



MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE
Tuesday 19 April 2022 at 5.00 pm
Held as a hybrid meeting

PRESENT: Councillors McLennan (Chair) Conneely, Gbajumo, Maurice and Thakkar

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

Councillor Conneely declared a personal interest that she worked for Brent Centre for Young People who worked in partnership with Brent Council.

4. Deputations (if any)

None received.

5. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the last meeting held on 19 January 2022 be approved as an accurate record, and to ratify previous decisions.

6. Matters arising (if any)

None.

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

A member of Care in Action (CIA) highlighted what the group had done at the most recent CIA sessions. They had discussed ideas to help young people when they first came into care, and considered a leaflet that could be given to young people when they came into care. They had also been looking at training for social workers and relationships with carers.

Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) members had met in person and spoke about refreshing the Terms of Reference which set out how the group worked, in partnership with the Voice and

Influence Group. They considered that more staff would be beneficial to improving the group, and hoped to create opportunities within the new proposals to enable paid sessional experience working with young people, which would be especially beneficial to care leavers who were of working age.

C (Care Leavers in Action) had been involved in delivering interview panel training to care experienced young people. He had co-facilitated the meeting which 10 young people had attended, including 3 care leavers and 7 CIA members, 3 of whom were new members. The session covered presenting yourself for interviewing, how to write interview questions for the best person for the job, and understanding council recruitment processes such as equality policies and unconscious bias. This was delivered to young people who had not done interview panels before, and all who attended the sessions participated well. In response to whether there were more opportunities to give young people the skills to co-facilitate the sessions, C felt that more could be done to support young people to facilitate meetings.

The Committee thanked the representatives for the updates and RESOLVED:

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

8. **Annual Progress of the Local Offer for Care Leavers (2021/22) and the Proposed Revised Local Offer 2022 -2024**

Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the annual progress report of the local care leaver offer. He highlighted that Brent was one of the first local authorities to publish their offer for care leavers once the requirement became statutory in 2018. Brent had committed to reviewing the offer on an annual basis, bringing a revised version for the Committee to approve every two years, as per DfE guidance. There were commitments in the local offer defined by law, and also a set of commitments defined as additional or discretionary which Brent Council offered. The report included progress against those commitments. The report also detailed the demand on local services due to an increase in numbers of care leavers currently being supported. Children and young people had been consulted on the revised offer and had proposed some changes, highlighted in appendix 1 of the report.

The Chair thanked Onder Beter for the introduction and invited comments and questions from those present, with the following raised:

Responding to how the offer would change as time went by against the projections, Onder Beter advised that the increase in care leaver numbers had been brought to the attention of the Committee over the past few years to keep them updated. The projections were kept under constant review both within the Children and Young People department and corporately. Every year, the Council had allocated growth funding to ensure it was meeting the funding requirements, but as the department moved into the future there would be challenges.

In response to a query regarding financial commitment for care leavers going into higher education, Onder Beter advised that there was a legislative requirement for local authorities to offer £2k bursaries per care leaver for higher education up to the age of 21. Brent had been providing care leavers with discretionary financial support up to the age of 25, based on a needs assessment, but was not resourced to provide financial support post 25 years old for higher education.

The Committee asked what impact the new additions to the local offer would have. Onder Beter advised that they had made good progress with the Nominated Housing Officer who worked with Personal Advisors to identify suitable independent accommodation for care

leavers. A strength in Brent was the support the Council offered care leavers who might be at risk of homelessness and rough sleeping. The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communications was impressed with Brent at a recent Moderation Panel when they were reviewing funding allocations to tackle rough sleeping. Onder Beter highlighted that, because the Council did well in this area, the funding allocation was not as much as would be preferred. In relation to the updates to the financial guide and how that would have an impact, the Committee were advised that it was too early to know what the impact of that was, however it was being done alongside a number of initiatives, such as workshops provided by 'My Bank', work with ASDAN, Independent Life skills work, and the new initiative with the Gordon Brown Centre.

