



Brent

MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Thursday 21 September 2023 at 6.00 pm
Held as a hybrid meeting in the Members' Suite – Brent Civic Centre

PRESENT: Councillor Ketan Sheth (Chair), Councillor Collymore (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Afzal, Begum, Molloy, Smith, Mistry, Lorber and Parliament, and co-opted member Mr Alloysius Frederick

Also Present: Councillor Gwen Grahl

The Chair introduced the meeting by welcoming Chatan Popat, who had been appointed as the Strategy Lead – Scrutiny, supporting the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee.

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

- Councillor Matin, substituted by Councillor Lorber
- Co-opted member Ms Rachelle Goldberg

2. Declarations of interests

Personal interests were declared as follows:

- Councillor Sheth – full list of declarations available [HERE](#)
- Councillor Collymore – lay member of several NWL ICP Boards

3. Deputations (if any)

There were no deputations received.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED:- The minutes of the meeting on 5 July 2023 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

5. Matters arising (if any)

There were no matters arising.

6. Outcome of 2023 Ofsted ILACS and Current Children's Social Care Improvement Activity

Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) introduced the report, which he explained had two parts. The first part provided an overview of the recent Ofsted ILACS Inspection and its findings, which took place in February 2023, and the second part provided details on where the Children and Young People Department were with workforce challenges, particularly in social care.

In continuing the introduction, Nigel Chapman outlined the general ILACS inspection process. He informed the Committee that the Council would normally expect to be inspected on a three-yearly cycle, but the pandemic had stretched that and Brent's previous inspection had taken place in 2018 where the Council had been judged 'good' overall, with some variability in sub-categories. The department had been very pleased to receive an overall 'good' rating when the new judgement was published in April 2023 following the inspection in February, with 'good' across the board in all sub-categories. This was the first time Brent had been judged 'good' across the Board in all areas. The process for inspection was not standalone but an ongoing cycle, and within a three-year period the Council would expect to receive another inspection, likely in 2026, and midway through that cycle a focused visit. This was a 2-day visit on a chosen topic approximately one year following inspection. This provided reassurance to the Council alongside the scrutiny function. Within the 2023 inspection outcome, there were some areas for improvement that Ofsted expected the Council to action. Palvinder Kudhail (Director of Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) explained that the Council was expected to produce an action plan to Ofsted within a specified time period based on the 4 recommendations given by Ofsted, which had been done. Alongside that, the Children and Young People (CYP) department had a wider, comprehensive practice improvement plan which picked up other areas that had been highlighted during the inspection but which had not been included in the Ofsted recommendations, in order for the department to be thorough. One of the main priorities of that was the revised workforce development plan to create stability in the workforce at every level, particularly those hard to recruit to frontline posts.

Councillor Gwen Grahl (Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Schools) added that the inspection had come at a time of significant change within the CYP department, with Nigel Chapman, Palvinder Kudhail and herself relatively new to the roles. She explained that even though workforce and turnover was a national problem, Brent wanted to be a leader in attracting good quality social workers to Brent on a long-term basis, and she felt that Nigel Chapman and Palvinder Kudhail had showed good leadership on that across London.

In relation to the second part of the paper, Nigel Chapman highlighted that workforce was the biggest risk area to the department regarding social work activity, and workforce was one of the highest risk factors across the board within the Council, not just CYP. Workforce and turnover of social workers had been a factor in the Council's looked after children (LAC) work being judged as 'good' as opposed to retaining its 'outstanding' judgement from 2018. He highlighted this was a national and regional issue, and the last nationally published data on social workers showed that the number of agency workers had risen by 13% from September 2022. In Brent, the number of agency workers rose by 19%, meaning Brent was above the national average in terms of agency workers, and vacancies were also high at approximately 20%. However, the Council's caseload activity, which was a determining factor in social workers feeling well supported, was manageable and below the London average. The actions being taken to address workforce challenges were outlined in the report, and Nigel Chapman highlighted that, through leading in London on workforce, it was clear to him that the issues were beyond a single local authority's ability to control. Local authorities in London were waiting for central government feedback on further reforms in the workforce. Palvinder Kudhail added that, in Brent, the positive was that there was a stable leadership team in the service and the service had made a good start on filling frontline management posts permanently. The service had been meeting with all agency staff to talk about the benefits of converting to permanent employment, and since April 2023 the service had secured 7 former agency staff who converted to permanent, and there were 3 further agency workers in the pipeline to become permanent. This was good news as for every post there was a cost avoidance of £20k per annum, and it created stability in the workforce so that children and young people had less changes of social worker.

