



MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Wednesday 18 September 2024 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Ketan Sheth (Chair), and Councillors Aden, Afzal, Mahmood, Rajan-Seelan, Smith, Mistry, Kennelly and co-opted members Ms Rachelle Goldberg and Mr Alloysius Frederick (online)

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies were received from the following members:

- Councillor Fraser, substituted by Councillor Kennelly
- Councillor Ethapemi
- The Venerable Archdeacon Catherine Pickford
- Observer Jenny Cooper

2. Declarations of interests

Personal interests were declared as follows:

- Councillor Kennelly – employed at a Food Bank

Councillor Sheth highlighted that his register of interest could be found on the Brent website.

3. Deputations (if any)

There were no deputations received.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 July 2024 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

5. Matters arising (if any)

There were no matters arising.

6. Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2024-25

The Committee noted the work programme.

7. Overview of SEND provision in Brent

Councillor Grahl (Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Schools) introduced the report, which provided an overview of services for Brent's children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and also highlighted the national context regarding the Council's obligations towards children and young people with SEND. She raised awareness of the much greater level of need since the report was previously presented to the Committee in 2023-24, with the number of children on an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) rising by around 10% per year since 2014 and the figures in Brent also reflecting that increase. As a result of that increase, she advised the Committee

that there had been pressures on Councils to assess each child and put in place the right package of support for them, but this had not been matched with provision of funding by central government. In July 2024, local authorities warned central government of a debt equating to approximately £5billion facing local authorities if the funding situation did not improve.

The Committee heard that, as well as an increase in need, the Council had also seen an increase in the complexity of need, with around 40% of children with an EHCP also having an Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC). Councillor Grahl highlighted that, despite the challenges with funding and SEND demand, there were successes to be celebrated. For example, the report detailed the work the Council was doing to maximise the support available to children and young people with SEND, including both inclusive provision and specialist educational provision. A large part of the work in addressing the pressures was delivering the SEND capital programme which aimed to provide more than 400 local SEND places. There were some areas for improvement outlined in the report. For example, it was recognised that there was a gap for post-16 provision which the new post-16 skills and resource centre in Welsh Harp would help to address, and there was continued work to reduce the waiting times for families applying for an EHCP.

In concluding her introduction, Councillor Grahl recognised and paid tribute to Brent's local schools, who she felt had stepped up provision and built additional support into their schools, whether that be through new buildings, additional staff, or improved institutional learning. She re-emphasised the acute pressures on the High Needs Block outlined in the report and the need for ongoing public pressure to ensure that every child with SEND received the vital support they needed.

The Chair invited Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) to contribute to the introduction, who highlighted the Annual School Standards and Achievement Report that was presented to the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee in April 2024 for members who wished to see further details on the outcomes and attainment of children with SEND. Similarly, he highlighted the report and minutes of the Audit and Standards Advisory Committee that took place on 24 July 2024 where the department was scrutinised in relation to the High Needs Block (HNB) position.

In terms of inspection arrangements for children with SEND, Nigel Chapman informed the Committee that Ofsted was looking to change its use of single word judgements for schools reform the current inspection framework to look at how local areas were delivering their SEND work, but at this stage the joint inspection framework with Ofsted and CQC was continuing, therefore it was anticipated that Brent Council would receive a joint SEND area inspection in the current academic year. In preparing for that, strengths in the current system had been identified. For example, the solidarity and quality of special schools was high, and the Council's had good links with the Parent Carer Forum where there was healthy challenge from parents. A piece of work on the new transport policy had been developed in collaboration with parents and carers through that Forum. There had also been performance improvements in the timeliness of EHCPs. Areas for improvement had also been identified around working collaboratively with health partners in areas where there were still waiting times for children with particular needs.

