



MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Monday 29 April 2024 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Grahl (Chair), Collymore, Dixon, Gbajumo and Hirani

1. **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

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

2. **Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members**

None.

3. **Declarations of interests**

None.

4. **Deputations (if any)**

None received.

5. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the last meeting, held on 5 February 2024, be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

6. **Matters arising (if any)**

None.

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

At the start of the item the Committee held a short workshop with young people to consider ways to improve the participation of children and young people in Corporate Parenting Committee. The Committee noted that the outcomes of the discussions and noted that any agreed actions would feed through to future Corporate Parenting Committee meetings. The Committee then heard updates from the young people attending the meeting.

J (Care Leavers in Action) informed the Committee that he had been involved in an interview panel for the participation team. He advised members it was interesting to see who the right fit was to help Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) and Care in Action (CIA) thrive and it had been a positive experience to see different members of staff within Brent and have them hear his views and the views of other care leavers about the care leaver offer.

K (Care Leavers in Action) informed the Committee about the recent residential trip the group had taken to the Gordon Brown Centre. The aim of the residential trip was for young people to learn skills for independence such as cooking, healthy eating, health and safety and DIY skills which included a reference booklet to take home. The package included pots and pans and other kitchen essentials which was an improvement from the package in previous years following feedback from CLIA.

C (Care Leavers in Action) advised the Committee that this would be his final attendance at Corporate Parenting Committee. The Committee offered thanks to C for the work he had done over the years for Looked After Children and care leavers, highlighting that future generations of children would benefit from the work he had done. Members wished C well for the future.

The Chair thanked those present for their contributions and invited members of the Committee to ask questions to the CIA / CLIA representatives. The following questions were raised:

The Committee asked for further information about the residential trip. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency – Brent Council) explained that the residential offer had recently been enhanced to enable several camps per year for young people to benefit from the activities which were aimed at supporting young people to become independent. There would also be extra events during the summer when the weather was warmer such as glamping. The residential was offered through the ASDAN programme and young people could either receive a booklet and work through that or attend the residential. As those practical trips helped young people to experience independence in a more real life setting everyone was encouraged to do at least one camp trip.

The Committee asked whether there were any other skills CLIA would want to learn. K felt that, together with the Brent Virtual School Finance and Money Management offer the independent life skills were covered.

In relation to the Ikea kit that was offered, the Committee advised CLIA that the Public Health Team were meeting with Ikea soon and asked whether there was anything else the Council could ask them to provide for care leavers. CLIA members suggested offering discounts on furniture items and fed back that they needed items such as plates, cutlery, glasses and bedding. It was agreed this would be passed on to the Public Health Team.

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. **Brent Virtual School Annual Report 2022-23**

Michaela Richards (Acting Head Teacher – Brent Virtual School) introduced the report, which outlined the activity and impact of the Brent Virtual School (BVS) during the academic year 2022-23 in monitoring and supporting looked after children to achieve the best possible educational outcomes. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- A key priority of BVS was that attendance should be above 95%. The attendance figures had improved slightly from the previous year by just under 2% and there had been an extra focus on attendance with that work having an impact. It was usually key stage 3-4 where attendance issues set in.
- There had been an increase in fixed term exclusions which mirrored the trend of the general population. This was attributed to the return to school following covid, as 2022-23 had been the first full year back in schools.

- There had been no permanent exclusions, but BVS had been in a position on a number of occasions during the last academic year where they had needed to work closely with schools to avoid a possible permanent exclusion. Those had been at out of borough schools where young people had not been placed before as it was a challenge to embed expectations in schools that were not Brent schools. BVS was focused on building relationships with out of borough schools to explain those expectations.
- In relation to out of borough schools and how BVS currently worked with them to ensure compliance with expectations, it was highlighted that BVS offered training on a range of topics and had recently had a Forum focused on trauma informed practice. BVS had found that schools could be reactive sometimes and may not take into account the contextual issues Brent's young people may face so it was important to get that messaging across as well as focus on relationship building. BVS was liaising with schools and designated teachers to explain expectations and ensure staff were present at PEP meetings.
- All advisory staff knew Brent's carers and interacted with them regularly. Training was also offered to carers.
- Results were outlined in paragraph 5.7 and 5.8. The eligible cohort had 24% of 5 passes including English and Maths at levels 4-9, which was a big increase on the previous year by 7%.

