

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

Thursday, 9th November 2006 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Motley (Chair), Councillor Arnold (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Ahmed, Eniola, Mrs Fernandes, Mistry, Tullett, and co-opted members Mrs Bondzi-Simpson, Dr Levison and Mr Lorenzato.

Also Present: Cllr Wharton (Lead Member for Children & Families).

Apologies for absence were received from Reverend Phil Stone, Ms Gouldbourne and Ms Cooper.

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Ahmed.

The Chair welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the new Children & Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee. There followed introductions from all members of the Committee. The Chair outlined the principles of the Committee noting that it was important to keep the best interests of young people at heart.

1. Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

There were none.

2. Minutes of last Children and Families Scrutiny Panel meeting on Thursday, 2nd February 2006.

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Families Scrutiny Panel held on 2nd February 2006 be agreed as a true and accurate record.

3. Matters Arising

The Chair thanked Cllr Mrs Fernandes for her work as the previous Chair of the Children and Families Scrutiny Panel.

Noting that the Brent Children and Young People's Plan was complete, the Vice Chair referred to Item 7 and asked if there was any further update. John Christie (Director of Children & Families) informed members that a report with details of an action plan would be presented to the Committee at their next meeting in January 2007. Mr Christie added that a recent Joint Area Review had made note of the fact that progress against the plan was felt to be reasonable. Mr Christie highlighted for Members that there had been an improvement in the percentage of young

people contacted by the Youth Service as well as an increase in levels of communication, provision of support and levels of accreditation.

In relation to Item 5, Members asked about the Extended School Strategy and in particular wanted more information about health and safety concerns and the possible financial implications associated with addressing these. In response Mr Christie informed the Committee that a report on Community Access to Schools was put before the Executive Committee at their last meeting. He explained that the Executive requested that a further report be provided with practical details about extended schools and community access, and a report on this would be presented to the Executive in January. Noting that it would be important for there to be scrutiny of the financial implications, the Chair suggested that Committee should review the report after it has been presented to the Executive. Cllr Wharton (Lead Member, Children & Families) commented that there was a need for clearer outcomes with regard to providing community access to schools. He also explained that the Executive was to receive two separate reports, one of which would provide an update on progress as the Council reached the end of its 1st year taking part in the initiative.

4. Looked After Children in Brent

Members had before them a report that set out the key issues with regard to looked after children in Brent. Apologies for absence were given for Janet Palmer, Assistant Director Social Care, who was unable to present the report. In her absence the report was presented by John Christie, Director, Children & Families. Mr Christie began by explaining that the concept of "Looked after Children" originated from the Children Act 1989, replacing the concept of children being "in care".

He explained that there were approximately 400 looked after children in Brent and highlighted figures in the report outlining the types of placement being offered to them. It was noted Brent did not have an excessive number of looked after children and that the figures fluctuated but were in line with those for other comparable boroughs.

Committee Members were advised about the main issues affecting looked after children. It was noted that too many children were placed in residential schools or homes outside the borough. Mr Christie explained that it was preferable to place looked after children within the borough as placing them outside was expensive and often would not lead to the best outcomes for the children. He added that there were also an increasing number of children with complex needs that were expensive to place. With these issues in mind, and also considering budget pressures Mr Christie explained that the Department was looking to reduce the number of out of borough placements and increase the number of Brent carers. It was explained that there was an action plan for recruiting more carers, in particular adopters. The plan would address the possibility of having

professional foster carers i.e. people employed and paid to be full time foster carers. Additionally the possibility of providing a small scale residential facility was being looked into. Mr Christie explained that these measures were 'invest to save' schemes with a view to making significant savings in the long term. Commenting on the possibility of providing more preventative based initiatives, Mr Christie suggested that because of budget issues it would be challenging to further develop this type of service.

There followed questions from Committee Members. In response to questions about out of borough placements, it was explained that the Department had a responsibility to monitor the progress of children placed outside Brent. It was noted that co-ordination of services such as education provision and social worker visits was more difficult when done at a distance.