The Chair then invited Jonathan Turner (Borough Lead Director – Brent, NWL ICB) to provide an overview of support for children with SEND from the health perspective. He advised the Committee that health colleagues had been working closely with the Council to prepare for the SEND local area inspection and ensure the relevant documents for Annexe A were ready. A paper was due to be presented to the Brent Children's Trust (BCT) regarding commissioning arrangements for some of the health services supporting children and young people with SEND. There were some challenges reflected in the report,

particularly in relation to CAMHS waiting times. He highlighted that there was no solution to those challenges as yet, but a workshop had been arranged to address the issues and come up with some innovative ways forward. In relation to special school nursing provision, the partnership had committed to some non-recurrent funding to support additional capacity within the CLCH service and there were ongoing discussions to see how that could be made permanent at NWL level so that it could be tied to the development of a common service specification across NWL.

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

The Committee thanked officers for the report which they felt provided a good overview of the barriers the Council had in relation to funding, and the challenges in relation to complexity of cases.

In relation to the potential upcoming joint area inspection of SEND, the Committee asked whether officers foresaw a positive judgement. Nigel Chapman explained that the framework for the area inspection of SEND did not have the single word judgements of 'outstanding, good, requires improvement, inadequate' but a range of scores where the highest represented services being delivered well with the area re-inspected in 5 years, mid-range representing an inconsistency in how services were delivered with the area re-inspected in 3 years, and the lowest score representing serious weaknesses or deficiencies in how services were delivered and the need for an improvement plan to be put in place and monitored by central government. He informed the Committee that Hillingdon had been inspected in Spring 2024 and their outcome had been mid-range, with the inspectors finding an inconsistent service approach. The view in the sector generally, given the pressures around SEND nationally, was that most local areas were likely to be in the inconsistent, middle range. In London there had been 5 area inspections with 3 rated at the highest score and 2 rated in the middle. Officers hoped Brent had enough good quality evidence to show that generally good services were provided and, while there was hope that Brent could move towards the top end of scoring, officers were realistic about the current position of services given current demand pressures.

The Committee asked whether there had been any reservations from schools to place children with complex needs and what the Council had done to alleviate any concerns and support those schools with complex cases. Shirley Parks (Director Education, Partnerships and Strategy, Brent Council) responded that there was a higher proportion of children with EHCPs educated in mainstream settings, as outlined in the report. She advised members that there were many different reasons for that, for example the parents may prefer their child to be educated in a mainstream setting, but the Council were realistic about the need for special school places and therefore had introduced the Capital Programme to build more places. She recognised that schools were managing a range of children with complex needs and the Council provided different levels of support depending on those needs. For example, for those children with lower levels of need there was support to schools on how to manage classrooms, support individual children, and implement a graduated approach to adjust teaching to meet the needs. At the higher level of need where children were placed in mainstream settings with complex needs, the Council provided advice and training around how to manage those children so that schools did not feel the need to attach teaching assistants to a child. There were specialist teachers supporting schools and modelling the work they should be doing and how they could adjust their learning environments with a comprehensive training programme for schools covering all the key needs identified in children so that mainstream staff felt more confident about supporting children with complex needs. Another concern for schools was funding and to address this the Delivering Better Value Board, which had headteacher representation, would be going out to consult on a new banding system that would allow schools to use funding provision

in more flexible ways in the future. The Council recognised the pressures on schools so had ensured this comprehensive package of support was available.

Thanking officers for the outline of the support package available to schools, the Committee asked whether schools were content with that support and whether the Council had received feedback on the offer. Officers confirmed that feedback was mixed. The Council did receive positive feedback but it was recognised that schools were facing many challenges and therefore there were frustrations from schools as well, dealing with not just SEND pressures but other pressures including budget constraints against the need to increase teacher salaries and falling pupil rolls. Officers advised the Committee that, through the Delivering Better Value Programme, the Council was doing as much as possible to listen to schools and change the system to support them. It was highlighted, however, that the challenges were national, so there was hope that there would be some national policy direction coming forward to support schools.