The Chair thanked officers for their introduction and invited comments and questions from the Committee, with the following issues raised:

The Committee was pleased that the Council had retained its overall 'good' rating following the Ofsted ILACS inspection, however, they noted that there was one particular area that had been judged as 'outstanding' in the previous 2018 inspection - the experience of looked after children. They asked why the judgement had changed and what further work was being done to ensure that did not slip further and could get back to 'outstanding'. Nigel Chapman informed the Committee that one of the main factors in not being 'outstanding' in that area following the recent inspection was due to turnover of social workers in the service. Some looked after children (LAC) Teams had a number of changes of social worker which reflected in some of the case files inspectors looked at. This had an impact on continuity of support for LAC. Whilst there had been a lot of good work in this area, Ofsted had not been able to see work they considered 'outstanding' because they were not able to see evidence of the mitigations that the service had in place in relation to social work turnover. For example, there was consistent team managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) which enabled continuity and stability, but the service had not evidenced fully that impact during the inspection. Palvinder Kudhail expanded on the actions the Council was now taking to mitigate the impact and provide evidence for that, explaining that the service was now reporting on the number of changes of social worker for each child and putting in mitigations for every single child where there had been a change. The service knew that every single LAC had a stable IRO, but they were now looking at other practitioners across the whole system to be the 'constant' in that child's life, such as a mentor, if it could not be the social worker, as mitigation. Since the inspection, Nigel Chapman had now asked for the quarterly performance data he received to incorporate the data on the number of social worker changes a child had, so at a granular level the head of service could then ensure that if a child had more than two changes of social worker then there were plans in place to prevent a further change from happening and that the child was moved to a team that was more stable. He felt this made the mitigations more robust as there was now regular data being received and it was possible to evidence that.

Continuing to discuss the rating for the experience of children in care, the Committee asked whether the CYP department felt confident that the 'outstanding' judgement would have been retained if there was enough staff adequately trained in the right place at the right time. Nigel Chapman confirmed that he would feel more confident that the judgement would have been more favourable if the workforce was more stable. The Council still aspired to be 'outstanding' and wanted to get back to that rating.

Aside from workforce pressures, the Committee asked what other factors specific to Brent may have contributed to the drop in judgement for the experience of children in care. Nigel Chapman explained that another area that the Council were working on was around sufficiency of local placements for children in care. Whilst the inspectors accepted that there was a need to place some children further away from Brent, there was always a need to find more local placements through fostering and residential care as close to home as possible. The Committee was reassured that CYP was putting mitigations in place to address the reasons for the slippage in the rating. For example, the Council was building its own Children's Residential home which would enable more of those children to have a placement in the borough, which would also be cheaper for the Council to provide. Other problems identified in the report were ones that could be resolved relatively easily. For example, the inspectors identified issues with care leavers accessing their records which CYP had already taken action on, and clear decisive action had been taken around private fostering placements. The workforce issues were the most significant but also the most difficult to resolve due to the many factors outlined and the trajectory of social work over the past 10 years where wages had remained relatively low, pressure on services had increased, and the roles had become more stressful following a number of public enquiries.

In relation to the second recommendation from Ofsted regarding attendance of children in care at their reviews and the information provided to them, the Committee noted that the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, Sonya Kalyniak, had met with commissioned providers to discuss the findings, agree improvement actions, and undertake an audit to further understand practice issues. They asked whether there was any early learning from those discussions that could be shared with the Committee. Sonya Kalyniak responded that the feedback from Ofsted was that there was some variability in the quality of information provided to children, such as records provided to children following their reviews. The service wanted to ensure that when a child's care plan was reviewed a letter was written to them in child focused language that explains exactly what happened during the review, what the child's voice was within that, what their dreams and aspirations are, and how they would be supported to achieve them. The audit had found that some of the language that was used at times was not particularly appropriate for children as it was written in a professional manner, whereas other times it was written in a child-friendly way. The service was looking to take the good practice examples of child friendly letters and use them as best practice tools to support IROs to write letters in that way.

