



MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE

Virtual meeting on Wednesday 13 October 2021 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT (in remote capacity): Councillor M Patel (Chair) and Councillors Conneely, Gbajumo and Maurice

Also Present (in remote capacity): Councillor McLennan

The Chair led opening remarks, explaining that, as the meeting was being held virtually, any formal decisions would require ratification at the next in-person meeting.

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Thakkar.

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 20 July 2021 be approved as an accurate record, subject to ratification at the next quorate meeting.

6. Matters arising (if any)

None.

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

A (Care Leavers in Action) told the Committee about the fun day that had been organised in August, where the Care Leavers in Action Group (CLIA) and the Care in Action Group (CIA) got together in Kenton for food and music. The groups had input in to the planning of the event. Another event had been to Brighton beach on

3 September. Going forward, CLIA were lobbying for a celebration event to acknowledge the hard work they had done on the Young Inspectors project.

T (Care in Action) expressed to the Committee that CIA had been the highlight of the year so far, especially during Covid-19. CIA were working to attract other Looked After Children, and held an event at the Gordon Brown Centre with looked after children who were not part of CIA as a taster for them to see what type of activities the group did. T advised that CIA had wished the budget for the fun day had been wider as they wanted to do more, and hoped that could be taken on board for the following year. The CIA group had also looked at the results of the 'Bright Spots' survey, analysed the graphs and tables and gave feedback on what Brent could do better. T advised that the CIA group felt like a safe zone where she felt listened to, valued and important.

T (Care in Action) expressed that CIA had benefited her as a person to speak about her experiences confidently, with other people with similar backgrounds. The group allowed T to get to know other people and learn new things, and helped younger children speak the truth about their lives.

A (Care in Action) agreed that CIA had a good impact on her, and helped her become more social with other people and confident.

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that, within the Covid guidelines, the service would look in to the possibility of an in person celebration event for looked after children and care leavers.

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. Feedback from Looked After Children: Outcome of the Bright Spots "Your life, your care" survey 2020

Sonya Kalyniak (Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, Brent Council) introduced the report, which provided information about the 'your life, your care' survey and how the Council was responding to the results. She advised the Committee that the survey was conducted through the University of Oxford. It had been developed with children and young people to ensure it was easy to access and quick to complete, meaning the Council could get a really good representation of children's voices. The Committee heard that the Council put a lot of effort into promoting the survey through schools, foster carers and Independent Reviewing Officers, and elected members could be confident that this was a fair representation of young peoples' experience in care. There were responses from 36% of eligible children, meaning the survey was statistically relevant.

The key areas the results of the survey showed had gone well were; children and young people felt safe at home; a high proportion of respondents said they trusted their carers; children and young people knew who their social worker was and

trusted them, which was an improvement from the 2018 survey results; and there had been an increase in young people with less variation in social workers, with 40% of respondents aged 11-18 having had one social worker in the last 12 months, compared to 16% in 2018. The areas children and young people said needed to be improved were; feeling settled, with 76% reporting feeling settled compared to 90% in other local authorities benchmarked against; knowing their personal history and why they were in care; and contact and spending time with birth families. When Care in Action had discussed the results of the survey, they had discussed the topic of bullying, which had come up in the survey, and how the local authority could support people experiencing bullying. They also spoke about having a pet and contact with families.

The results of the survey were considered at a local partnership meeting to address key themes, which had good attendance from looked after children, care leavers, social workers and senior managers across the different service areas. Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) would lead on the improvement plan following the results.

The Chair thanked Sonya Kalyniak for her introduction and invited comments from the Committee, with the following points raised:

In relation to the timescales of the survey, the Committee were advised that the service was committed to doing a survey every 2 years, as it took a while from completion to get the results and then implement the improvement work. It was felt that 2 years would be sufficient time to see the impact of the improvement plan.

Sonya Kalyniak confirmed that the service would go back to the young people who had taken part in the survey as a 'you said, we did' exercise to show the respondents that their voice had made a difference, which would encourage them to complete the survey again in the future.