The Committee asked how the Council facilitated communication between schools to share best practice regarding SEND. They were advised that schools were grouped into clusters based on geography and worked together on projects and sharing best practice. Funding had been provided to support clusters in the past. In addition, headteachers discussed SEND concerns, issues and best practice at a dedicated termly meeting with the Corporate Director for Children and Young People each year. As well as this, the Council was bringing Heads and SENCOs into forums where they could advise the Council what it was like on the ground to help develop services. The Council was also working with schools to pilot some projects so that they could hear the voice of schools in the services developed going forward. For example, to support children in reception and year 1 with complex needs presenting behavioural issues, an Intervention First Team was being piloted, which had been finding that a lot of children who may have usually progressed to an EHCP actually needed trauma support. As a result of those findings the Anna Freud Centre had been commissioned to work with children and families to do play therapy, and the Council were seeing that those who may normally have progressed to an EHCP no longer required one due to the support that had been put in place. Work was now being done to roll that out across the system.

The Chair then invited a representative from Brent Youth Parliament to contribute. They asked whether there were any initiatives in place to help parents identify the signs of SEND before they were identified through the school or other means, particularly where SEND may be stigmatised in the child's community. Nigel Chapman confirmed that the intention was to try to identify SEND needs as early as possible in the early years. He advised the Committee that, as part of the Best Start for Life Programme, the Council was supporting parents to better understand their child at a young age in the first 3 years of their life, including what constituted normal development, and in particular supporting with reading, speech and language. The Inclusion Team worked in Early Years to help parents identify needs before they presented at school which was viewed as too late. Roxanna Glennon (Head of Inclusion, Brent Council) provided further information around speech and language needs which was a particular area of concern in Brent and nationally. She highlighted the importance of not only identification of need by the time the child had reached statutory school age but of prevention of the need developing in the first place where possible. A recent discussion had highlighted the need for the Inclusion Service to work with colleagues in Early Help and colleagues in health from an antenatal point of view, recognising that the foundations of good communication were created immediately following birth in that bonding period, and if that bonding period was disrupted then prolonged issues within that parent-child relationship may be seen. The need to upskill the community and increase understanding amongst the community in relation to SEND was also highlighted as important, and it was recognised this needed to be done in a multi-agency way. Roxanna Glennon advised the Committee that there were already workstreams within the BCT looking at speech and language, looking to get clearer

commitment from the multi-agency on that area. In relation to cultural sensitivity and identification of need, she felt that there was a need to be nuanced in the understanding of need to take into account cultural differences. For example, health colleagues had highlighted that there was a higher incidence of ASC within the Somalian community but a lower understanding, as well as complexity around the willingness to accept a diagnosis and respond to that. As such, cultural competency was part of the agenda in Brent to address need in the borough.

In relation to place planning, the Committee noted the details in the report regarding the £44m capital investment to build more places, and asked how that balanced against the decline in pupil rolls in the borough. Members asked whether there was a way to meet additional need without significant investment. Councillor Grahl explained that the capital investment that the report made reference to was funded through DfE grant money, meaning the programme would not remove funding from other areas of the Council. Shirley Parks provided further details, explaining that, whilst the overall pupil numbers in the borough were reducing, the increase in children requiring an EHCP had continued, so despite the population decrease the Council was still seeing an 8-10% increase in EHCPs year on year. The £44m funding would fund the new secondary special school in Wembley due to open in September 2025 where there would be 80 pupils ready to move in as soon as the school was opened. The funding would also go to Additional Resourced Provision (ARP) for children that may not require a special school place but had additional needs that meant they would struggle to learn in a mainstream setting all the time and would benefit from attending a unit with specialist facilities some of the time. Officers raised awareness that, despite the capital investment, there was pressure to provide places beyond what was being funded through the DfE grant. Members were informed that, over the next year, a key priority of the Council would be to work with schools in Brent with spare capacity, such as in Planning Area 4, to use them more efficiently and see what other provision could be established locally to meet the need, such as satellite classrooms. From a budget point of view, the cost of sending a child out of borough or into independent provision was expensive, so the Council was balancing trying to increase provision against limited capital expenditure. Councillor Grahl added that the Council's approach was to use existing school sites as flexibly as possible as demand changed. she explained that whilst there were falling pupil numbers in primary schools this was not the case for 13-14 year olds where demand was stretched, so there were many different factors being managed at once.

