



MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Thursday 27 July 2017 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor S Choudhary, Conneely, Hossain, Thomas and Warren

Apologies were received from: Councillor M Patel (Chair), Councillor S Chouhdary was present in her place as substitute.

1. **Election of Chair**

Tom Welsh (Governance Officer, Brent Council) opened the meeting to explain that Councillor M Patel had given her apologies and that the Committee had no appointed Vice-Chair. He outlined that, in this instance, Members would need to formally elect a Chair for the duration of the meeting.

It was **RESOLVED** by Members that Councillor Thomas would Chair the meeting.

Before the substantive business of the meeting began, Councillor Thomas mentioned that Janet Lewis (the Council's Head of Virtual School) was due to retire in the near future. The Committee thanked her for all of her hard work at the London Borough of Brent.

2. **Declarations of Interests**

There were no interests declared by Members.

3. **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 19 April 2017 be approved as an accurate record.

4. **Matters Arising**

Janet Lewis provided further information on the strategies in place to address attainment, as requested by the Committee on page 3 of the previous minutes. She firstly explained how Lexia was a digital program designed to improve both the literacy skills and reading age of students in academic years 5, 6 and 7. Members heard that, as it was web-enabled, it could be accessed at school or at home and that teachers and carers could be given log-in details in order to assess how students were progressing. She noted that around 50 schools both inside and outside the borough had used the program and that very positive feedback and favourable outcomes had been reported to the Council.

She went on to provide an update on the 'Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children' (PALAC) pilot project. She outlined that this was a knowledge exchange programme which aimed to improve the educational attainment of Looked After Children (LAC) in the year 11 academic year. Members heard that the programme was based on teachers and members of staff giving specific one-to-one

feedback and mentoring to LAC in this age range. She noted that 5 schools in the borough had been part of the programme and that it had also drawn encouraging feedback from both teachers and students. She added that the Institute of Education were due to complete follow-up work to assess to results of the pilot, and that the effectiveness would be analysed after students received their results in August.

Janet Lewis also spoke on the work to assess absenteeism data which related to LAC, as mentioned on page 4 of the previous minutes. She outlined that a monthly report had been agreed to be drawn up and sent to all Social Care Managers which flagged up any children with attendance levels below 90%, in order to identify and address attendance issues quickly.

Gail Tolley (the Council's Strategic Director, Children and Young People) added an update on the Children and Social Work Bill, as mentioned on page 6 of the previous minutes. She informed Members that the Bill had recently received Royal Assent and had become law shortly before Parliament was dissolved for the June 2017 General Election.

Members welcomed the updates from Officers and it was **RESOLVED** that the Council's Virtual School team would continue to provide regular updates to the Corporate Parenting Committee on the strategies in place to improve LAC attainment levels (such as Lexia and PALAC).

5. **Deputations**

There were no deputations.

6. **Children in Care - Questions and Answers**

The Chair welcomed LM, CM and JB from Care in Action (CIA) to the meeting and invited them to provide their respective updates.

LM began and said that they had enjoyed attending two Corporate Parenting meetings with officers recently. Members heard that the first meeting had focused on youth offending and explored the possible background reasons for why young people in care commit crimes. LM said that they had found this very interesting, and that they had observed that petty crime was often the most common offence.

The second meeting LM attended focused on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) for LAC. LM explained how the questionnaire worked and outlined that they had taken an active role in the meeting by questioning some of the procedures of the SDQ. Members heard that this included: why in practice only one person tended to complete the questionnaire as this would not capture enough information about the child; whether social workers were qualified to score the results of the questionnaire; why an online version of the questionnaire had not been used; and why Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) support ended at age 18. LM was pleased that officers at the meeting had said that they would address these concerns. LM added that they felt happy to have been involved in the meetings and that their suggestions had been listened to as they wanted to help to make a difference to other young people in care.

