00 pm.

10. **Any other urgent business**

Brent Youth Parliament

The committee received an update from members of the Brent Youth Parliament. The Brent Youth Parliament had held elections on 29 January attended by 60 members and also by councillors. A new Chair had been elected for a two year term and five Executive portfolios had been also been created. A theme for a new campaign was also under consideration and the top ten themes would be identified on 11 February and the final decision would be made at the next Brent Youth Parliament meeting. Members noted that Brent Youth Parliament had attended New Years Day parade where significant funds had been raised. Brent Youth Parliament membership was very diverse and it would continue to try and protect services for young people and highlight their needs and councillors and officers were encouraged to consult with them and young people to help achieve this.

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm

H GLADBAUM
Chair