Acknowledging the number of children in the borough with EHCPs, the Committee asked whether other education partners such as academies were supporting pupils with SEND and putting adequate resource in place. Nigel Chapman responded that, whilst Brent recognised the importance of formal governance, children attending academies and other education provision were still viewed as Brent children attending Brent schools. Brent Council had built a good relationship with the secondary school sector, all of which were academies, free schools or voluntary aided schools. The rates of exclusion at those schools were comparatively low and schools were taking an inclusive approach, working with the Council to place children with SEND. Some schools were felt to be more inclusive than others, but this was not seen to be a result of their governance structure but with the individual school's ethos. Ofsted were looking to reform the inspection framework to have a focus on schools being inspected for their inclusive nature and ethos, with schools inspected on their ability to accept children of all abilities. That framework would include inspecting multi-academy trusts as a whole as opposed to individual schools, which officers felt would lead to greater accountability in the national system.

In relation to the development of the new SEND school in Wembley, the Committee asked how many places it was envisaged to hold when built and whether the school would have a specialist focus, such as on ASC, or general additional need. Shirley Parks responded that the school would have 150 places when fully established, but the Council had established the provision to ensure that at the point of opening there were young people ready to move

in, with 80 pupils due to join the school in September 2025. The school, called Wembley Manor, would be run by the RISE partnership, which was a local special multi-academy trust, and would have a specific focus on children with ASC due to the increase in children with a diagnosed ASC. In terms of the admissions process, this differed from mainstream schools which were based on catchment areas and instead was done through close working with the child, family, and professionals to identify the best setting for the child's education.

The Committee asked whether there was support for parents and carers of children with SEND. They heard that Brent Parent Carer Forum could provide advice for parents and carers for children with an EHCP and worked closely with the Council to ensure a response to any feedback or concerns about issues in the system. For example, the forum was consulted in relation to the Council's new transport policy. In terms of respite, officers explained that children with the most complex needs were known to social care and did have respite through the Ade Adepitan Centre.

Noting there were some children educated outside of the school setting, the Committee asked what the differences in the experience of children with SEND were in and outside of mainstream school settings. Roxanna Glennon explained that children educated outside of a school setting were categorised under a number of different categories and their experience would differ depending on that. The category of children for whom the Council were most concerned were those unplaced without a school placement at all because a mainstream school or multiple different types of school had said they could not meet the child's needs. The Council retained the responsibility and oversight of the education provision of those children. She highlighted that it was fortunate the number of children falling in that category in Brent was very small, but it was not zero, so it was higher than the Council would like it to be. Those educational needs would be met through home tuition with a bespoke programme of 1-1 provision within the home. For some children, this would be considered an acceptable education offer, but it did not offer them the level of exposure the Council would want for them, and the Council was consulting with all possible providers in ever wider nets to achieve a placement for those children. For some children, the Council had done close to 50 consultations where all providers had said no. There were other categories falling into 'educated other than at school' (EOTAS) which could be the choice of the young person to receive a mix of home tuition and some alternative provision, or elective home education. If a child was electively home educated and had an EHCP then it was entirely at the discretion of the parents how they delivered that child's education. Children falling within EOTAS would now receive funding for Free School Meals where eligible.