The Chair asked for more information about the educational outcomes for looked after children. Members were informed that there was an underperformance, however Mr Christie explained that there were various targets upon which performance could be measured. He further explained that whilst it was important to have the same expectations for all children across the borough, there also existed a need to measure the progress of looked after children in relation to their individual circumstances. There was discussion about the importance of measuring progress against a child's Individual Education Plan so that language needs and special needs could be considered. With this in mind, the Chair suggested that it be investigated whether a realistic measure could be developed for monitoring the progress of looked after children in view of their circumstances and asked whether this could be provided for Committee Members at a future meeting.

Committee Members asked about the possibility of further developing existing preventative schemes such as the family liaison initiative in Kilburn that was developed through a regeneration program in the area. Mr Christie advised Committee Members that two pilot schemes were operating in Stonebridge and Kingsbury as a result of the Local Area Agreement. It was explained that these projects focussed on identifying, at an early stage, children at risk of being looked after in the future. These projects would look at how to work with families, children and schools in a preventative way. However it was noted that there were resource issues associated with establishing more similar projects.

A Committee Member also suggested that in consideration of the diverse communities in Brent it could be beneficial to establish links with senior members from within various communities.

RESOLVED: -

- (i) that the report be noted;

- (ii) that the Committee recommend that a means of measuring educational outcomes and assessing progress for looked after children with a 'value added' approach be developed;
- (iii) that the review of placements for looked after children, with details about recruiting new carers and provision of a residential facility, be provided for the Committee at a future meeting.

5. **Special Educational Needs**

Mr Rik Boxer, Assistant Director, Achievement and Inclusion presented the report on provision for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). In providing an overview, Rik Boxer explained that one in five children in Brent were identified as having Special Educational Needs. It was noted that most of these needs were able to be met in school. However Committee Members were advised that the nature of such needs were changing and there were increasing numbers of children and young people whose needs were complex and severe and had to be addressed over a long term period. Additionally it was noted that there had been a substantial rise in the number of children on the autistic spectrum.

Committee Members were informed of a wide ranging review of SEN provision in Brent for which there had been extensive consultation. Arising from this a report was presented to the Council's Executive in October 2005. In his presentation, Rik Boxer highlighted the recommendations made by the Executive. Referring to these recommendations, Mr Boxer informed the Committee that the overall aim was for the Council to develop an ability to meet the needs of children locally. To help achieve this it was noted that the Council would have to look into providing a tailored, specialist facility in the borough.

Committee Members also noted the Draft Strategy for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability attached as Appendix 2 to the report. Rik Boxer informed the Committee that it was an initial draft not yet for consultation. Committee Members were informed that the strategy would have a wide scope and take into account education, social care and healthcare aspects. In relation to this Mr Boxer highlighted the priorities identified for Brent as set out in the contents of the strategy.

There followed questions from the Committee. In relation to provision of a new Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), Rik Boxer explained that there was a plan to develop a PRU in Chalkhill. The tender had been awarded and the unit was due for completion in September 2007. The unit would accommodate up to 30 key Stage 3 pupils. It was also explained that there was an interim provision for these pupils prior to completion. Rik Boxer additionally explained that the ethos of PRU's in Brent was one of

re-integration however the unit would cater for the small number of young people that were not suited to this. With regard to whether an extra facility might be needed in the future, Rik Boxer explained that there were only a small number of children in need of such a facility. However, he added that it was likely that the Council would have to consider an extra small scale provision in the future.

The Chair asked about home schooling for children on the autistic spectrum. Rik Boxer informed Members about the Lovaas program. This was an intensive program whereby parents alongside volunteers would work with children, employing Lovaas methods, for up to thirty hours a week. Mr Boxer highlighted that whilst there were passionate advocates for Lovaas, its long term effectiveness had not yet been proven. It was also noted that the Council had a view on when home schooling was appropriate and it gave great consideration to the importance of meeting the social needs of a child. Rik Boxer informed the Committee that the need for home schooling was assessed for each individual situation. In response to further questions, Rik Boxer explained that the Council had a home tuition service for those who can't attend school for various reasons. It was noted that between 80 and 100 children were registered with Brent's Education Tuition Service at any one time and each child received approximately 5 to 10 hours of tuition each week.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the report be noted;
- (ii) that the Committee be provided with an update on the new Pupil Referral Unit when further information is available.