The Committee asked whether there was any London-wide initiative or plans to set up an organisation for agency staff that would level the costs of agency workers. Nigel Chapman explained that there were no plans to set up an agency, but there was now a 'London Pledge', as referenced in the report. The Pledge had been running for a year. Every local authority except one in London had signed up to the Pledge which capped the rates Social Workers were paid through an agency. This had a lot of impact, and within a year the Council's spend on agency had reduced and stability had been increased. As such, there was no push for a London-wide agency because it was felt that local authorities were now managing the market more effectively and agencies were listening to local authorities more. Alongside this, Councils were awaiting updates from central government on proposals they were consulting on around managing agencies having an agreed national pay rate and banning the use of 'project teams'. There had been heavy lobbying around this but it was unclear whether the proposals would be implemented.

Palvinder Kudhail added that, as well as the cap on pay rates, the London Pledge also restricted any permanent member of staff employed by anyone in London to get another job in a London authority through an agency, which was helping to restrict movement of social workers. The Council had been focusing on their good agency staff and talking about the benefits of going permanent. Often, the factors for why someone chose to work with the Council were not always about money, but about having good supervision and management support, a good organisational culture, a reasonable workload, and opportunities for progression. The Council had a Progression Panel to enable that as well as training and development opportunities and were using those opportunities as pull factors. The service was also targeting external recruitment more carefully and using all social media outlets to do that. There was a steady stream of social workers coming through the 'grow your own' programme where newly qualified social workers were staying with the Council after they had trained. Finally, the Council had also recruited internationally and a cohort of social workers from India was due to join before the end of the year. The Council had found that international workers tended to stay with the Council longer and they had been set up with an effective package.

The Committee asked what the key factors were that made a social worker decide to continue as agency rather than enter full-time permanent employment. Nigel Chapman highlighted that a recent survey of around 1,000 social workers in London and South East had asked social workers about the attraction of agency. One of the findings was that whilst money was a factor it was not the top factor. Often, it was about the flexibility to fit social work in with their life to maintain a work-life balance. The opportunity for progression was

another factor, as there was a feeling that they could switch between roles and take control of their careers if they were agency.

In relation to whether the inspection had been unannounced, Nigel Chapman confirmed that the local authority did not know when the inspectors were coming. The authority would receive a phone call between 9 – 10am on a Monday morning and the inspection would then follow that week. In relation to inspections of schools specifically, which was not within the scope of the report, Nigel Chapman confirmed that they were also no-notice inspections. The school would know that an inspection was due but not when that would be. The school would usually be called on a Monday for the inspection to start the following day.

The Chair invited representatives from Brent Youth Parliament to contribute to the discussion. They asked what the Council was doing to maintain the mental health of looked after children to lower the risk of suicide and self-harm in young people who were in foster care, particularly those with multiple changes in social worker. Councillor Grahl thanked Brent Youth Parliament for the question, and responded that the support provided to care leavers and children in care on the whole was very good. She felt care leavers and children in care had access to a lot of different services and support workers, and there were a lot of different events and activities they could get involved in, including social events, subsidised access to gyms, and work with charities such as the Kiln Theatre and Barnardos where children explored their own identities. Sonya Kalyniak provided added that the looked after children with mental health issues were children the Council wanted to ensure had a permanent social worker and were not experiencing changes, as, for those children, retelling their story to multiple different professionals could be traumatic. The Council also wanted to ensure that the entire workforce was well aware of the mental health issues children and young people were facing so that they could be supported appropriately and interventions took place where appropriate. Sonya Kalyniak was leading that work with health partners, and there was good work happening in that space but she felt there was variability and that was being addressed through the multi-agency audit being done currently. For example, for children presenting in A&E with mental health difficulties, it was essential to ensure that before they left A&E that joined up work was happening and everyone supporting the child knew the child well and what their plan was for when they had left hospital.

The Committee asked whether there was any collaborative reflective practices in relation to mental health where children and young people were involved in order for CYP to gain feedback from them. Sonya Kalyniak advised the Committee that the department did receive a lot of feedback from children and young people on the services provided and the services the department developed. This was something the department was very passionate about, and Sonya Kalyniak supported the work of Care in Action and Care Leavers in Action, as well as Brent Youth Parliament, in order to hear those voices and ensure they informed services. The department was looking at getting young people involved in the training provided to social workers because children and young people were the experts in their own experience, and a joint project being ran with Brent Care Journeys had already done training designed and delivered by looked after children and care leavers to foster carers. In addition, the Council heard directly from looked after children at the Corporate Parenting Committee which was attended by Care Leavers in Action and Care in Action. In the past, those groups had successfully advocated for support such as an exemption from Council tax for care leavers. Councillor Grahl highlighted it could be difficult to encourage young people to participate in something like that as not everyone wanted to be involved in politics when they were growing up, particularly if they were facing other pressures in their life, but there was a group of very active young people attending those forums.