Continuing to discuss children with SEND educated other than at school, the Committee asked whether there was value in ensuring those children were brought into a setting where they were with other children occasionally. Officers felt that there was a potential value in doing that, but it would depend on the individual needs of the child. Brent Parent Carer Forum was good at setting up groups for parents, so some parents who had children with complex needs and chose to electively home educate their child benefited from some specialist groups within the forum so that those children could get social exposure. There were also children with SEND on the roll of a school who may be on a reduced timetable, such as if they were returning to school after a period outside of school education and were being gradually reintroduced over an extended period. The Council kept close oversight of children on reduced timetable to ensure their full reintegration plan was progressing. The priority for the Council and educators was about ensuring children were getting all the experiences conducive to their positive development.

The Committee asked what lessons were being learned from other local authorities who had undergone a joint SEND area inspection. Nigel Chapman highlighted that he had spoken with his counterpart in Hillingdon to further understand their process and heard that

managing the Ofsted and CQC interface was important. Whilst the inspection handbook indicated that the inspectors would look at 6 cases, the reality was that they were likely to look at a wide range of SEND work. There was a need to be open to challenge and a willingness to provide information from any area of the work. He had learned that the inspectors would review the solidity of the relationship between the local authority and health partners. Brent benefited from a very experienced Designated Clinical Officer who maintained that relationship, but there would be a need to be able to clearly articulate the strength of that relationship and provide examples of where there had been challenge and how that had been overcome at a strategic level. In doing that, there was a need to be honest around the challenges with the waiting lists and the plans to tackle those waiting times.

The Committee further enquired about the plans to address waiting times and how the partnership was working to ensure that any inconsistencies were neutralised. They were advised that quality assurance work was being done in partnership, with a regular multi-agency audit programme which was demonstrating an improvement in work compared to 6-12 months ago. Some teams in the local authority had previously had very high caseloads for EHCPs, so the Council had looked to invest some resource to increase the number of staff in that area to ensure a consistent response was being given to parents, annual reviews were done in a timely way and initial plans were being completed quickly. Jonathan Turner added that there had been some non-recurrent limited resource invested at a NWL ICB level to support the diagnosis of ASC in 0-5 year olds. This had reduced some of the backlog of the waiting list, but there was no additional resource from a government or ICB level to provide additional capacity to further reduce waiting lists and there were workforce recruitment challenges. This had been recognised at a NWL level and some workshops had been scheduled to look at innovative solutions to reduce those waiting lists. It was hoped the workshop would bring people together with collective ideas regarding new ways of working, new models and a more joined up approach, particularly in relation to early intervention and prevention.

In terms of funding, the Committee asked what was being done to highlight the constraints and demand a fair share of funding. Councillor Grahl advised that at a national level, local authorities had warned central government of a £5b shortfall in funding. London-wide, London leads and London Councils were lobbying for further investment. The new government was yet to announce the plans to respond to the crisis in SEND funding, so she felt this was a key moment to keep up the lobbying. In relation to funding on the health side, the Council was working in partnership with health colleagues to level up funding in Brent. Resource-wise, a multi-agency approach was taken to support children with EHCPs and those waiting for EHCP assessments.

The Committee highlighted that, as well as complex SEND needs, some children had cultural and religious needs. They queried how closely the Council worked with parents and collaborated with schools in relation to these needs, referencing the work of Newman Catholic College who they felt were doing good work in that space with Refugee children. Nigel Chapman highlighted that the Brent Parent Carer Forum was a good resource to support parents in that area. Every local authority also had a Special Educational Needs and Disability Information Advice and Support Service (SENDIAS) which was particularly strong for independent advice to parents.

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

- i) To widen the understanding of SEND within the wider community outside of the school setting, particularly in organisations with a young people focus.

A number of information requests were also made during the meeting, recorded as follows:

- i) For the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to receive a further breakdown of demand for EHCPs including ward breakdowns, age, gender and communities.