The Committee noted that young people had chosen not to prioritise the theme around young people feeling that they could talk to an adult they lived with, and queried what could be done to help in that area to open up conversations. Sonya Kalyniak advised that, although the CIA and CLIA groups had chosen specific areas to look at, the service would look at all areas that needed to be worked on. Training for foster carers about how to open up conversations and encourage vulnerable young people to share with adults they lived with was part of addressing that priority.

The Committee commended section 4.3.1 of the report, which stated that 40% of Brent young people reported they had one social worker in 12 months. They asked what further work would be done to improve that even more. Nigel Chapman (Operational Director for Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) agreed that the results indicated the impact of having a stable and permanent management group. He advised that the caseload in LAC and Permanency was manageable, to enable social workers to feel that they could do direct focused work with their children, and there had been a lot of work within the management group to develop and support that approach. The recruitment and retention challenge for the CYP department was frontline child protection teams, which was an issue nationally. The Council had agreed to increase resource for some frontline child protection teams to reduce caseloads, which would be proposed to the General

Purposes Committee. It was hoped that package would strengthen the progress made in this area even more.

Councillor McLennan was invited to contribute to the Committee, and asked about the feasibility of children and young people having more contact with their families in the context of child protection processes and regulations. Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that the level of contact families had was ordered by the court and not a decision made by the Council in care proceedings cases. In some circumstances, it would be related to the experience they had with their birth families, and having a more stable social worker workforce would not necessarily increase the contact time children and young people had with their birth families. Onder Beter reminded those present that the survey had been undertaken after the first national lockdown where in-person contact had been restricted, and may have been completed in a context where children were missing seeing their birth families face to face.

The Committee noted that the report highlighted children and young people would like more opportunity to do different activities, recalling the earlier conversation with CIA representatives about expanding events. In relation to how the programmes were designed, Sonya Kalyniak advised that the activities were driven as much as possible by what young people wanted to see. The CLIA and CIA groups were the Children in Care Council so did a lot of work outside of activities, co-ordinating and ensuring young people had a wide variety of opportunities on offer. The responsibility for organising and arranging activities sat with the LAC and Permanency Team. Gail Tolley advised the Committee that through the Virtual School at half term some looked after children were going to an event at Oti Mbusi's Dance School which everyone was looking forward to. There had been restrictions which had meant the service were not able to do as many face to face activities, but they were now being put back in place led by the interests of children and young people. Onder Beter concluded by highlighting that an expansion of activities was also heavily reliant on resources.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

9. Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2020 - 2021

Sonya Kalyniak (Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, Brent Council) introduced the report. She advised that Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) ensured cases were reviewed on a regular basis and that the wishes of children for their care plan were given good consideration. An average of 73 reviews were chaired every month, and there was a mixed model within Brent, with 2 in-house IROs and a commissioned service for the remainder of IROs. The arrangements had been in place for a long time. IROs had worked with young people since they had come in to care and it was a very stable service area.

A key theme in the report was to ensure a hybrid model was developed and put in place, following young people participating and being more confident with online case reviews during the pandemic. The Committee were advised that this model needed to be an innovative, long term and sustainable model, created in

consultation with children and young people. The service were also looking at escalations and how these made a difference to children.

In relation to the increase in escalations, the Committee queried whether there were any areas of concern there. Sonya Kalyniak advised that escalations were viewed as healthy, and IROs were encouraged to escalate where necessary. The service had emphasised what routes should be followed if an IRO had concerns.

The Committee highlighted that the majority of advocacy requests were around choice, type and location of placement. They were advised that this was in relation to children and young people requesting to change placements from semi-independent providers. The Committee were reminded that the report covered 2020-2021, so there was a hope that, following the implementation of the semi-independent quality assurance framework, those issues might be improved. Sonya Kalyniak added that there were new arrangements in place for children to access advocacy very swiftly. Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) added that the requests also related to where children were placed outside of their local area due to safeguarding, and they were unhappy to be placed away from their local connections.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

10. **Support for Brent's Looked After Children and Care Leavers from Afghanistan**

The purpose of this report was to provide information to the Corporate Parenting Committee with a summary of activities the Council were doing to support Afghan children and young people becoming looked after children and care leavers in Brent. Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) highlighted paragraphs 4.2 and 4.3 of the report, which detailed the emotional wellbeing and mental health support provided through commissioned services. Young people were being signposted to specialists in providing support to the Afghan community. Some young people had expressed they would like direct financial support to bring families to the UK, which Councillor Mili Patel as the Lead Member for Children's Safeguarding had been briefed on. As corporate parents, the Council had provided some support to help children who had needed to be brought back to the UK from Afghanistan.