In relation to the action plan arising from the Ofsted recommendations, the Committee asked how that would be monitored going forward, including the timeline for completing those actions. Nigel Chapman explained that the action plan was the department's, in response to the Ofsted Inspection recommendations. The Council had submitted the action plan within the required 60 days and it had been accepted. Nigel Chapman had chaired meetings internally, which had involved presenting officers, to confirm the action plan, refine it and submit it well within the time. He would review, on a monthly basis, the progress against the actions. The plan was a 6-month time limited piece of work which would be closed off by the end of October 2023 and the department would report back into Ofsted when they returned in November 2023 for the annual engagement meeting. He felt personally reassured that the department was on track against 3 of the 4 recommendations. The final area, which related to consistency of management supervision and recording, was a constant action which was never 'ticked off' and completed, but there was evidence it was being strengthened.

Noting the current challenges for the department, the Committee asked what the main concerns for the future were as the department looked forward. Nigel Chapman felt that cost of living pressures were a big factor within Brent and the impact that was having on families through poverty would mean an increase in families being referred to the Brent Family Front Door for support for issues connected to poverty. If the cost of living pressures remained unaddressed then the department was likely to see a rise in that demand, which would put pressure within the system to be able to provide a good quality service. At the moment, he felt that the service was managing, but if the situation continued to worsen it would put the front door under strain. The Committee felt it was positive that the issue of cost of living was front and centre across all partners as a risk factor. They asked for reassurance that a joined up approach with partners was being taken in response to cost of living pressures and poverty. Nigel Chapman reassured the Committee that CYP was working closely with Adult Social Care around transitional safeguarding. This focused on those young people aged 18-25 years old who did not have a disability and were not a care leaver and to ensure more effective join up of services around mental health, housing, support and employment across the piece. This was a longstanding partnership piece of work. Alongside this, there was work in Family Wellbeing Centres and Brent Hubs joining services up. For example, if a family attending a Family Wellbeing Centre and had an issue around welfare benefits then they would receive signposting to relevant services based on a neighbourhood approach.

The Chair thanked those present for their contributions and drew the item to a close. A number of information requests were raised during the discussion, recorded as follows:

- i) For the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to receive the latest data and historic data on the Brent CAMHS waiting list, including comparison with other local areas.
- ii) For the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to receive an update within the next 6 months on the response, improvements and outcomes made in relation to the Ofsted ILACS Inspection recommendations.

7. SEND Strategy Implementation and Readiness for a Joint Ofsted / CQC Inspection

Councillor Gwen Grahl (Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Schools) introduced the report which updated the Committee on the SEND Strategy, which was an important obligation of the local authority. The report highlighted several positives including; the additional 427 placements that had been introduced across the borough in both mainstream schools and the brand-new school being built; that the 22/23 had not added to

the existing deficit in the High Needs Block from which SEND support was funded and; the waiting times for accessing an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) had improved significantly. The Council had invested in the provision of post-16 skills and was building 2 centres for that in Welsh Harp and Airco Close. She highlighted that there was further work to do in this area given the huge increase in demand recently.

Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) added that there were now over 3,000 children in Brent with an EHCP, compared to this time last year where there was just under 3,000. The continued growth was a national position, but it was putting strain on the system. He highlighted the positive that there were now more children being educated within mainstream schools, but there remained pressure for the Council to build special school places and the Council were making progress there.

In relation to readiness for a Joint Ofsted / CQC Inspection, the Children and Young People (CYP) department had been working closely with colleagues in health to ensure it was as ready as possible. The new inspection framework had been introduced in January 2023 and only a handful of inspections had taken place so far, with feedback from those areas showing that it was a much more granular inspection process than the previous version and looked more in depth at the experience of children and young people. Those that had completed an inspection had fed back that it was a tough process. There were 3 possible narrative judgements from the inspection; that the experience and outcomes of children and young people was generally consistently good; that the experience and outcomes for children and young people were inconsistent or; that the experience and outcomes for children and young people were generally poor. The local authority and health colleagues were being realistic about their position and believed that most children and young people generally did receive positive outcomes, however there were areas that needed focus and improvements such as waiting times for services. The importance of evidencing that action was being taken was highlighted.