8. **Early Years Provision and progress towards meeting the expansion of childcare entitlements**

Councillor Grahl (Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools) introduced the report, which provided details about the rollout of expanded childcare entitlements within Brent and plans for the distribution of the capital grant allocation provided by the DfE, as well as the approach for delivering the requirement to have a wraparound offer for school-aged children to access childcare between 8am and 6pm during the school term. In introducing the report, she provided further context for why the report was being presented to the Committee, explaining that in the Spring Budget of March 2023, the previous government had announced a significant expansion of early years childcare entitlements and proposals for the development of a wraparound offer for school-aged children. The report outlined the borough-wide response to those new arrangements, which she highlighted were some of the most significant changes in childcare provision for a generation and provided an opportunity for local providers to step up their provision to support families in the early years.

In presenting the report, Councillor Grahl highlighted that the majority of early years provision in Brent was provided by independent nurseries or childminders, with the local authority playing an administrative support role. She advised the Committee that there was excellent provision on offer in Brent and drew attention to figure 3 of the report, which showed that Brent was well placed to meet the extra demand. She conveyed that the early years sector in Brent was strong, with 98% of childminders and 94% of PVI nurseries rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, and offered thanks to early years providers, noting the importance of the Council and its members fully understanding the contribution providers made to the borough.

In adding to the introduction of the report, Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) explained that the paper was being brought to the Committee as there had been national interest in the expansion of provision, with media interest in certain areas of the country where parents had reported they had been unable to find childcare provision whilst the expansion had been ongoing, as well as some technical issues with DfE processing. He hoped the report offered reassurance about how Brent had prepared for the expansion and was supporting providers and the parent carer experience of finding an early years place. He acknowledged that the focus for the government had been on getting parents back in to work, but the sector and the Council were keen to use this as an opportunity to ensure there was a focus on good quality childcare and education in early years to set children up well for school and into adult life. He then introduced two colleagues present from the early years sector to tell the Committee about their experience in Brent – Wioletta Bura, a voluntary agency nursery manager, and Dorette Briscoe, an early years childminder.

The Chair welcomed Wioletta and Dorette to the meeting and invited them to share their experience of early years provision in Brent.

Wioletta began her remarks by thanking the Early Years Team and the Inclusion Team for supporting all nurseries and childminders in the borough. She worked closely with the Inclusion Team to identify children with SEND, and her nursery was also supported by the Quality Improvement Team and Specialist Early Years Teachers to support improvement in the quality of childcare for children in nurseries. Dorette advised the Committee that she had previously worked as a teaching assistant in the SENCO department of a school which

had led to her role now as a SENCO childminder, understanding the needs of children with SEND and how they could be supported to achieve their full potential.

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

The Committee began by asking whether the Council had heard any objections from providers to the expansion and what had been done to resolve those concerns. Nigel Chapman responded that there had been no objections. The Council had done a lot of work asking questions of the sector regarding how ready they were and how interested they were in expanding their offer prior to the expansion. Primary schools where there was a nursery attached for 3-4 year olds had not been interested in expanding into the early years sector and were clear they wanted to retain their 3-4 year old groups with private nurseries and childminders taking the lead in expanding those earlier years. Sasi Srinivasan (Early Help Manager, Brent Council) added that some providers had no issues in expanding because they already were providing childcare for babies and very young children. Some of the main challenges raised were around funding rates, as the sector had been lobbying for a while for increases with the view that rates were not enough to cover costs, and recruitment and retention issues. The DfE had subsequently revised rates which had seen a significant increase in rates for childcare provided to 2-year-olds.

Wioletta Bura outlined further the concerns nurseries and childminders had around funding and staffing. She highlighted her colleagues were concerned the rates were not enough to cover costs, as those rates were still tax deductible, and the providers were still required to pay business rates. The increase in the number of younger children and babies would also require additional staffing as well as the increase of children with SEND. Her nursery had 10 staff and 28 children. Five of those children had SEND needs and 3 required 1-1 support for those needs. The nursery also had 6 babies. She highlighted a potential inequity issue as the new expansion had increased the number of working families accessing provision for free and then paying for the remainder of hours, meaning there was less space for non-working families.

