



MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE

Tuesday 20 July 2021 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor M Patel (Chair) and Councillors Conneely, Gbajumo and Thakkar

Also Present: Councillor McLennan

1. Exclusion of the Press and Public

RESOLVED: that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the duration of the meeting, on the grounds that the attendance of representatives from the council's Children in Care council, necessitated the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 2, Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, of the Act, namely: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.

2. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

None.

3. Declarations of interests

None.

4. Deputations (if any)

None received.

5. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the last meeting held on 28 April 2021 be approved as an accurate record.

6. Matters arising (if any)

None.

7. Update from Care In Action and Care Leavers in Action Representatives

C (Care Leavers in Action) advised that the Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) sessions were now in person on a socially distanced basis but with hybrid options, and expressed it was great to see everyone face to face again. The previous session had been focused on public speaking to practice for the care leaver inspection presentation to the Strategic Director of Children and Young People and councillors. The aim of the session was to help those with less experience of public speaking to do so more comfortably and fluidly. C expressed that the care leaver inspection CLIA members had been involved in was interesting to be a part of and all involved had done 2 months of training before undertaking the inspection. He

added it felt that the group's comments had been taken on board well by senior members of staff and councillors and he was looking forward to seeing what the next steps would be.

S (Care Leavers in Action) had started attending CLIA sessions following the encouragement of another care leaver. S was also part of the care leaver inspection and felt they had done a really good job. The findings had been presented the previous day and a discussion was held about what had been put in place for future progress.

A (Care in Action) highlighted that at the last Care in Action (CIA) session they had spoken about the Brent Promise and consulted on what it should include. A was heavily involved in sport and had won many gold medals. A (Care in Action) felt the CIA sessions made her feel welcomed and warm. The first session she attended had focused on goals and how to reach them, which had made A nervous to talk about the future. A enjoyed attending the sessions to find friends in care and to give opinions and advice on how to improve the service for other children.

The Committee thanked the representatives for the updates, noting that a common theme from the speeches was how the children and young people had chosen to get involved in order to help other young people like themselves. It was RESOLVED:

That the updates by the representatives of Care in Action/Care Leavers in Action be noted.

8. Brent Care Journeys Programme: year one progress update

Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which was a joint report prepared by Brent Council and Barnardo's charity. Two colleagues from Barnardo's were also in attendance to present the report; Rajinder Nagra (Assistant Director Children's Services, Barnardo's London) and Anna Willow (Children's Services Manager, Barnardo's London). Onder Beter advised that the recommendations were set out in paragraph 2 of the report, which asked for comments on the content of the report, and for the Committee to consider what support could be provided to the strategic alliance by elected members in order to achieve best outcomes for Brent children and young people. The programme was a 5 year programme listening to children and young people, and bringing their voice into shaping services and creating system change so that children and young people could influence decisions and end up with better destinations. The definition of 'destination' was not just about being employed or attending school but was defined by young people around what would make them happy and fulfil their potential. For example, a care leaver may have a goal to be able to parent their child without the involvement of social workers for their child. In terms of the joint working with Brent and Barnardo's, several themes to work on had been identified. The major theme was around the challenge of young people coming into care late, as adolescents, and what could be done to create system change to ensure positive destinations for the cohort. A qualitative piece of work would be undertaken by young people who were designing 2 projects as detailed in the report. There was a group of 35 young people known as 'the Movement' who were supporting the work with participation, engagement, voice and influence. The Committee's

attention was drawn to the case study at the end of the report which showed the impact of the programme on the lived experience of young people.

Anna Willow advised that a partnership between the statutory and voluntary sector would always be organic and there would be a need to learn as they went. The programme was not delivering pre-determined outcomes of what they thought was best for young people, but instead working with young people to create their best future with them. She advised that the programme aimed to work in equal partnership with young people, going into situations together. For example, the young people had co-designed training for key workers who worked in semi-independent provision, and that training had been delivered equally with young people and Barnardo's.