Jonathan Turner (Borough Lead Director – Brent, ICP) had been working with CYP in preparation for the inspection in order to know where there were issues. He agreed that outcomes were generally good but that there were areas where plans to improve the experience of children and young people were needed, for example around waiting times for ASD and ADHD assessments. The Brent Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) would be bidding to NWL Integrated Care Board (ICB) to level up some of Brent's services, but that would not be resolved by the time of the inspection so those plans also needed to be evidenced during the inspection. Another area needing focus was the Special School Nursing Service provided by Central London Community Healthcare NHS Trust (CLCH) as demand for that service would increase when special school places increased. The ICP was looking at producing a business case to invest more into those services, but in the short term the ICP had released some Section 256 funding to support CLCH to recruit on an interim basis. The ICP had also put forward a business case for Children's Continence Services but this had been rejected as it only affected one borough. In response, the ICP was now working with other boroughs to resubmit that business case on a NWL basis.

The Chair thanked colleagues for their introduction and invited comments and questions from those present, with the following issues raised:

The Committee asked about the deficits projected in table 2 of the report. Olufunke Adediran (Head of Finance – Children and Young People, Brent Council) explained that, over the years, there had been a deficit built up within the High Needs Block due to the rising number of children with EHCPs. The DfE required councils to model what that demand would look like going forward, so there was a need to make assumptions around growth based on trends from previous years in the budget. There was a current deficit of approximately £13.8m, and the table showed what that deficit would look like if no action

was taken or what it would look like taking into account all of the mitigating actions taking place such as managing demand, improving sufficiency of places and improving financial management. She highlighted that the funding received from DfE was essential to bring down the historic position of the deficit. Last financial year was the first year in many years that the High Needs Block had almost broke even, but when the Council went into year 2024-25 there remained a challenge and risk to the local authority due to cost increases. Nigel Chapman added that, at the moment, a 'statutory override' allowed councils to carry forward a deficit in the Dedicated Schools Grant but this was only in place until 2026. After that, it was not clear what would happen so there was a risk to the general fund that all councils may have to cover their Dedicated Schools Grant deficit once the statutory override ended, unless that deficit was written off or the override was continued.

In response to what was being done to mitigate the pressures in the funding, Sharon Buckby (Head of Inclusion and Brent Virtual School) highlighted that the Council had increased the number of school places for pupils with SEND. The number of specialist places had been increased in Brent following councillors agreeing to invest £44m in specialist provision within the borough. This meant the Council did not need to place children into expensive out of borough or independent provision, where costs had increased on average by 9-10% and in some cases 15% for in-year provision. Building and delivering specialist provision within the borough was also the most effective way to ensure children's outcomes could be improved, which was CYP's primary focus. Investment had also been made into developing the skills and capacity of schools, particularly the development of Additional Resourced Provision within mainstream schools and the training alongside that. Another area of focus was thinking about how children's needs could be met earlier, and the Council had recently started a new programme called 'Intervention First' which looked to meet the needs of children earlier in terms of chronological age and target specialist intervention.

The Committee asked whether the rising SEND costs had been a significant factor in any of the recent Section 114 notices in other Council's. Olufunke Adediran explained that Section 114s had been a result of several issues. The Dedicated Schools Grant was a ring-fenced pot of funding, with a national deficit of around £1billion. Those Councils who had issued Section 114 notices had not done so as a result of the DSG necessarily, but due to issues in the general fund and debt.

The report showed that the proportion of students with an EHCP placed in mainstream schools had increased, and that some mainstream schools had concerns as to how much they could support those students. The Committee asked what support, such as training, was available to tackle those concerns. Nigel Chapman highlighted that schools wanted to be inclusive and take children where possible. There was anxiety amongst headteachers as to whether their school had the right skills and capacity within the school to meet the needs of a particular child in relation to ensuring teachers were delivering effective lessons for individual children whilst also meeting the needs of everybody in that class. To provide support to schools, Brent had an Outreach Autism Team which was a team of specialist teachers who went into schools to develop the skillset of teachers to support children to thrive educationally. The Specialist SEN Advisory Team also went into schools to work with SENCOs and review provision maps and support training programmes. In addition, the Inclusion Support Team worked with children who had particular challenges around emotional regulation, and the Anna Freud provision through WEST assisted with cognitive behavioural issues. Sharon Buckby highlighted that schools were well resourced in relation to their EHCPs and Brent resourced higher than other local authorities.