Considering the concerns around funding, the Committee asked what providers would consider a reasonable rate. Wioletta Bura suggested that an increase in rates for 3-4 year olds would help cover costs, to £6.50 per hour. The Committee queried the rate structure and why there were different rates between each age group, with younger age groups appearing to have higher rates. Nigel Chapman advised the Committee that the rates were set nationally by government, who had looked to increase the 9-month old to 2-year old rates because that was where the sector needed to increase places. Ratios were another factor in why more money needed to be allocated to younger age groups, as younger children and babies would require more staff with smaller ratios. The Schools Forum looked at early years funding arrangements and what could be done locally, but there was a limited envelope around the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) covering the early years block, and the Council was overspent on the DSG as a result of SEND pressures. This meant the room for manoeuvre was limited, but the Council did accept that the sector was underfunded, particularly for 3–4-year-olds. The Early Years Alliance was lobbying at a national level for improved funding, pushing for a sector that looked to improve the quality of education and childcare as well as help get parents into work. The Committee agreed to refer the matter to the Budget Scrutiny Task Group due to take place across the next few months to see whether there was any way of using funding differently to improve hourly rates.

The Committee asked whether the support given to providers was the same across all or whether it was tailored to the individual needs of the provider. Serita Kwofie (Head of Early Help, Brent Council) explained that the Early Years Team worked closely with providers to understand their sufficiency and how they wanted to account for the additional families wanting to take up places, planning how to ensure there was adequate space for additional

places. Providers were being supported to apply for capital grants to adapt their spaces to do that. The changes by the DfE had also introduced a change in ratios, so the Early Years Team worked with providers so that they had adequate staff capacity at the new ratios. There was a team of Advisory Teachers and Childcare Development and Business Support Officers who worked with childminders, allocated based on geography. Each of those officers had a number of settings they worked with closely and knew well, so that they could support individual concerns. Those officers fed back to the Early Years Team what providers were telling them. As such, the early years team was providing tailored support, recognising that there were differences by ward with some areas having a lot of provision and high vacancy rates whereas other had long waiting lists. The team was able to break down data by ward to see where there was lower take-up compared to other wards and were working to understand why that was and how those areas could be targeted so that the team could understand their barriers and work with communities to help them take up provision. The team would begin interrogating that data to understand demand to take localised approaches and work with partners to target particular areas.

In responding to how providers found the support offered by the local authority, Wioletta Bura responded that she had found the support to be great. She highlighted that all providers across the borough had received reminders about the capital funding scheme applications and every provider could request a Business Support Co-Ordinator to help with the application. In addition, early years teachers were coming into settings to support staff in understanding child development and giving staff actions to monitor the progress of children. The Inclusion Team also came into settings to provide a good understanding of SEND. Where she had concerns that a child might have additional needs she would invite her Early Years Inclusion Support worker who would observe the child, give the nursery some strategies to implement, and then alongside the Inclusion Team, nursery and parents of the child make a decision on whether a referral was appropriate, get an early diagnosis and apply for an EHCP, all done working as a team. There was also a bulletin sent to all providers which included information about available training. Dorrette Briscoe agreed that the local authority did provide a lot of support. She felt that one improvement that could be made was around the advertisements of local places to ensure they matched the ward boundaries to which they were closest. In addition, less jargon would be more parent friendly. Sasi Srinivasan confirmed that the Council was trying to simplify how parents were informed about local places.

The Committee asked how the Council provided information and support where there was overcapacity of places with large waiting lists, linking parents to other available providers. They heard that the Council did try to gather vacancy information and sufficiency knowledge so that provision could be mapped out, which was requested on a termly basis. Members were advised that not all providers shared that information but where they did the Council could get a picture of provision. The Council then had a statutory duty to offer brokerage, so if a parent was struggling to find childcare, they could call the Early Years Team for information about what was available and where there were local vacancies.

