

**MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Thursday 16 July 2009 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Motley (Chair), Councillors Mrs Fernandes, Mistry, J Moher, C J Patel and Tancred, together with co-opted members Mr C Akisanya and Dr Levison, and observer Ms C Jolinon (Teachers' Panel).

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Wharton (Lead Member, Children and Families) and R Moher, together with Reem Ali and Kishan Parshotam, representatives of Brent Youth Parliament.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Arnold, from co-opted members Rev P Stone and Mr Lorenzato, and from observers Ms J Cooper and Mrs L Gouldbourne (Teachers' Panel).

The Chair welcomed the three witnesses – Philip Craig (Manager, Dalling Road Children's Home, LB Hammersmith & Fulham), Natasha Finlayson (Chief Executive, The Who Cares? Trust) and Errol John (Head of Operations, Barnardo's).

1. Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interest

None declared.

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16 June 2009 be agreed as a true and accurate record.

3. Matters Arising

Item 3 – Matters Arising – Education Standards in Brent

The Chair informed the Committee that, as agreed, he had written a letter to thank teachers for their work with pupils during the year.

4. Children in Care and Residential Provision

Ros Morris (Head of Commissioning, Social Care) presented a report setting out Brent's approach to provision for children in care in the context of the UK situation and preliminary information on the approach to provision in various European countries. She reported that in 2007 Brent had developed a radical three-year *Invest to Save* programme with a view to delivering service improvements and managing budget pressures effectively. A key part of the programme was to reduce the number of children in care where it was safe to do so, as well as to reduce the number of children in residential placements. After two years the total proportion of children in care in Brent had come down and was more in line with the UK average.

Ros Morris informed the Committee that placing children in residential

placements local to Brent cost an average of £2,000 per child per week. Currently there were nine young people in such placements. A total of 14 young people with the most complex and challenging needs were currently in several different residential placements in Southern England and the Midlands. Such placements cost in the region of over £2,000 to nearly £4,000 weekly for each young person. Brent used a small number of organisations that demonstrated a high standard of care and therapeutic approach to the children and young people in their care.

The contrast with the situation in several European countries was stark. The proportion of children in care in the UK was around half of that in Denmark and France, for example, and children came into care at a much earlier stage in life. In the UK there was a philosophy of promoting family life and of attempting to keep children at home for longer. Another clear difference was the significantly higher proportion of residential placements in European countries. Ros Morris reported that, from the studies she had looked at, there was a difference in philosophy of how children's homes were run. Residential workers were reported to be more involved in the total upbringing of children, and there was a greater focus on the young person's positive strengths, particularly in Denmark and Germany. The concept of social pedagogy was commonly used in European countries. The main qualifications for residential workers were at a higher level in Europe and fostering was less common. The outcomes appeared to be very positive, although long-term outcomes had not yet been studied. A direct comparison between the UK and Europe was difficult, as the needs of young people in residential care were more complex. In addition, the differences did not simply concern the training of workers and the pedagogic approach, but were integral to the policies and practices of the various countries studied.

Ros Morris added that it was pleasing to note that one of the providers used by Brent recognised government recommendations in relation to social pedagogy. She pointed out, however, that it was more difficult for providers to maintain consistent staffing – a key element of good residential care – in London and South East England, and that any move towards increasing the proportion of residential care would inevitably have financial implications. Ros Morris also pointed out that research had highlighted the longer-term potential costs of social exclusion as young people in care became young adults.

Errol John (Head of Operations, Barnardo's) informed the Committee that in the 1970s he had begun working in a children's home. The home had 26 children and young people, with four sets of house parents, who were married couples. The children tended to stay there for an extended period. It was a family environment, a village with detached houses. Barnardo's also worked in services to prevent children coming into care, providing alternatives. The local community was involved, with link workers and befrienders providing family support. At the time, work with children was still a social work specialism, but – as a result of the Seebohm Report in 1968 – generic social work came into being. Errol John pointed out that fostering was often not a stable option, with children being moved from placement to placement and only then being offered residential care. He felt that corporate parents had perhaps been reluctant to express a preference for residential care at an

earlier stage, regarding it more as a last resort. Errol John felt that preventive work was important, and that a range of options, including residential care, was needed.

Philip Craig (Manager, Dalling Road Children's Home, LB Hammersmith & Fulham) acknowledged that the report presented to the Committee was well researched and captured the key principles of trying to effect real change in residential care. Having worked in residential care since 1976, he felt that one thing had been constant – underachievement. The young people who came into residential care needed high quality care and comfort, but were cared for in the main by the least qualified and least resourced staff. There was a national pilot programme to look at models of social pedagogy. Philip Craig pointed out that this approach was within the social policy, justice system and families of the countries in which it was applied. In the UK there were ongoing problems of the quality of training and development for foster carers, and if foster families were not well supported there could be a stream of breakdowns. Residential care was viewed as a last resort. He agreed that it was difficult to make comparisons with other countries. For example, the UK was much more multi-cultural than Denmark and Germany. While this was a success, the UK had not done well in terms of investing in and respecting children in general. The European model worked for specific reasons – it was taken seriously, and was often regarded as a first choice, with highly skilled, trained and motivated staff working holistically and making a significant difference to outcomes. Philip Craig took the view that this was something that had happened in the UK in the past, but that residential care had become over-regulated and bureaucratic. He felt that the main difference between residential therapeutic staff and mainstream social workers was the level of training, and he hoped that the national pilot scheme would enable not only an understanding of social pedagogy, but also a raising of the level of staff training and development.

