

**MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Wednesday 4th February 2009 at 7.30 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Motley (Chair), Councillor Mrs Fernandes (Vice Chair), and Councillors Eniola, Mistry, J Moher (part), CJ Patel and Tancred, together with co-opted members Mr Akisanya, Mr Lorenzato and Rev Phil Stone and observers Ms C Jolinon and Mrs L Gouldbourne.

Councillor Wharton, (Lead Member, Children and Families) was also present at the meeting.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Arnold and Dr Levison.

1. Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interest

None.

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 26 November 2008 be agreed as a true and accurate record subject to the following:-

Clause 6 – Update on Primary and Secondary School Places:

Paragraph 3 - -add to end “the Chair added that school places were a legitimate concern”

Clause 7 – Special Educational Needs:

Paragraph 5 – delete last sentence and substitute therefore “where there was evidence that a new method has more success Brent would embrace it.”

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

4. Tackling Homophobic Bullying

The Chair referred to the importance of tackling homophobic bullying in schools pointing out that he had raised the matter at Full Council and had received cross party support. Brent was one of a few councils to work closely with the campaign group Stonewall on LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Trans-sexual) issues.

Anthony Felsenstein (Strategic Co-ordinator, Children and Families) introduced the report which outlined work in tackling homophobic bullying in schools in the past year. He reported that members had last received an

update in June 2007 and that in November 2007, a conference had taken place, the first major event aimed at tackling homophobic bullying in Brent schools. Since then, 40 participants including 10 schools had signed up to an Action Plan, aimed at combating homophobic bullying. Schools in Brent had been asked to provide information on their existing policies with the aim of all schools to eventually have specific policies on homophobic bullying. Of the 78 schools which had been approached, 28 had responded, with 24% making direct reference to homophobic bullying in their policies. In further updating the Committee on progress being made, Anthony Felsenstein informed that the Council was working with Stonewall, Mosaic and Teachers' Unions. Overall progress on tackling the issue in schools was good and guidance was being updated. Anthony Felsenstein added that another approach being pursued was a pilot project to work with one or two schools, the results of which would be shared with other schools.

Elly Barnes (Head of Year, music teacher and LGBT Co-ordinator, Stoke Newington Media Arts College) gave a presentation on LGBT awareness in schools. She noted that since the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, local authorities no longer had an excuse for not addressing LGBT awareness in schools. 2009 marked the 5th year of LGBT history month and there was a need to recognize that celebrating homosexuality was a part of celebrating diversity. Tolerance, she emphasised, was no longer sufficient. She acknowledged that many parents were uncomfortable with the promotion of LGBT awareness in schools, however parents were important to the effort and the message had to be conveyed to them. Ms Barnes pointed out that gay people comprised a significant proportion of the population; approximately 1:10, many of whom were high profile and contributed greatly to society. She also highlighted projects carried out for LGBT Month 2008 and made particular reference to a concert in Hackney. In concluding her presentation, she emphasized the need for teacher training, for school codes and policies to be reviewed and for LGBT awareness to be made a part of the school curriculum.

Lydia Malmedie (Stonewall) advised of action being taken and support being given to authorities. A Governors' Forum was also available to assist with training and help in the drafting of policies. Other projects and programmes being undertaken included the expansion of an Education Champions programme which provided support and guidance to local authorities. Evidence indicated that teachers were willing to promote LGBT awareness and tackle homophobic bullying, but needed advice and support. Other initiatives included a teaching pack and a youth volunteering programme to help equip young people to run their own campaigns.

Lucas Konica (Mosaic LGBT Youth Programme Manager) contributed to the discussion on the response of the Youth Service to homophobic bullying. The Programme had been established in 2000 in response to young people's reluctance to access mainstream services. He reported that students wanted to know about sexuality, but that there was a high degree of confusion and lack of understanding which contributed to bullying behaviour. He felt Brent, as a diverse borough, should celebrate diversity in all its forms. Mr Konica

further pointed out that transgender people were often particularly victimised, and should be a part of any awareness programme. He drew the Committee's attention to the event to be held at Willesden Green Library on 25th and 26th March 2009 as part of LGBT Awareness month. It was also suggested that LGBT Awareness month should be celebrated in colleges as well as schools.