In relation to school nurseries, members highlighted that some had stopped taking children as they were no longer operating. Nigel Chapman confirmed that some schools had found their nursery provision to be no longer viable as not enough children were taking up places, so had taken the decision to close their nursery provision and operate from reception onwards. Some parents had been told that if their child went to a school nursery then they had a better chance of their child being admitted into the school, which officers confirmed was not the case as the school admissions process worked differently. For those who had been placed at school nurseries that had closed, the Council had the brokerage team to inform parents about available places and parents would be encouraged by those schools to contact the local authority to find a suitable local alternative.

The Committee asked for further information in relation to place expansion for breakfast and afterschool clubs, detailed in section 3.5.6 of the report. Sasi Srinivasan explained that this referred to the number of places per site the Council could give a school if they could evidence they would create the new places. Some schools had demand whereas others did not. The application process was open currently and schools had the option of bidding for funds under any one of the criteria listed in the report. She explained that the application round finished the following week so the Council would understand more what the demand was. Members heard that, from work over the summer speaking at school cluster meetings, officers had found that there were some schools who had never had demand and did not see themselves opening provision compared to some schools with waiting lists. The Council was monitoring the demand as more people were required back into the office as it was expected demand would shift again.

Members highlighted an increase in the number of children in Brent accessing food banks. It was highlighted that food banks could very easily anonymise and track data and provide that to Family Wellbeing Centres (FWCs) so that they could see where demand was and what schools those families were using to target those families regarding take-up of breakfast clubs and afterschool clubs. This would enable mapping of demand and where schools had fed back that there was no demand for that provision this could be checked against the data. Councillor Grahl agreed that this was a valuable suggestion which could be picked up in the work currently being undertaken on the Food Strategy. The use of breakfast and afterschool clubs within this report was focused on them as an option for childcare, and whilst they were places that some people relied on as a way out of food poverty those 2 cohorts were not always the same. As such, she agreed that a joined-up approach to tackling food poverty across the borough would be useful. Nigel Chapman added that there was an expectation when the Children's Wellbeing Bill was announced that there would be an expansion of the universal provision of breakfast clubs across all primary schools with an expectation that every primary school would provide free breakfast clubs for all pupils.

In noting that a risk of expansion was low take up of the new offer, the Committee asked what work was being done to make parents and families aware of the scheme, particularly hard to reach communities or families whose first language was not English. Serita Kwofie advised members that the team was working closely with community providers and organisations to ensure information was provided about the places available and the change to provision to ensure there was good take-up. Messaging was going through Family Wellbeing Centres (FWCs), and the Council was using data from FWCs so that where it was known there were young children that information was readily available to the families. There were connections with each community provider across the borough so that the Early Years Team were aware of families with young children outside of FWCs and information was available in different languages. In terms of take-up in hard to reach areas, the Committee heard that this was an ongoing process. There was now good engagement in a number of areas and the team continued to review that to ensure improvements. For example, the team was working closely with families of Somalian heritage and community providers to ensure information was disseminated and that the team was available at different settings in their spaces so that parents and families were comfortable coming forward for information.

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

- i) In relation to advertisements of local early years places, to ensure these included the full location details of the provider.
- ii) To recommend that officers working on the Food Strategy looked to further utilise data from food banks to map where provision of breakfast and afterschool clubs is required.

- iii) To recommend that the Budget Scrutiny Task Group reviewed the hourly base rate for early years provision, particularly for 3-4 year olds.
- iv) To endorse an approach where sufficiently profiles are completed when new developments are approved through the planning process.
- v) To recommend early years officers contacted voluntary and community sector organisations who had data on children and families whose first language was not English so that information regarding provision could be disseminated to those families.

9. Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Recommendations Tracker

The Committee noted the recommendations tracker.

10. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 7:45 pm
COUNCILLOR KETAN SHETH, CHAIR