CM spoke about how they had been happy to be asked to help to develop a 'Readiness for Practice' module for trainee social workers at Royal Holloway, University of London. They said that they had enjoyed giving suggestions to the tutor and that they felt glad that they had been able to contribute to potentially improving the lives of other LAC in the future. The Committee heard that CM had also been part of the start of the preparations for the 'Voice in a Million' concert at the SSE Wembley Arena which gave a voice to children in care all across the UK. CM was excited that monthly rehearsals for the choir performance at next year's event would begin in October 2017. CM also explained that they had been to a recent CIA meeting for LAC and Care Leavers attended by the Philosophy Foundation. CM said that they had been intrigued by discussions with fellow young people about their different beliefs on issues such as religion, god and hope.

JB spoke about a recent tour of St John's College at the University of Cambridge, which had been organised by the Virtual School. They told the Committee about how they had learnt about the University's history and JB said they had benefited from the visit because they no longer viewed University solely as hard work, and that it could also be an opportunity of fun for students. They also spoke about the recent 'Summer Fun Day' for CIA young people and their Foster Carers at the Poplar Grove Centre. The Committee heard that there were lots of activities for young people to enjoy, such as: an exotic insects display; being able to design their own t-shirts; learning to DJ; nail painting; egg and spoon races; and kickboxing. The CIA representatives said that they had all enjoyed the fun day, and they were happy that Foster Carers were also welcome to attend.

Members of the Committee thanked the representatives for their updates and collectively agreed that their presentations had been excellent. A Member of the Committee referenced the event which looked at youth offending and asked what conclusions could be drawn from this. LM responded that it appeared that moving placements had an adverse impact on a number of young people in care and that this could lead to an increased risk of crime. It was noted that petty crime appeared to be a particularly prevalent area for youth offences.

Questions also arose on what the representatives felt the effects were on LAC when their assigned social worker had changed. Members heard that this was felt to be very serious as constant change made it more difficult for the young person to form a proper relationship or sufficient level of trust with their social worker. Wider discussions followed on the cause of social worker changes and what the present workforce situation in this area looked like in Brent. Gail Tolley stated that changes had been made to address staff retention problems and that 66% of the social work staff at the Council were now permanent, as opposed to a similar percentage being non-permanent three years ago. She noted that there was a national shortage of social workers but that Brent had strived to make itself more attractive as a place to work through reducing social work caseloads and implementing more permanent management support arrangements. Nigel Chapman (the Council's Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes) added that Brent currently had a lot of newly qualified social work staff which had also helped to improve retention levels. It was agreed that a report which looked at the social care workforce in Brent in more detail be presented at the next meeting, as it related to Children in Care and Care Leavers.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- (i) The updates from the CIA representatives be noted; and
- (ii) A report which provided up-to-date data on the current social care workforce in Brent and more information on what action the Council had taken to solve any issues with staff recruitment and retention in support of both LAC and care leavers, would be presented to the next meeting of the Committee.

7. **Presentation from the Lead Nurse for Looked After Children, London North West Healthcare NHS Trust**

As Nickola Rickard (Lead Nurse for Looked After Children, London North West Healthcare NHS Trust) had given her apologies for the meeting it was **RESOLVED** the item would be deferred to the next meeting of the Committee and that the presentation would be combined with the LAC Annual Health Report.

8. **Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report 1st April - 30th June 2017**

Kelli Eboji (the Council's Principal Officer, LAC and Permanency) introduced the report which provided Members with information on the recent outcomes and overall management of the Council's Fostering Service for the first quarter of the new reporting year (Q1).

She ran through the key details within the report, and began by highlighting that in Q1 the numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children who had approached Brent for support had stabilised and levelled-off. She explained that the Fostering Service had carried out 7 recruitment focused activities in order to raise awareness of fostering and to encourage more people to come forward as potential foster carers. Members heard that this recruitment drive had mainly taken place through 'Fostering Fortnight' and that the service had organised information stalls in Wembley and on Kilburn High Road. She noted that this had drawn 59 enquiries from members of the public and had resulted in 12 formal assessments as of 30 June 2017. She concluded by mentioning that the Fostering Panel had recommended five new fostering households for approval and that it was encouraging that this meant that the target had been met for the quarter.