The Committee highlighted the motion submitted by Councillor Hassan to Full Council regarding support for Afghan refugees, and members of the Committee had shared some of the initiatives detailed in the report with her such as the mental health offer, which members felt was very proactive. Councillor Hassan had been impressed at Brent's response and hoped national government funding could be secured to ensure these interventions continued to be offered.

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised the Committee that the government had focused on those Afghan families and individuals through the ARAP scheme who were evacuated. Brent did not have any bridging hotels for the ARAP scheme but there were families in hotels in Kensington

and Chelsea and Westminster, so Brent had looked at ways to help there in regard to school places.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the report.

11. **Brent Virtual School Annual Report**

Sharon Buckby (Head of Inclusion and Brent Virtual School) presented the report which outlined the activity of the Brent Virtual School and the educational outcomes for Brent looked after children for the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21. She advised the Committee that looked after children had been learning in the pandemic and hoped councillors would see how well they had achieved despite that learning environment over the past 2 years. The core aim of the virtual school was to ensure children and young people were provided with every opportunity to succeed, to support schools to be aspirational, and to create intervention programmes to support looked after children's learning and understand how they learned. She highlighted the key positives within the report, including: the success of achieving PEPs with 99% completion rate, which was attributed to the multi-disciplinary approach taken; very high attendance levels which were far above the national average; and a zero permanent exclusion rate.

There was a slight decrease in the number of children achieving 5 GCSEs including English and Maths from 28% to 24% in 2021, which was attributed to the significant challenges faced during students' final years. The Committee were advised that lower attainment rates demonstrated the late entry to care for those in year 11, and very often those looked after children had unidentified or unmet Special Education Needs, coupled with a fractured educational career, and so the focus of the virtual school was to enable those LAC to have a positive future post-16. Those not engaged in employment, education and training post-16 had found it particularly hard to get back in to work, which had been isolating for those young people. As a result, work had been undertaken with the commissioned careers advice service, Brent Works, and the post-16 life coach.

The Committee commended the report and highlighted the high attendance record, which was attributed to the fact schools remained open for all looked after children during the lockdown. There was a wholehearted focus in Brent on ensuring vulnerable children attended schools. Although there were challenges for young people in secondary schools placed outside of the borough, Brent Virtual School had worked very hard with foster carers to ensure children could engage wherever possible in a meaningful way.

The Committee queried how those not in education or employment would be supported. Sharon Buckby advised the members that Prospects gave targeted support, and Brent Works also supported young people into work. She highlighted that the combined work being done with by the virtual school with Brent Works had opened up opportunities and provided one of the most successful routes for young people to take. The focus was on looking at the interests of young people as a way to re-engage them and re-invigorate their motivation. This was done in conjunction with social workers or supported by semi-independent providers.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

12. Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Report, Quarter 2 (July 2021 - September 2021)

The Committee received a report from Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) highlighting the work of the fostering service in Brent between July 2021 and September 2021. In summing up activity, he advised the Committee of the additional resources required to administrate 72 referrals for age assessments from unaccompanied asylum seekers coming forward as children from the 3 contingency hotels in Brent. This included recruitment of additional lawyers to support potential judicial review hearings and additional age assessors. He advised that the Council believed some of those who had come forward to be children over the age of 18, which raised concerns over the age assessment process on arrival to the UK by the Home Office.

In terms of recruitment and assessment of foster carers, there had been a decline in the number of new enquiries and the conversion rate from referrals into initial visits and assessments. This decline had been associated with the holiday period and that the marketing and recruitment officer had not yet been appointed. An interim service manager for LAC and Permanency had been appointed following the departure to another London LA of the postholder.