Natasha Finlayson (Chief Executive, The Who Cares? Trust) informed the Committee that most of the relevant charities were strongly in favour of social pedagogy. The Who Cares? Trust had a close relationship with the national populations of children in care. The key message was that foster care had failed, particularly in view of the outcomes. Some people felt that the care system compounded children's difficulties. While there were good foster carers, many mediocre ones were not getting the training and input to enable stability for young people. Instability characterised a life in care and the subsequent sense of rejection and worthlessness. Indeed, children rated stability more highly than the quality of care, and corporate parents needed to get this right from the start. All assumptions needed to be dismissed. For example, the government was already moving away from the view that a nuclear family setting was best for all children. Many children in care did not want another family, and would prefer to be in residential care. In Germany and Denmark there was absolute confidence in the care system and there was no concern that a child might not be better off in residential care. Natasha Finlayson felt that the reluctance to use residential placements was in itself an indictment of the care system, and that in countries such as Germany and Denmark there was no stigma attached to being in care. The degree

qualification in social pedagogy was an exceptional qualification, very different from what she saw as the controlling and punitive attitude to children in the UK. The national pilot was extremely positive, and was an indication of a trend. It was interesting to note that all the children's homes run by Essex County Council were moving to the social pedagogy model.

The Chair regretted that, while witnesses from Essex County Council had been invited to this meeting, they had not been able to attend.

Commenting on the presentations, Councillor R Moher stated that, in her experience as a fostering manager, the best foster carers kept children's birth families alive for them, and that placement stability was the key to success in care. She felt that the social pedagogy approach would involve longer working hours than staff were accustomed to, and that the organisation and cost of this would need to be considered. Corporate parents needed to look at what young people wanted and needed, and choices needed to be built in. Extra places would be needed in order to be able to offer choice, and all this cost money.

Councillor Mrs Fernandes thanked the witnesses for their presentations, which she had found inspiring in their focus on children. In the past children had not been the focus, as safety had been the main consideration. Over the years progress had been made, and the child was now the focus. She did not agree that fostering had failed, rather that carers were being failed in relation to support and training, but she looked forward to the application of the concept of social pedagogy as a holistic approach to children and their families.

Asked what support was available to foster carers, Graham Genoni (Assistant Director, Social Care) reported that, while the Council could always provide more in terms of induction, training and support with a view to supporting stability, the reality was that carers were dealing with very challenging young people. Philip Craig added that in some cases there came a point when, regardless of the amount of support provided, foster care was no longer manageable.

Errol John informed the Committee that, as a result of funding cuts and changes in the system of commissioning by local authorities, organisations such as Barnardo's were no longer able to work imaginatively in partnership with agencies to offer a holistic approach in listening to and adding value in working with young people, and he felt this was a loss.

Natasha Finlayson added that it was worth bearing in mind that in Denmark and Germany social pedagogues also trained foster carers, so providing the benefit of raising the standard of fostering.

Dr Levison commented from his experience in business that if it was felt that the current model was not working, there needed to be an understanding of the underlying causes, and issues such as social stigma and financial commitment needed to be solved.

Councillor Wharton (Lead Member, Children and Families) informed the Committee that the administration's policy was the *Invest to Save* programme.

This had been initiated as a result of the view having been taken that the wrong children were being taken into care and that the right type of support had not been offered. There had been success in family support, particularly in terms of finding other family members to support children. He felt that allowing the numbers of children in care to get out of control again would be a problem. He also saw risks in that it was difficult for the Council to provide stable staffing resources for assessing children. Asked whether the administration would look favourably on reviewing the balance of residential as against fostering placements, Councillor Wharton replied that this would depend on availability of resources.

After discussion, the Committee agreed that it would like to hear more about social pedagogy and the experience of Essex County Council. The Committee recommended that the possibility of developing a hybrid model of care between fostering and residential care be explored with a view to introducing social pedagogy into care for children. The Committee also asked that information be provided on the number of multiple foster placements and the number of foster carers' own children in placements. The Committee agreed to start by looking at the Essex County Council model.

The Chair thanked the three witnesses for their illuminating and passionate presentations, and the Committee recorded a vote of thanks.

RESOLVED:

- (i) that further work be carried out by the Children and Families Department to develop a hybrid model of care between fostering and residential care with a view to introducing social pedagogy into care for children in Brent;
- (ii) that information be provided on the number of multiple foster placements and the number of foster carers' own children in placements.

5. Performance Management of Children and Young People Plan 2008/09

The Committee agreed to defer this item in the absence of the relevant officer. In the meantime, Graham Genoni (Assistant Director, Social Care) was pleased to report that the social care performance indicators that had slipped down to level two the previous year were now at level three and much stronger.

RESOLVED:

that the report be deferred to the next meeting.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting would be held on Wednesday 21 October 2009.

7. Other Urgent Business

Update on School Places

Graham Genoni (Assistant Director, Social Care) introduced a report on the sufficiency of school places, the number of children currently without a school place, and measures taken to provide suitable provision out of school. He reported that 169 children due to start school in September 2009 were unplaced. There was a total of 106 vacancies. In addition, 84 places had not yet been confirmed, and would become available on Monday 20 July if they were not confirmed by then. The Council was continuing to pursue options for additional provision. A total of 152 pupils due to transfer to high school were without a place. There were 180 vacancies, the majority in boys' schools. The admissions service was working with parents and staff in schools to help secure places and would continue to do so over the summer. Councillor Wharton (Lead Member, Children and Families) informed the Committee that the most immediate concern was for primary school places. He reported that the Council worked hard to fulfil its legal obligations, but the outcome was not always satisfactory, and he emphasised the difficulties of operating at near to full capacity. While the government had announced funding for expansion, the details of the funding were not yet known. Three extra classes had been opened since the previous year. Members were concerned at the number of 11-year olds unplaced and expressed the hope that any new high school planned would be built in the south of the borough, where the need seemed greatest.

RESOLVED:

that the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm.

W MOTLEY
Chair