A young person who had been involved in the project shared their experience, expressing that the programme had helped them a lot and they had become the young person they wanted to be. They were now more confident and a better speaker. They joined to help other people and better themselves along the way. Another young person had been involved in the training designed and delivered to semi-independent providers. He advised that between 5 and 6 sessions had taken place to design the training and then two separate training sessions had been delivered to 12-13 providers for around 3-4 hours each session.

The Committee queried what the structure of the programme was. Anna Willow advised paragraph 4.4 explained what young people had defined it – 'The Movement'. She advised that the projects within the programme would look like the movement of young people at the core, who had the ambition to drive youth led connections that sustained over time and built a legacy for people like them. She highlighted that the programme should be a co-designed space working with people who were the experts in that space as they had lived the issues they were serving. The projects that were being focused on were outlined in section 5.2 of the report. As the partnership thrived, the focus would evolve through phases. The starting point was research going through to design, which had now been done and so those projects had moved to the testing phase to see how the designs worked.

The Committee queried how quickly changes from engagement, feedback, design and testing of the current projects in the programme could be made. Onder Beter gave an example of the Quality Assurance Framework for semi-independent provision which the Committee spoke about at the last meeting. Brent Care Journeys had been involved in the work on that, through training of key workers, as well as now being a part of follow up visits and the Best Practice Forum. He felt this was an example of how the programme worked with young people to influence how the Council internally developed and how semi-independent provision could learn from that too. In addition, one care leaver had now been formally employed as a project worker as part of the semi-independent provision project. There was also an ambition to provide up to 10 young people some 'as and when' contracts so that their contributions could be financially incentivised. The Committee welcomed that recompense for the valued work young people provided. While the work of the programme was fluid and not necessarily quantifiable, officers felt that there were solid examples of impact.

In terms of engagement, the group had now delivered the prototypes of the welcome packs for people to give feedback on. Five young people had been given

2 weeks to try out the packs to see how they made them feel and what difference they made. The Committee queried who the welcome packs would be given to. Onder Beter confirmed that, for now, the packs were designed for 16-17 year olds going into semi-independent provision for the first time, as the expectation was that anyone going into a foster placement should have all items they needed available. The research for the project had showed there were variations in semi-independent provision and what providers made available for young people, particularly if their accommodation took place out of hours by emergency duty. The prototype pack had been designed to focus on the very practical elements of the first few nights of entering semi-independent provision. Within the pack were essential cooking items, toiletries, two sets of bedding, towels, a Deliveroo voucher, a £10 oyster card, a lock which was important for young people to feel safe, and the Brent local offer condensed to one page. Anna Willow highlighted the box was more than items, as it was also a gesture of welcome and the beginning of the relationship between a young person and a semi-independent provider. For that reason, a guide for a conversation between staff and the young person had also been provided including how to introduce yourself and what to do if something went wrong. Anna Willow highlighted that the design of the box gave hard evidence of how lived expertise mattered.

In relation to the two projects highlighted in the report (the welcome pack and the complaints process), the Committee queried whether these would be enshrined in the Quality Assurance Framework for semi-independent providers and form part of the monitoring process going forward. Onder Beter confirmed that the aim was to do that and take the learning from the testing phase to enhance the Quality Assurance Framework. The ambition was to embed the projects into the Council's expectations of providers in their commissioning arrangements.

In relation to the financial impact of Covid-19 on the project, Anna Willow confirmed that the funding of the programme was from the Barnardo's project, which might increase if they could demonstrate that the programme was having an impact on the outcomes for children and young people. Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) added that during Covid-19 charity fundraising had significantly reduced and the fundraising events that might have led to significant donations were not able to take place, which had impacted these types of projects.

In searching for additional partners and engaging grassroots organisations, Anna Willow explained that the programme did not have additional resource, so they were looking at where they could bring additional resource in, together in partnership across the locality. She had explored several opportunities which had not come to fruition but would keep looking.

The Committee asked for further details about the bundles and food parcels provided to young people during the lockdown. Anna Willow explained that these had been donations from Barnardo's, and were very much about addressing someone's acute needs and building trust into a relationship. Onder Beter advised that the donations from Barnardo's to young people had been documented in the previous report to the Committee regarding support to care leavers during the pandemic.