As requested by the Committee, the report included information on relevant elements of kinship care pertaining to fostering. Paragraph 9.1 of the report detailed new developments and the service were continuing to work on the collaborative fostering project where they hoped to have a product towards the end of Spring 2022. Paragraph 9.2 of the report detailed the decision made by the DfE to ban local authorities from placing any child under 18 in an unregulated semi-independent provider, and the Committee were reassured that there were no children under 16 placed in semi-independent accommodation in Brent.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

13. Six-Monthly Adoption Report (Quarter 1 and 2)

The Committee received a report from Debbie Gabriel (Head of Service, Adopt London West) updating them on the performance of Adopt London West over the review period. Debbie Gabriel highlighted the following key points in relation to the report:

- Sections 5 and 6 of the report detailed the improved performance for placing children after court authorisation, which had improved by 31 days. She felt this demonstrated the strong partnership between Brent social workers and Adopt London West.

- 11 children in Brent had plans for adoption. 6 had been placed in their adoptive families, and 1 child had been matched and would be with their adoptive family by the end of the month. There were 4 children going through court proceedings.
- The government had made early permanence for children a priority and allocated additional funding to improve that area of practice. There was one child in Brent placed in early permanence which meant they could join their adoptive family much earlier.
- There had been capacity issues for adopter recruitment, therefore the Board for Adopt London West had approved a fixed term temporary post to add additional management capacity and improve that position.
- In regards to adoption and special guardianship support, the education support group had been promoted as an area of good practice. This group met termly and was facilitated by an educational psychologist. A podcast had been recorded to help adopters think about the challenges of applying for a secondary school and the transition to high school.

The Committee thanked Debbie Gabriel for her introduction to the report, and noted that a Special Guardian had joined the meeting this evening to talk about her experience. The Chair welcomed the carer to the meeting and invited her to comment.

The carer informed the Committee that since becoming a Special Guardian carer she had linked with Adopt London West for support, and had a really positive experience. She engaged with different groups and carers who had been able to support each other along their journeys. She hoped to develop the service further through a peer support network with more community based activities for Special Guardians, which would be carer led within their own communities. One example of a community based event was a recent Fun Day, which was the first time the children had been able to interact with each other. She felt this enabled children to see other representation of themselves in the different family units. There was also a newly developed special guardian reference group, which the carer fed in to in order to influence government response to adoption nationally.

The Chair thanked the special guardian for her comments and invited comments and questions from the Committee, with the following points raised:

The Committee agreed that the special guardian was trailblazing in this area and helping to ensure all the support that could be given was in place. In terms of the role of the Committee, the members queried what carers would want them to do through monitoring and holding the service to account. The carer advised the Committee that it was important to understand that the journey for special guardians was different to adoptive carers, but was the same level of permanency for the child. Access to entitlement was not the same, and she was lobbying nationally for universal support no matter the legal order of the carer, highlighting it should be based on a child's needs. Support offered to special guardians was not currently regulated and she felt that this should be looked into, as it made it difficult for special guardians to approach services. In terms of improvement, she felt this could be done through utilising communities, forums and panels for special guardians to feed back their experience, which could make a difference at a local

level. The carer invited councillors to meet special guardian carers through support groups.

The Committee expressed gratitude to all special guardian carers, highlighting that the more equitable support that could be offered the more people might come forward as special guardians. They wanted to recognise and value special guardians, and noted that the previous week had been Kinship Carer Week.

The Committee moved to speak about recruitment, including the national recruitment campaign launched by central government ‘#youcanadopt’. Debbie Gabriel advised that the campaign was really welcome, but from experience it was highlighted that adopters needed certain skills, characteristics, understanding and insight. The children being placed needed to be able to maintain a level of relationship with their birth families. Ideally the service would look to be able to support children to be with their birth families and if that was not possible to place them within a kinship arrangement as that was better for children’s resilience, emotional wellbeing and mental health. If that was not possible then adoption was the right pathway, but the right adopters were needed in order to be able to understand the children’s loss and identity.

Adopt London West had launched a Black Adopters Project, recognising that the experience of Black adopters was not what it should be and that Black children often waited longer for adoption. Debbie Gabriel agreed to bring back to the Committee an update on the Black Adopters Project, particularly in relation to Brent, for the next report.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

14. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 18:51 pm

COUNCILLOR MILI PATEL
Chair