Questions arose on the service values for 2017-2018 (as set out in section 3 of the report) and it was queried why the values were different on this occasion from the previous quarterly monitoring report. Nigel Chapman stated that a more coherent cross-directorate plan had been developed for the new reporting year which drew together outcome targets across all of the different service areas which affected LAC. Gail Tolley added that a senior management restructure within the Children and Young People's Department at the Council had reframed the department for future success and this had been reflected through an updated service plan. A Member of the Committee commented that the service values for 2017-2018 were an improvement, but that it would be important that progress on the values was monitored closely.

On training and support for foster carers, a Member questioned why there had been a drop in training spaces offered since the last reporting period. Nigel Chapman

posited that this was likely to be because the courses during Q1 were more specialist in content. He explained that more general training courses, such as First Aid Training, tended to draw a higher degree of interest from a wider range of foster carers. He confirmed that the drop in numbers had not been caused from training being cut back and highlighted that the number of sessions offered between quarters had remained the same.

A specific question was asked on how long the Fostering Development Co-Ordinator role had been vacant. Kelli Eboji outlined that the role had been vacant since the end of June 2017 but that the job description had been cleared and that the advertising process for recruitment to the post would begin imminently.

A Member of the Committee questioned why 5 annual reviews for foster carers had been cancelled (as set out under paragraph 9.1 of the report). Kelli Eboji said it was often the case that more information had been needed prior to be able to inform the review, but confirmed that the cancelled annual reviews had now taken place.

A representative from CIA questioned what the recruitment target for fostering placements would be for 2017-2018. Kelli Eboji stated that the target was for 20 fostering placements within the reporting year and re-iterated that five households had been recruited already.

It was **RESOLVED** that the content of the report be noted.

9. **Annual Corporate Parenting Report 2016-2017**

Nigel Chapman introduced the report which provided Members with an annual report on the outcomes for LAC, in accordance with the Council's statutory duties. He ran through each section of the report in-turn, highlighted some of the key aspects and offered an explanation to the Members on the statistical trends.

Members heard about: the specific role of the Corporate Parenting Committee; the Committee's work in providing scrutiny and challenge over the past reporting year; the work of CIA; the statistical profile of LAC in Brent, and how the overall number had fallen even further below the national average; placements having been slightly above the national average for the proportion of children placed more than 20 miles away from the borough; the number of care proceedings having risen within the last reporting year; Brent's record on different health outcomes for LAC; the specific work being undertaken to address absenteeism; the role of the Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) panel; education data from the Brent Virtual School; what the Council currently provided in terms of support to Care Leavers; and what areas the LAC and Permanency Service had prioritised for 2017-2018.

Members received the report positively and Councillor Warren specifically praised the use of quotes and case studies within the report content as he felt that this had made it more enjoyable to read. Questions arose on what the formal mechanisms were for reporting the detail within the annual report to both the Government and the Committee. Nigel Chapman specified that the Council had to submit a statistical data return for the borough to the Government by 30 June each year and that this was how national data was typically captured. Gail Tolley also explained that the basic dataset for the borough across LAC and permanency was reported to the Committee through the quarterly monitoring reports. She confirmed that the Council

had met its statutory obligations for 2015-2016 as the Council had published all of the required information through these monitoring reports, but that it had not been drawn together into one comprehensive report format. She outlined that, to avoid any risk of confusion in future, the Council would stick to the format used for 2016-2017 which involved the continued presentation of quarterly monitoring reports followed by an overarching annual report which pulled the key information together.

Members raised questions on the placements of LAC outside of Brent and why Brent was slightly above the national average on this. Nigel Chapman explained that some LAC were moved out of the borough for their own welfare, such as the risk of drug or gang related exploitation. He said other moves sometimes took place in order for the child to be able to access a certain specialist service provision that Brent did not have the resources for. In response to an additional question from a Member about future reports containing direct data comparisons with neighbouring boroughs, he stated that there was a difference between geographically neighbouring boroughs and statistical neighbour boroughs. It was made clear that boroughs such as Harrow and Barnet could not be compared to Brent as they were not statistical neighbours. Members heard that Brent's statistical neighbours were detailed in the footnote of page 30 of the report.