The governance arrangements for the programme was a 6-monthly strategic steering group which included Gail Tolley, as the Strategic Director for Children and Young People, and the Programme Directors from Barnardo's, who provided support and challenge. The recommendation was for the Corporate Parenting Committee to receive an annual report about the progress of the programme, as well as an evaluation impact report.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

9. **Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2020-21**

The purpose of this report was to present an annual update to the Corporate Parenting Committee on outcomes for Looked After Children, in line with the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (2010).

The Committee heard that the number of children in care currently looked after by Brent Council was 298, and officers were expecting a slight increase as the country moved out of restrictions. The current number of care leavers being supported was 440 compared to 330 pre-pandemic, and cases had not been closed for young people struggling with isolation and loneliness even if normally those cases would have been closed. There had been a significant increase in the number of referrals and contacts to the Front Door with Covid-19 associated reasons. There was also an impact on young people waiting for decisions from the Home Office regarding their immigration status, as the Home Office had not made decisions. This meant young people had been left without clear status, therefore Brent was required to continue supporting those young people in semi-independent provision.

Onder Beter informed the Committee that, as discussed at a previous Committee meeting, the Home Office had placed a large number of adults seeking asylum within 3 different hotels in Brent, which had resulted in a number of those coming forward to claim to be under 18 years old and therefore classed as children. By law, if someone claimed to be under 18 years old then as a local authority Brent would be expected to accommodate them, in some cases with any dispute about age needing to be assessed. Onder Beter explained this put a lot of pressure on capacity and they had received 27 referrals within the past 7-8 months from those seeking asylum claiming to be children. Some of those had been accommodated where the Council had agreed with their claimed age after initial screening or a full age assessment. Due to the financial implications, 2 locum lawyers had been recruited to assist the Council through potential judicial reviews, and there was agreement to recruit 2 additional social workers to conduct age assessments. When those who were judged to be children became looked after they were often 16-17 years old and therefore soon to become care leavers, and the Council had around 130 young people who they supported as care leavers who were former unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC).

The Committee queried the communications process between the Home Office and Council when those seeking asylum were placed in the Borough. Onder Beter confirmed that the Council were being told now, but when the first hotel had been commissioned they had not been informed. The Council now had weekly reports

detailing all young people and families placed in the Borough, including children of families who would need school places. It was important to inform health colleagues also.

In terms of the Home Office policy, Nigel Chapman (Operational Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) explained the Home Office were trying to find space for adults and, due to the lack of tourism in Wembley during the pandemic, hotels had been available. He advised that there was pressure at entry points, giving the example of a big cohort of people arriving the previous day in Kent, so felt the Home Office's ability to make quick and accurate decisions was limited. Age assessment at the point of entry was crucial and there were not enough assessors in the country nationally. Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) added that the national transfer scheme was voluntary, but a significant number of local authorities were not participating. Brent were operating on a rota taking children through that system, and had dipped below the 0.07% nationally agreed as they did not take children directly due to the proportion of those individuals placed by the Home Office that would come forward to be classed as children that the Council had planned for. She added that Brent would soon be over the 0.07% agreed for under 18s and significantly over for care leavers.

In terms of the financial impact that the placement of asylum seekers was having, Onder Beter advised that the Home Office did not provide enough financial support to cover the costs. There was financial pressure on the placement budget for Looked After Children, and the 27 individuals recently assessed generated a large amount of work, meaning there was pressure on staffing and capacity, dealing with unplanned arrivals, legal issues and the logistics within the system. He highlighted that Brent had a very open minded approach and understood the trauma some people seeking asylum would have experienced, which could sometimes make it more difficult to undertake an age assessment due to their needs. There was a need to ensure culturally sensitive practice, for example through the use of interpreters.

With regard to placement stability, the Committee noted the positive performance detailed in the report. As a Council, it felt that the department had done a large amount of work through the 3 lockdowns and made a lot of improvements, with placement stability one of them. The number of children who stayed in placements for over 2 and a half years had seen a significant improvement. The Committee highlighted other Boroughs had experienced some placement breakdowns so it was positive this had not been the case in Brent.