The Committee asked whether young people aged 16-25 with SEND were being picked up late in relation to their need or whether they were new to the borough. Sharon Buckby explained that the reason there was a growing proportion of 16-25 year olds with SEND was because the regulations changed in 2015 to extend support for those with a SEND

statement up until the age of 25. Before 2015 that support was only provided up until 16. She highlighted that the biggest growth area was actually in the cohort of under 7 year olds, where there had been significant growth with 62% of children with an EHCP being in that cohort. The Council had received £1m from the DfE and invested £1m from its own SEND support programme within the High Needs Block to support those needs.

The Committee recalled that the Council was making provision within the borough and asked whether this would minimise out of borough placements substantially. Sharon Buckby confirmed that the 427 additional placements would be significant in terms of its impact. With the growth in placements, Additional Resourced Provision, and support and development of specialist teaching staff, more children would stay within the borough as their parents would be confident their child was getting the educational support they required. Already, the Council had slowed the number of children going to independent provision because they had been given mainstream placements, and some young people had returned from independent provision back into mainstream schools, demonstrating the effectiveness of the Additional Resourced Provision.

The Committee were pleased to hear about the positive work being done with the Harlesden cluster of schools and asked how that would be broadened to ensure good practice across the borough. Shirley Parks (Director of Education, Partnerships and Strategy, Brent Council) highlighted that there were 5 school clusters in Brent which had been developed during Covid by headteachers as support networks. The Harlesden cluster were working with the Council on the Delivering Better Value (DBV) Programme because they were the most cohesive in the way they worked together and also because, as a cluster, the children in those schools had particularly high needs. The alignment work being done with Brent Health Matters, Family Wellbeing Centres and the Intervention First Teaching Programme would make a real difference in the way localities worked together to support children. The intention was to learn and grow from that and develop cluster by cluster, targeting the next group of schools with additional needs through the next 2 academic years. The Council were now developing a more formalised relationship with other school clusters in order to work with them to develop local programmes. In the forefront needed to be the knowledge that every locality may have different needs that they needed to serve and that was important to recognise in the way that the council worked with those clusters. Jen Haskew (Head of Setting and School Effectiveness, Brent Council) was now having regular meetings with cluster leads so there was a mechanism to cascade good practice.

The Committee asked what Harlesden cluster had been doing that was working particularly well. They heard that both primary and secondary schools were coming together regularly to meet and recognise the key issues for the communities and parents in their areas and how those needs could be met. With the funding the Council had rolled out to clusters, the Harlesden cluster had developed a curriculum called 'my world' which was about adjusting the curriculum to relate to the experiences of the pupils in their school. The cluster also had a good practice model of how schools could work well together across phases with a common language in the curriculum.

The Committee asked what the reasons a child might not have a school place were. Shirley Parks explained that for mainstream primary schools there were lots a spare places with 20% spare across the borough, meaning there was no problem allocating an offer of a mainstream primary school place, and this was also true for secondary schools. The issue was around parental preference and choice, where parents could make a preference but it may not always be possible for that choice to be met. Placements were made in line with the admissions code, and whilst there were a lot of parents who preferred particularly popular schools, there were a limited number of places in those schools and therefore admissions policies ensured that spaces in those schools were fairly allocated. This meant

that sometimes admissions could not meet the parents' aspirations of the place they wanted their child but they would be offered another place.

The Committee asked for more information about 'Project Search', which was an internship programme within Brent Council. Nigel Chapman highlighted that the interns undertaking this programme were very integrated into the Council's work and it had been a true success story as a whole council approach, but it was felt that more could be done in that space. Part of the work being done around post-16 provision was to provide more opportunities for young people and their families to feel that having a disability was not a barrier to having a full life, being able to have a job, being able to live independently and support themselves. Sharon Buckby added that further post-16 provision work included working with Brent Works and working alongside employers across Wembley to develop the disability confident standards and increase the number of employers who were supporting young people to not only have real life work experience but also progress on to paid employment. The Council was also looking at providing a horticultural facility, a digital media centre and a cultural development skills resource centre to expand opportunities further, working alongside the national development programme for improving SEND provision to expand the internship.