In relation to care leavers having Band B priority for offers of accommodation, with three months to bid for and accept a property, the Committee asked what the reality of a care leaver getting a Band B property in 3 months was. Onder Beter advised that this had so far been a realistic target and there had not been any issues for young people ready to move on. He foresaw this being more challenging in the future due to market supply and demand in housing. The banding was agreed by Brent's Housing Allocation Scheme which was approved by Council members. The Children and Young People's department had input into that Scheme, with a comprehensive response to ensure care leavers were at the highest priority.

The Committee noted that care leavers were given a Personal Advisor (PA) at the age of 18. Considering the increase in mental health issues for young people, the Committee queried how skilled PAs were to provide support if there was an increase in mental health issues for the young people they supported. Onder Beter confirmed that all looked after children were allocated to a social worker until the age of 18. He advised that young people aged 16 and 17 were co-allocated to PAs who would be their sole worker post 18. Onder Beter stated that PAs were not mental health practitioners and their role was not to provide mental health support. He highlighted that mental health for care leavers was a national issue and steps were being taken to address this, for example with the NHS transformation plan which included service improvement to CAMHS for young people up to the age of 25. There was also a programme in Brent for care leavers called 'Safe Base Brent' focusing on care leavers' mental health, as well as the Brent Centre for Young People and online mental health support for those care leavers who did not meet the threshold for adult mental health services. Responding to a query on the level of need for care leavers, the Committee heard that care leavers were known to be a vulnerable group due to adverse childhood experiences which would put them in the category of young people needing mental health support. The degree of that support would depend on their individual level of need. It was highlighted that there was much more support available for children under 18 than for those 18-25 years old, who had much fewer services available. The Committee highlighted the importance of supporting that transition from childhood to adulthood and the importance of transitional services.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

9. Looked After Children and Care Leaver Placements

The Committee received a report which provided an update on placement commissioning activity for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. It was highlighted that there had been recent media attention on the topic, particularly the cost of specialist placements.

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised the Committee that the paper aimed to be informative, for members to see and understand the

pressures on the placements budget. This was not a Brent specific issue but a London and national issue, and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) had recently published a report regarding the pressures. All local authorities had been contacted about their costs for placements and the Association for Directors of Children's Services had put in a response on behalf of local authorities. The average financial cost of a placement for a child in residential care was detailed in paragraph 3.13 of the report. Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) added that the issue was particularly significant for local authorities with a LAC population made up of mainly teenagers. Brent Council had seen an increase of 18.6% in the number of children and young people needing placements in the past year, and a 78% increase in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASCs). The increase in numbers had, in turn, increased demand on the Brent Family Front Door (BFFD). Table 5 included further details on the number of looked after children Brent Council were supporting in various residential settings.

The report detailed the difficulties and challenges around placement sufficiency and the importance of finding a suitable placement. Officers highlighted that, despite the challenges highlighted in the report, colleagues had put in a lot of hard work to identify suitable placements, including staying late in the evenings.

Brent had seen a decrease in the number of foster carers over the past few years due to the cohort being of a more mature age. This recruitment issue was experienced despite a number of recruitment strategies trialled by the Council. The previous year there had been a net loss of 7 foster carers, despite 5 new fostering households being recruited. Neighbouring authorities were experiencing similar issues with similar numbers. This would mean the Council would be relying more on independent foster carers and there was an increased risk of more children going into residential placements, which would increase financial pressures.

In considering the report, the Committee raised the following points:

The Committee acknowledged the importance of the report in highlighting the cost implications to the placement budget alongside the complexity of cases. Committee members drew out some positives they felt the report demonstrated, such as that standards for living arrangements for young people in care were being looked into through future Ofsted regulations, although they felt quality provision would require funding.