The Committee asked for further context to paragraph 5.1, which stated that the number of children becoming looked after through voluntary agreement with parents had decreased by 36% compared to the previous year. Nigel Chapman advised one particular reason for this was due to UASCs being accommodated under Section 20. He felt the figure also reflected the approach the Council had taken to be more robust to actively seek care proceedings if it was felt a situation was not resolving where the Council had an agreement with the family. It also reflected the age of the care population.

The Committee raised paragraph 5.2 of the report to officers attention, asking if the statement meant that Brent were doing whatever it took, and paying whatever they

could, to keep children in Brent, or whether Brent would need to place some young people out of Borough due to the lack of placement. They emphasised that the Council should not be being priced out of its own Borough. Onder Beter advised that the ambition was definitely to do the utmost to place children locally when it was in their best interest, but the Committee were right to highlight insufficient placements which would mean a proportion of children may not be able to remain local. This would be strongly connected to their complex needs and the risks involved. Officers agreed to look at the phrasing of the statement. Gail Tolley explained that a proportion of late entrants to care were gang related therefore children would be placed out of Borough for safety reasons, but there were children they would want to place in Brent who they could not. Officers would provide an update on this as a matter arising for the next Committee meeting.

The Committee queried the focus on finding a co-ordinator for CAMHS outside of Brent and why that had not also been a focus within Brent, which had a large waiting list. Onder Beter advised that the position for an out of Borough CAMHS co-ordinator was due to be filled 2 years ago and it had taken 2 years for the CCG to appoint to the position. He advised the Committee it had been valuable to have someone who was now doing hands on work for children where the Council had been concerned about their clinical need. Onder Beter agreed that assessments for LAC in Brent by CAMHS also needed to be prioritised, and assured the Committee local CAMHS was high on the agenda of the Brent Children's Trust and the Joint Commissioning Group meetings. Gail Tolley added that the topic of CAMHS was the substantive item on the Children's Trust agenda that day.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

10. **Fostering Service Quarterly Report, Quarter 1 (Apr 2021 - Jun 2021)**

The purpose of this report was to provide information to the Corporate Parenting Committee about the general management of the in-house fostering service and how it was achieving good outcomes for children, in accordance with standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards (2011).

In relation to the Joint Fostering Project and Hounslow being interesting in re-joining, Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) explained that conversations were ongoing but it was not definite. The way the piece was being marketed focused on creating more local placements for children in West London, and a competitive package for foster carers in London who could take more challenging children.

The Committee were pleased there would be a hybrid option to provide sessions for foster carers, and asked for the next report to include a breakdown of sessions attended and the gender make-up of the sessions. Onder Beter agreed they had observed significantly more uptake in the online offer and would provide both online and in person training for the future, while taking government guidelines on Covid-19 into consideration.

The Committee highlighted section 7.2.1, which mentioned the effect Covid-19 had on the lived experience of Brent foster carers, asking what type of effect it had. Onder Beter advised that the primarily it was a negative impact, for example residents had lost loved ones due to Covid-19, some had Covid-19 themselves, and some had looked after children with Covid-19. The reason it had been included in the report was to highlight that Brent had been responsive to those experiences and supported foster carers accordingly. He reassured the Committee that they were acutely aware of the need to support foster carers. A number of foster carers had increased anxiety, particularly around social workers and professionals entering homes, and the Council were thinking about how they could best support foster carers through that anxiety including making testing mandatory for professionals entering homes or having had both Covid-19 vaccinations. The Committee noted that foster carers had been very resilient and committed during the pandemic.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the report.

11. Any other urgent business

The Committee queried where Brent Council was at with the EU resettlement scheme. Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) confirmed Brent had done well and received corporate financial support to recruit a part time worker on the issue. The department were communicating with families, children and care leavers. By the deadline of 30 June 2021 Brent had made applications for all Looked After Children, which the Strategic Director Children and Young People, Chief Executive and Lead Member had sight of. The Council were also clear about the process for new children coming into the system and were in regular communications with the Home Office Vulnerability Team. They had also linked with 8 care leavers whose cases had been closed as the Council saw they would usually be eligible, to check they had made applications.

The meeting closed at 18:51 pm

COUNCILLOR MILI PATEL
Chair