The Chair thanked Michaela Richards for her introduction and invited contributions from the Committee, with the following points raised:

The Committee asked what the holistic approach to access to education for those with challenging placements looked like. Michaela Richards highlighted that the age many of Brent's young people came into care and the issues they faced often disrupted their education, so BVS had to consider the best programme for them. Sometimes, young people would not go directly into a school straight away after coming into care or moving placement and had a tuition package in place instead while an Educational Psychology assessment was arranged as soon as possible to ensure recommendations from that could be put in place by the school.

In relation to paragraphs 5.9 and 5.10 of the report, which outlined that some of the children with placement breakdowns had seen those breakdowns reflected in their outcomes, the Committee asked how hard it then was to keep the children in their school when they move placement. They heard that BVS tried very hard to maintain school placement. If there was a requirement to move school, the priority is to ensure a child is placed in a school rated 'good' or better. If a looked after child was in a school that was 'good' and that school become 'requires improvement', BVS would look to see what the best approach for that young person was. Any move might not happen immediately as the child had been in a school where they had stability, so there might be a need to put in additional support to maintain their outcomes, but BVS would look to move them to a 'good' school as soon as possible. Looked after children had key adults within the school to maintain stability, which was usually the designated teacher, but if the child had a better relationship with another member of staff then BVS would want the school to identify that to ensure local support around the child.

In relation to the recruitment of specialist roles outlined in the report, the Committee asked how that was progressing. They were advised that BVS had a solid staff team that had been in place for a while. There had been difficulty recruiting for a post-16 role over the past few years but the Council had recently recruited to that post and the post holder was described as excellent.

The Committee asked what a child's Personal Education Plan (PEP) looked like. K (Care Leavers in Action) outlined what her PEP had been like. She had attended meetings which looked at areas that might not be going well, areas that were going well, and then what actions could be taken or revision undertaken. Then a plan would be devised covering how many hours of revision she should do and how she would do it. K had found it useful but the important aspect of implementing the PEP was around motivating herself. Michaela Richards provided further information, explaining that LAC should receive 3 PEP meetings a year in each academic term. It should involve the child's social worker, carer, the school and the young person. The PEP meeting would set targets and review whether previous targets were met. The meeting would also review where the pupil premium could support achieving those targets. She highlighted that those meetings worked best when the young person was present so that they could contribute to what they would like to happen.

CLIA highlighted that PEP meetings had meant getting called out of lessons and this had felt to be not always discreet enough to avoid questions about personal information. They asked whether that process had now improved so that looked after children were not being pulled out of lessons in front of their peers. Michaela Richards acknowledged the stigma attached when a young person left a lesson for a meeting and the BVS spoke to schools about ensuring there were ways around this. For example, the school could arrange meetings to start during a lunch or breaktime instead of during lessons so that it was a less noticeable absence. She highlighted that Brent schools were more in tune with this and out of borough schools were being asked to do this discreetly also.

The Committee asked whether there was a different process for working with academy schools and how BVS and the Council could influence and manage those schools. They were advised that all secondary schools in Brent were either academies, free schools or voluntary aided and underwent the same monitoring process, which schools did a good job of adhering to as they wanted the best for the young people they taught.

The Committee asked CLIA whether there were any particular challenges within school that, looking back, they felt there could be more support for. CLIA highlighted that the transition from A-Level to University had felt like a big leap where they had not always known if and where they could access support. Michaela Richards responded that, on a national level, BVS Head Teachers had lobbied for additional support for that transition period. Now, there was funding for post-16 support for the first year of education. This was not in line with the statutory school age funding Council's received but it was more than had previously been received. The BVS worked closely with the Care Leavers Team to support care leavers' access to education and educational success as much as possible. The Committee advised of the importance of getting that message across to care leavers so that they could ask for that support that would help them succeed.

As a future action point, the Committee asked for officers to present further information about the university transition and the support the Council could offer at a future meeting.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the content of the report.