In relation to plans for recruiting foster carers, the Committee were advised that this was being worked on with the West London Fostering Collaboration Project. The Committee were informed there were financial incentives and allowances for foster caring, but Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) were choosing to pay more money for foster carers which Brent Council was not able to compete with. It was hoped that Brent could level up allowances to bring them into a competitive range with IFAs. To further increase recruitment efforts, a redesign of the fostering service was considered with more impetus on digital marketing strategies. Brent was looking at the existing cohort of foster carers to see how they could be upskilled, and using creative ideas to increase the number of beds in placements. Onder Beter highlighted that more lobbying was needed to position foster care as the best care arrangement for looked after children, and the CMA report had issued recommendations around how fostering should be supported and boosted, including standards requirements for IFAs.

Those present acknowledged that foster carers were older in age and there were grandparents caring for children which could be challenging in terms of their complex behaviours. They were advised that grandparents willing to care for a grandchild were well supported in Brent by the kinship care arrangements, which received the same level of support provided as mainstream Brent foster carers. In relation to the age of foster carers,

the Committee also acknowledged that the current cost of living was an inhibiting factor for younger people.

The Committee asked what the impact of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care would be in terms of taking up recommendations. Gail Tolley advised that it had been made clear early on to members of the independent review that the review would provide ideas, solutions, and a strong steer to government on the issues. The report was due to be published in June 2022, and it was agreed that it should be presented to the Corporate Parenting Committee for a discussion, looking closely at any government response to the review at the end of this year. There was concern that the review may not go far enough in its steer to central government.

In relation to the pilot for young people needing CAMHS, the Committee asked how that would benefit young people, and where the funding came from to support that pilot. Nigel Chapman (Operational Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) highlighted that, regionally and across London, there was work being done to jointly commission and secure welfare homes in Barking and Dagenham. Working with the NWL CCG and the West London Alliance (WLA), the pilot would provide a home crisis service for children and young people who, following admission to A&E due to mental health concerns, were not able to safely return home and needed a short period of intensive support in a tier 4 bed. As this was being done in partnership across 8 local authorities the WLA and CCG had agreed to put funding towards it. Brent would act as the lead authority for this work in West London.

To close the discussion, Gail Tolley reminded that Children's Services in Brent was the 6th lowest funded Children's Services in London. The Committee agreed that this report was a starting point to drive the issue forward politically, and hoped that the new administration would pick up these issues.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

10. **Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report - Quarter 4: 1 January 2022 to 31 March 202**

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).

The report detailed the efforts being undertaken on fostering recruitment, and the number of foster carers in each stage of their applications. The Committee's attention was drawn to paragraph 9.1, which detailed a new Clinical Evaluation Tool for evaluating the impact and difference in outcomes for children with complex needs who were placed with foster carers. 50 children had been chosen for the assessment tool pilot by social workers and supervisors, and it was hoped this tool would help with placement sustainment. In relation to the West London Fostering Collaborative Project, that work had been put on hold during year end budget setting and local authority elections at the request of the other local authorities involved.

The Chair thanked officers for the presentation, and invited comments and questions from those present, with the following issues raised:

The Committee asked whether there was capacity in the system to take the number of children coming into care. Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) advised that officers anticipated that the numbers would plateau and slowly decrease in this financial year. The rise had mainly been linked to the increased number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASCs) entering the system, and there would be some increase in numbers of looked after children going forward but not at the level that had been seen over the past 12 months.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the report.

11. **Brent Adoption Report Six Monthly Report: 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022**

The purpose of this report was to provide a briefing to the Corporate Parenting Committee in relation to adoption performance data for 1 October 2021 – 31 March 2022, the progress and activity of Adopt London West (ALW), and how good outcomes were being achieved for children. Debbie Gabriel (Adopt London West) drew the Committee's attention to some key points of the report, detailed as follows:

- 21 adopters were approved in 2021-2022. 47% of those were from Black or Mixed Ethnicity households.
- There was a general support offer to families and also targeted support and specialist support. Adopters also received newsletters and invites to the whole family for training opportunities.
 - Specialist support included helping adults access their adoption records, specific counselling, reunification, or for families struggling with very young children's behaviour management.
 - Social workers made applications for support for families to receive specialist therapeutic support through the Adoption Support Fund, with 58 applications made for Brent families.
 - Special guardianship support was available, and one of Brent's special guardians acted as an advocate for special guardians. This special guardian co-facilitated a special guardianship support group and a small grant had been made available to the group to co-ordinate 'chill and chat' sessions which were more informal, regular catch-ups that were easy to access. The first special guardianship forum would take place the following week and senior managers had been invited to attend this to hear directly from special guardians in Brent.
- Partnership work continued across ALW.
 - The Partnership Board had now agreed a partnership with 'Kinship', a national organisation leading on advocacy support and training for special guardians.
 - The Black Adoption Project had started, and was planned in various stages. The first phase involved data collection to enable ALW to better understand the experience of Black children in care and adopters. For this, a survey had been conducted to seek the views and experiences of Black families, which would then be analysed by the Steering Group which had been established as part of the project's governance process.
 - 'We are Family' was a peer support adoption agency that ALW worked closely with. They delivered a Webinar programme online for adopters fortnightly and hosted a podcast series in partnership with ALW which had proved popular.

The Chair thanked Debbie for her update and invited comments and questions from those present, with the following issues raised:

The Committee queried what the most challenging factor for adopters was going forward. They heard that age was not a challenging factor, but the issue of adopters understanding that the needs of adoptive children were different continued to be a challenge for ALW and all adoption agencies. ALW were producing materials to help people understand in more detail the needs of adoptive children, for example through the ALW animation video on their website.

The Committee asked whether there was any possibility of crossover work between the Black Adopters Project and Brent's Black Community Action Plan (BCAP). The Chair highlighted that one of the 9 priorities the Youth Advisory Group of the BCAP had established over the 10 year implementation programme was family relationships, so believed there was some connection between the projects that could be explored. The Youth Advisory Group could link with ALW about this. The BCAP Programme Co-ordinator could also link in to the work and officers would provide the Co-ordinator with information about the ALW project.

Regarding the national issues with delays and speed of adoptions, the Committee queried whether there should be concern locally, highlighting the slow speed of some of the adoptions listed in the report. Debbie Gabriel advised that, regionally and nationally, more cases were being delayed due to birth parents appealing. The court process for appeals was very complex which contributed to the delay. Statistical analysis with neighbours was difficult due to the complexity of the adoptive cohort, and as the number of adoptive children in ALW was relatively small, this skewed the average and made it appear there were more delays than there necessarily was. It was acknowledged that it was right that parents were offered additional assessments and had strong advocacy to explore all options before adoption was decided as the final care plan. Nigel Chapman (Operational Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) added that, as the Agency Decision Maker, he saw speed once the court decision was received. Onder Beter added that Brent had never been limited to in-house adopters as an option, and the Council continued to look beyond Brent and nationally to search for adopters. He also added that the national data published in relation to speed of adoptions was outdated.

The Committee were advised that 51 families were currently receiving social worker support, where some of those families may have an Adoption Support Fund service, but not necessarily all of them. There had been a small improvement in the number of applications made, and as the ALW offer of services increased slightly it may be that not all families required an Adoption Support Fund service, but where they did applications were made very swiftly.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

12. **Any other urgent business**

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) informed the Committee that this was the last meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee under the current administration. She highlighted the importance of the Committee and the lives of the children it considered. She thanked members on behalf of the Children and Young People department for the time they had put in to the Committee, highlighting its very visible role in the Council in terms of external interest, such as Ofsted.

She also added that Councillor McLennan who had stepped in as Lead Member for Children's Safeguarding, Early Help and Social Care, and who chaired the meeting, would be retiring as a Councillor and thanked her for her championing of the needs of children in care and care leavers. The Committee thanked Councillor McLennan on behalf of children and young people.

The meeting closed at 18:40 pm

COUNCILLOR MARGARET MCLENNAN
Chair