Leslie Gouldbourne (Teachers' Panel), while accepting the need for LGBT awareness, stressed that teachers would welcome advice on how it could be built into everyday teaching, particularly given the other existing demands on the teaching profession. The Committee also considered the respective roles of governors in tackling homophobic bullying and the Chair made reference to the Equality Act 2006 and Department for Children, Schools and Families guidance which placed an obligation on governors to tackle homophobic bullying. The Committee agreed on the importance of parents and carers and cyber bullying was given as a good example of an issue where schools have worked with parents to tackle bullying. It was also put that parents need to be reminded that homophobic bullying also affected children who were perceived to be gay and as such they should be more inclined to support initiatives.

Elly Barnes acknowledged that she received complaints regarding LGBT awareness-raising however, she considered these to be an opportunity to suggest face-to-face discussions, although such offers were rarely taken up. She was pleased to add that she received many letters of thanks and also invitations from parents to give presentations at their places of work where adult bullying was often prevalent.

The Committee discussed means of measuring the effectiveness of initiatives and the extent to which the existence of policies was an indication of real change taking place within a school. It was also accepted that the existence of policies would go some way towards demonstrating that the matter was being taken seriously. Additionally, it was noted that evidence existed indicating that gay students were less likely to be bullied in those schools where pupils had been taught that homophobic violence was wrong, and that this had made significant difference to young people's lives. The Chair also observed that this issue affected everyone: continued bullying of young people, for any reason, reflected a moral degradation of the whole community.

Krutika Pau (Assistant Director, Children and Families) contributed that mechanisms were already in place which could be used to remind governors of their obligations, to get headteachers involved and demonstrate success. She felt that time should be allowed to work with a few schools as a starting point so as not to spread resources too thinly. In this way, best practice could be identified and promoted. Anthony Felsenstein added that the guidance document was being consulted on and, once updated, would be sent to all schools. It was hoped that within nine month's time practical examples would exist of work so far and it would be possible to review policies already in existence.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair thanked all presenters for their

contributions, stressing that the Committee would be vigilant on this issue.

RESOLVED:-

that the report be noted and a further progress report submitted, within the year, on progress to date.

5. **Review of the Impact and Outcomes of Special Projects for Secondary School Age Children Newly Arrived in Brent**

Carmen Coffey (Head of Community and Student Support) presented this report which provided members with information on the education provision in special projects for secondary aged children who were new arrivals in Brent. She reported that coinciding with growing demand for school places, historically Brent has been a destination of choice for many people seeking asylum and many of the young arrivals included those with little formal education and limited knowledge of the English language. Work being done to address this situation included the setting up of a team to look at issues around new arrivals such as their numbers, and how provision could best be made for them. Projects such as in Claremont School and Ashley Gardens were given as successful examples.

She informed that a policy decision had been made that children would not stay in a project for more than 1 year however this was sometimes difficult to achieve where needs were complex. Generally, the projects were making a significant contribution and children were doing well with good exam results. Carmen Coffey drew attention to concerns relating to the need for access to educational psychology support, special educational needs provision and the adequacy of accommodation in particular at Claremont.

Members congratulated Carmen Coffey on what was considered to be an excellent report and also teachers and support staff on for the work that had been carried out in the short time available. Questions were raised on the arrangements to track attainment, supporting the management structure, the likelihood of numbers increasing and funding availability.

In response, Carmen Coffey replied that attainment rates were not formally monitored however it was hoped that children would progress to further and higher education and there was some evidence of students going into 6th forms and colleges. It was noted that students in the projects could also get support from a Connections personal adviser and, after leaving projects, could link up with the Brent In2 Work scheme. It was accepted that the projects seemed to have evolved in response to problems however it remained a joint responsibility between officers and schools, which worked well with commitment on both sides. What were identified as weaknesses were the limitations on bringing in other resources for support. In terms of the future demand for places, there was a perceived link between new arrivals and economic and political situations around the world. There had been a decrease in arrivals since January 2009 possibly linked to the shortage of school places in the Borough in addition to the fact that the project approach

was spreading to neighbouring boroughs. Were there were sufficient school places, projects could be closed.

Carmen Coffey stated central government funding was available to cover start up costs. She added that in terms of continuation, long standing projects such as that at John Kelly School, having been in existence since 2002, were likely to continue and examples of good practice would be retained.

RESOLVED:-

that the report and full review be noted.