A Member commented on problem of missing or absent LAC and what the Council had been doing to address this issue. Janet Lewis agreed that this was not acceptable but re-assured Members that it was a small minority of LAC and that the Council still attached a high priority to tackling this. She emphasised the work of the Vulnerable Adolescents' Panel which aimed to ensure that the needs of vulnerable adolescents were understood at a strategic level in order to develop an action plan and improve services further.

Questioning moved to care and placement orders and a Member of the Committee questioned how many of these tended to be challenged in court. Kelli Eboji specified that the majority were contested and Gail Tolley added that this was consistent with what tended to happen nationally.

Specific questions were asked on the proportion of children in care who had a form of autism and how this had been addressed. Nigel Chapman outlined that a significant proportion of LAC had Autism Spectrum Disorder and that specialist autism awareness training had been recently been introduced for staff across the Council and different partner agencies, as directed by the Vulnerable Adolescents' Panel.

The discussion moved to provisions for care leavers and what the Council had been doing to improve its support for this group. In response to a specific question from a Member of the Committee, Officers said that proposals put forward by the Children's Society on exempting Care Leavers from having to pay Council tax until age 25 were being considered. Responding to questions on housing arrangements, Nigel Chapman said that a lot of young people did not take up the option of 'staying put' but that the Council and carers had to assess what the best option would be. He explained that 75% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were in suitable accommodation and that the Council would deem custody, bed and breakfast and 'whereabouts unknown' as examples of unsuitable accommodation. He also spoke about the risk of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people becoming uncontactable if they had their asylum application turned down upon reaching age

21. Members heard that the Council now had a responsibility to provide support to Care Leavers up to age 25, which included them being assigned a Personal Adviser. Mr Chapman specified in response to questions from CIA representatives that personal advisers were not the only source of support, and that the Council had different networks across Housing Needs and the Homelessness Persons team to provide additional support to Care Leavers on any issue, if necessary.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- (i) The contents of the report be noted; and
- (ii) A report which detailed what the Council currently provided in terms of support to Care Leavers, and additional support which could be included in the Council's local offer to Care Leavers in the future, be brought to a future meeting of the Committee.
- (iii) A report which provided a breakdown of the ethnic demographics for LAC in Brent, be brought to a future meeting of the Committee.

10. Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017

Sonya Kalyniak (the Council's Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance) introduced the report which provided the Committee with information on the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) over the last reporting year (April 2016 to March 2017). She said that the report had taken on Councillor Warren's comments from last year's report and had included more case studies and relevant quotations from service users alongside statistical information. She also thanked CIA for having promoted the 'Bright Spots' survey which had had a 33% response rate.

She outlined that the report detailed both the positive aspects of the previous year, and the elements which could be improved. Focusing initially on the positives, Members heard that it was very encouraging that the vast majority of children in care felt that they were included in decision making about their lives. It was also felt that the development of functions of the Review, Engagement and Participation (REP) Team had helped the Council gain a more holistic understanding of the view of children and young people. Ms Kalyniak noted that 984 reviews had been chaired by IROs in 2016/17 and that the close collaboration between IROs, Aidhour and social workers had allowed the issues identified during these reviews to be resolved more quickly. She also referenced some of areas for improvement such as: addressing the continued high number of social worker changes and the need for timeliness of LAC reviews to be monitored more closely. She also said that the 'Bright Spots' survey had been a success and that it would be a priority to take forward the messages identified from young people within the survey to drive the service forward.

Questions arose on the specific role of IROs and at what stage they ultimately become involved in the care process. Gail Tolley explained that the final decision to take a child into care came via the court system. She said that IROs are assigned to young people once they come into care and provide oversight and monitoring of the child's care planning. Sonya Kalyniak added that IROs were qualified social

workers with significant experience which complimented the nature of their role. One of the CIA representatives commented that they had a very good relationship with their IRO and believed that their role was effective.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- (i) The content of the report be noted; and
- (ii) A detailed summary which explained the role of IROs be included at the start of the 2017-2018 IRO annual report.

11. **Any Other Urgent Business**

There was no other urgent business to transact.

The meeting was declared closed at 6.43 pm

COUNCILLOR BOBBY THOMAS
Chair (Elected for this meeting only)