9. Brent Fostering Service 6-Monthly Monitoring Report: 1 October 2023 to 31 March 2024

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which provided information about the general management of the in-house fostering service and how it was achieving good outcomes for children. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- Paragraph 4.1.2 of the report set out the achievements against the priorities set the previous financial year.
- The largest challenge facing the fostering service currently was recruitment of foster carers. The Council was working hard to improve its ability to recruit new mainstream foster carers, and the carers that had been recruited were in the target demographic. The revised fostering offer was due to launch following its approval, which included an increase in the fostering allowance. It was hoped the new offer would improve recruitment and retention and provide more local placements for Brent looked after children. The service had received DfE funding to improve recruitment and retention which had gone towards the new joint fostering recruitment hub due to go live in May 2024. It was hoped this would increase the catchment area for Brent, bringing in new enquiries.
- The fostering offer had been rebranded with a 'share your love, share your life' message and a new logo. The launch for the revised offer would take place in Foster Carer Fortnight and would start with a foster carers walk and end with a picnic for foster carers, staff and community members. Members were invited to attend that. The new fostering offer would also see the service work with HR to get Brent recognised as a fostering friendly organisation.
- The service had seen an active summer with a community awareness raising campaign, which was now reflecting in the number of enquiries and assessments.
- The achievements of foster carers had been celebrated with a cream tea event in Foster Carer Fortnight in May 2023, a seaside trip in August 2023, and an end of year event in November 2023.
- The new LAC resilience service had been running since November 2023. This gave the service another way of maintaining placement stability for children and supporting foster carers and families. The service had seen 13 referrals to date and had already avoided a placement breakdown.

Following the introduction, the Chair invited two foster carers who had attended the meeting to talk about their experiences of fostering with Brent.

One foster carer told the Committee that they had begun their fostering journey with an independent fostering agency before joining Brent 5 years later. She had fostered a Brent child at the time and following that experience had decided that, as she lived in Brent, she should give back to her borough. She had now been fostering for Brent for 12 years. She highlighted that her positivity towards fostering for Brent was thanks to her Supervising Social Worker, as without their mutual understanding of each other she would not have succeeded as a foster carer. Since being with Brent, the foster carer felt she had been able to bring out her passion to help others and now fostered Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASCs). She currently had a staying put arrangement with a 20-year-old and felt sad about the day they would leave but felt that the bond and relationship would remain as most of the young people she had cared for remained in touch.

Another foster carer had started foster caring as his wife had wanted to foster. He had agreed, as his wife's parents fostered as well, which made them a fostering family. He told the Committee that he had been in care from the age of 14 and was still in contact with his foster carer. As such, being part of a family that fostered and as a child that was brought up in foster care, he had wanted a way to give back to society. He had seen that when the children he fostered for learned that he had also been in foster care it gave them hope, and that was a very important part of the role. He agreed that the relationship a foster carer had with their Supervising Social Worker was vital to ensure success and he had been blessed with the social workers he had worked with.

The Chair thanked officers for the update and the foster carers for sharing their experiences with the Committee, and then invited comments and questions from Committee members with the following raised:

The Committee highlighted that one of the challenges of the fostering service was encouraging foster carers to attend training, and asked the foster carers present what their experience had been of training and how they would encourage other foster carers to attend training. The foster carers believed in in-service training as there was always something new to learn. They felt it was important to ensure the training was accessible, including utilising hybrid technology to enable training to take place online if necessary and ensuring the time was convenient. They felt that the training they had attended had been useful but may require carers to take time off work to attend due to the timings. The foster carers suggested doing a questionnaire for foster carers asking how they would like to attend training and at what times.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the content of the report.

10. **Brent Adoption Report 6-Monthly Update: 1 October 2023 to 31 April 2024**

Debbie Gabriel (Adopt London West) introduced the report, which provided the adoption performance data for October 2023 – March 2024, the progress and activity of Adopt London West, and how good outcomes were being achieved for children. She highlighted some key points:

- Three quarters of children placed with Brent were placed with Adopt London West carers.
- Adopt London West had been part of the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA) Inspection Pilot by Ofsted. While there had been no formal judgement it was hoped the feedback from Ofsted offered the Committee some assurance.
- A drama group had been hosted in the Easter half term for children aged 8-11 years old, with some Brent children attending that group and had seen good feedback.

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

The Committee asked for further information about the Black Adopters Project. They were advised that Adopt London West was in the final stages of securing funding from government for a project manager to implement a number of pilot projects on this which focused on co-design. Debbie Gabriel added that the DfE seemed interested in the project due to its focus on co-design and the inclusion of community members having ownership of the project.

The Committee asked for more insight into how the inspection had gone, what had been found, and how it compared to the previous inspection system. They heard that Ofsted had found that the pooling of resources had meant adoption agencies could offer much more in terms of services and support, such as the drama group and We Are Family Partnership. The inspectors had highlighted Adopt London's educational support group as exceptional, which was a group facilitated by an Educational Psychologist who offered consultation and supported children through the transition to adoption. The Front Door, recruitment, placement of children and standards were found to be good. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) added that each time a local authority

partner of ALW was inspected, the regional agency would be involved in that, meaning there was more scrutiny of the regional adoption agencies under this arrangement.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the report.

11. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 19:00 pm

COUNCILLOR GWEN GRAHL
Chair