The Committee asked how the challenges around waiting times were being addressed. Jonathan Turner advised the Committee that there were specific areas that proved more challenging than others with regard to waiting times, particularly ASD and ADHD assessment waiting times. This was a national issue but was acute in Brent. Tom Shakespeare, the Managing Director for the ICP, had set up a workstream focused on this with Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust (CNWL) and GPs, with various stakeholders inputting into that workstream. The ICP was looking to bid against a £3m funding pot in NWL ICB to bring additional support either into that service or into third sector providers that could provide support to CNWL for that service. The ICP would be advocating for as much resource as possible within that pot to reduce those waiting times. It was not clear whether this would be successful but the ICB sounded positive about it at the moment and had a willingness to work with Brent ICP and recognise that Brent's mental health services, particularly for children and young people, did need to be levelled up.

Shirley Parks added further information in relation to mental health and wellbeing. There were around 300 children waiting for CAMHS treatment currently, but assessment timeliness had greatly improved. This was still a focus for the mental health and wellbeing subgroup within the ICP Executive, bringing partners together to look at leveraging more funding, monitoring and tracking current performance, and looking at a range of other initiatives to support young people. The subgroup met monthly and reviewed data across all issues involving SEND, including CAMHS data. Partners were working across the system to ensure young people were 'waiting well', so if a child was waiting for treatment they had access to support from other parts of the system while they waited, such as through the voluntary sector or WEST. Another piece of work within Brent was Thrive, a model that looked to increase early intervention and prevention services so that young people did not get to the point of needing specialist CAMHS in the first place. Partners were focusing on shifting the system to that approach to take the pressure off specialist CAMHS and move support earlier in that young person's life to avoid them reaching a crisis point. A working group chaired by the Director of Public Health had been established around Thrive, developing services that supported young people's needs.

The Committee highlighted the focus Pan London on joining up SEND in relation to health inequalities, and asked what activity had been done in Brent to join up that work with health partners. Jonathan Turner highlighted that the local NHS partnership and CYP were connected up regarding their understanding of the health inequalities experienced in Brent. Brent Health Matters (BHM) were looking at a range of different issues through the health inequalities lens, which had begun with looking at covid, diabetes, and more physical

health areas and had now evolved and expanded into the area of children's health, including neurodiversity. BHM had been successful in a business case application for funding from NWL ICB to focus on health inequalities for children and young people, and a steering group would lead that piece of work, made up of Shirley Parks, BHM, CNWL, and the CAMHS provider. There were various workstreams within that, such as childhood immunisations and mental health and wellbeing. There was also funding to recruit a number of different professionals, such as Speech and Language Therapists, and the opportunity to recruit to several positions focused solely on health inequalities.

The Committee asked how much the activity on health inequalities paid attention to communities in the most deprived areas, highlighting that this would rely on how much was known about communities and how much information could be accessed. Nigel Chapman highlighted that it was recognised Harlesden had higher numbers of children with identified SEND and was also an area with higher levels of deprivation, so it was expected that the work of BHM would help to understand what was driving that inequality and help target services in that area. There was a higher proportion of children from certain backgrounds who were getting an EHCP at a later stage, so it was also important parents and carers had an understanding of how to access support at an earlier stage. Work was ongoing to develop indicators that would track that information and this could be incorporated into future reports.

The Chair concluded the meeting by asking how ready for a joint inspection Brent was. Nigel Chapman explained he had been chairing regular meetings to ensure the paperwork was in order, including their self-evaluation. The inspection was a three-week process and very intensive so required good co-ordination. One key learning from self-evaluation was that there had been variability in outcomes for children in terms of waiting times for certain therapies. The key to addressing this was to take action now to ensure that when children were waiting they were waiting well, and ensuring that was demonstrated during the inspection.

The Chair thanked those present for their contributions and drew the item to a close. He invited the Committee to make recommendations, with the following RESOLVED:

- i) To recommend that the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee heard directly from a member of the Harlesden cluster.
- ii) To recommend that the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee received a report detailing the success of the activity of the Harlesden cluster and how that was being replicated across the Borough.

8. Adult Social Care CQC Assurance - Item withdrawn

This item was withdrawn from the agenda.

9. Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Recommendations Tracker 2023-24

The Committee noted the recommendations tracker.

10. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 8:00 pm

COUNCILLOR KETAN SHETH, Chair