6. **Update on Primary and Secondary School Places**

Carmen Coffey (Head of Communications and Student Support) gave a verbal update on primary and secondary school places, the numbers of children currently without a school place and measures being undertaken to provide suitable education provision for children out of school. It was noted that there were 44 children of primary age without a school place and 74 without a secondary school place, with as many as 24 waiting in Year 10 and 16 in Year 11. With additional capacity having been created in the north of the borough, there was currently additional pressure in the south, especially in the Harlesden and Kilburn areas.

Of secondary age students, 41 had arrived in 2008, 40 in 2007 and 51 in 2006. Carmen Coffey commented that there had been an increase in young men arriving as asylum seekers and meetings with the College of North West London had been scheduled to discuss arrangements to ensure that they would be in age appropriate environments. There were sometimes difficulties in establishing ages but professional judgments would be used and age assessments carried out. Money for this work was available from the Dedicated Schools Budget. Efforts would also be made to encourage ethnic diversity within individual projects.

In answer to a response to questions on the waiting time for secondary places, Carmen Coffey stated that a round of assessments was about to finish, but it was likely that there would be a small number of pupils who may not be placed due to special educational needs, parental choice, travelling distance or exclusion records. Looking at trends over the years the number of new arrivals was observed to be slowing down but also to fluctuate. While noting the fluctuations in arrival numbers, the Chair reminded the Committee that the Council had a statutory duty to educate all children in the Borough.

RESOLVED:-

that the report be noted.

7. Local Area Agreement – priorities for children and young people

The Committee received a report updating on the progress and performance of the LAA 2008-2011 with regard to the priorities for children, a revised version had been circulated before the meeting. Sarah Mansuralli (Head of Strategy and Commissioning) reported that these were based on audit assessments which had revealed a need to concentrate on a number of areas including improving sexual health and reducing the number of under 18 pregnancies. The Council had been on target however 2007 data revealed an increase in teenage pregnancies. Regarding the target to increase the stability of placements of looked after children, there was a large cohort of looked after children with more complex needs and the Council was in the process of recruiting additional foster carers. She reported that child and adolescent mental health targets were on track, in addition to targets associated with physical health and sport.

The Chair proposed an additional recommendation to the report suggesting that an annual report on LAA priorities should be presented to Committee showing any improvement and decline drawing links to previous years' data and targets.

In response to a question on the likely impact of plans to reduce the growth element of area based grants for 2009/10, Sarah Mansuralli pointed out that any loss of funding would affect the extended schools programme however work was taking place to find a resolution.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the report be noted;
- (ii) that an annual report on the LAA priorities for Children, Families and Young People should come to the committee with data showing changes, both improvements and declines compared to previous years and targets.

8. Reducing Childhood Obesity

The report from the Director of Children and Families presented by Melanie O'Brien (Joint Commissioning Manager, Child Health) set out information on childhood obesity, from a national and local perspective and indicated that Brent currently had higher levels of overweight and obese children than the national average, with 22.1% (ie 600) of Year 6 children in Brent being classified as obese compared to 17.5% in the UK. This was of particular concern because of associated health consequences including reduced life expectancy, heart disease and cancer. The annual economic cost of this nationally was estimated at £1 billion, and for Brent £83 million, and expected to rise in future. To help combat this problem, a joint NHS Brent and local authority programme had started in 2008. Two programmes had already taken place with 27 families on the waiting list. Additionally, staff insets were being run to raise awareness and the Council was working closely with school

caterers and developing a cookery programme for Brent schools. Data was also currently being analysed so as to be able to concentrate efforts on schools most in need.

The question was raised as to the extent to which schools should be compelled to treat obesity as a priority and, in response, the contrary view was put that while schools were aware of the gravity of the situation, obesity was a wider, societal problem. In any event, schools were already making every effort possible and children could, if they so wished, purchase less healthy foods off-site. It was however encouraging to note that a lot of work was taking place in the borough including the national campaign 'Change for Life' and there were still opportunities for further improvements for example, green and transport policies and reducing the number of junk food shops near schools. The point was also made that parents should be encouraged to monitor their children's diet and expenditure of pocket money.

The Chair indicated that consideration may be given in future to establishing a task group on the issue.

RESOLVED:-

that the report be noted.

9. Any other business

Councillor J Moher suggested that a report on safeguarding children be presented to every meeting. The Chair in response reminded that some related issues were already regularly presented and that a major report on this issue was due to come before the next meeting. It was agreed that further consideration be given at this time to how this information could be best presented.

10. Date of next meeting

The next meeting was scheduled to take place on Thursday, 5th March 2009.

The meeting ended at 10:00pm.

W MOTLEY
Chair