6. Improving Outcomes for African Caribbean and Black African Pupils

The Chair introduced this item advising Committee Members that they could be minded to establish a task group to address issues arising from the report. Rik Boxer presented the report which was about the need to improve the academic and economic outcomes for children and young people from Black Caribbean and some Black African heritage groups as statistics had shown that these were below borough averages in Brent.

Rik Boxer informed Committee Members that the issue was being experienced on a national level. He commented that it was a complex issue with many interacting factors contributing to its cause. To demonstrate the nature of the problem, Rik Boxer explained that at Key Stage 1, African Caribbean and Black African pupils performed in line with the national average, however they performed just below average at Key Stage 2, they were considerably below average by Key Stage 3 and with a further significant drop by Key Stage 4. Noting these statistics it was explained that the effect was noticeable particularly at secondary school

level however Members were advised that it was important to address the issue earlier at primary school level.

Committee Members were also advised that there were variations in performance for different ethnic groups within the African Caribbean and Black African spectrum. For example in Brent there was a significant performance issue when looking at the outcomes for pupils from the Somali community. In contrast it was noted that other heritage groups were doing well such as pupils of Nigerian and Ghanaian heritage.

Mr Boxer further explained that the need to improve outcomes did not solely relate to education. It was noted that a lot of work had been done by the Council in the past year to identify other social factors that affected this heritage group. For example data had been collected that highlighted issues such as youth offending, teen pregnancy, exclusions, youth participation and social care referrals. Rik Boxer informed the Committee that children and young people of African Caribbean heritage had a significantly poor performance with regard to a large number of these social outcomes.

For information, a summary of a report on this issue previously prepared for the Council's Executive was distributed amongst Committee Members. Rik Boxer outlined the report explaining that it helped to build a comprehensive picture of how to address this issue. It was noted that the report had highlighted the need to identify and disseminate good practice and to look at the issue with a preventative perspective. It was also highlighted that there was a need for a tailored program for the Somali community and a need for effective coordination of the wide range of successful initiatives that had already been established. Noting that the Council was in the process of developing a strategy to tackle this issue, Mr Boxer suggested that it would be beneficial for there to be scrutiny at this early stage.

Committee Members had several question on this issue, the Chair asked about how performance and outcomes related to gender. Rik Boxer informed the Committee that there was a particular performance issue for boys; however girls were affected albeit not as acutely. In response to questions about proportion, it was explained that approximately 25% of the children in the borough were affected.

Committee Members welcomed the initiative to develop a strategy addressing this issue. Members also noted the importance of getting to the heart of the issues and with this in mind highlighted the need to involve people in the community both affected by and with knowledge of these issues. The need to draw on the expertise of those involved in existing initiatives such as Boys2MEN was also highlighted. A Committee Member also suggested that it was important to engage not only with young people but also with their parents. In relation to this Mrs Bondzi Simpson informed the Committee that as the Chair of the Parents Forum

she would ask that this issue be raised for discussion at their next meeting.

Having noted that the Committee agreed on the importance of this issue, the Chair proposed that a task group be initiated with scope for measuring the problem, developing a strategy and carrying out further investigation and consultation. The Committee agreed to this proposal and the following Members nominated themselves for the task group: Cllrs Arnold, Mrs Fernandes and Tullett. It was also agreed that the Co-opted Member Mrs Bondzi-Simpson join the task group. It was noted that there would be officer support. In consideration of the wide scope of issues the task group could address, it was agreed that the task group should have a focussed approach. In addition it was agreed that the task group report back to the Committee at the next meeting with their terms of reference and a report on their progress. Consequently, the Committee at the next meeting could take a view on the key areas to be addressed. In response to questions it was noted that reports on the issue from other boroughs such as Lambeth would be made available for the task group.

RESOLVED: -

- (i) that the report be noted;
- (ii) that a task group be established with Cllrs Arnold, Mrs Fernandes and Tullett and Co-opted Member Mrs Bondzi-Simpson comprising the membership;
- (iii) that the task group communicate their terms of reference and progress at the next meeting in January.

7. Date of Next Meeting

RESOLVED:-

that the next meeting of the Children & Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee take place on Thursday, 11th January 2007.

8. Any Other Urgent Business

There was none.

The meeting ended at 9.05 pm

W MOTLEY
Chair