



MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE
Wednesday 15 July 2020 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor M Patel (Chair) (in remote attendance) and Councillors Kansagra (in remote attendance), Conneely (in remote attendance), Gbajumo (in remote attendance) and Thakkar (in remote attendance).

ALSO IN (REMOTE) ATTENDANCE: Councillors Kelcher and McLennan

1. Exclusion of the Press and Public

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

2. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from Sarah Miller (Head of Inclusion, Brent Council).

3. Declarations of interests

None.

4. Deputations

None received.

5. Minutes of the previous meeting - 5 February 2020

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the last meeting held on 5 February 2020 be approved as an accurate record.

6. Matters arising

None.

7. Update from Care In Action/care Leavers in Action Members

S (Care Leavers in Action) expressed well wishes to the Committee and their families in light of COVID-19. The Committee heard S had been involved in a Women's Empowerment Group and Book Club and had taken part in 21 Days of Abundance. S had begun a podcast for care leavers and young people with care experience, and had been volunteering with the Youth Offending Service and Answer Youth Project. S was also taking part in an Entrepreneurship programme offered by Brent Council and helping with a migration programme for migrant children to help young children settle in the UK. Brent Council had been supporting S through a bereavement and reimbursed S for expenses.

M (Care Leavers in Action) updated the Committee that they had been involved in several Brent Youth Parliament events and a training session for Unicef Rise. M had the opportunity to do some public speaking for the London Children in Care Council in February and had since been invited on to the Children in Care Council Advisory Board. Brent Council had been supporting M to get new glasses and with drama classes.

A (Care Leavers in Action) highlighted that she had set up a cooking with care leavers Instagram page and wanted to do videos on how to cook in future. A had been conducting research for upcoming youth inspections and had also attended the Children in Care Council.

In response to how care leavers had coped during lockdown and managed to attend events, the Committee heard that events attended had been done virtually via Zoom and regular communication was done through a WhatsApp group with membership of around 50 care leavers. Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that as soon as it was felt it was safe to do so physical gatherings could be arranged but it was important to follow the government guidance. It was noted that through the Whatsapp group a meet up at Nando's had been arranged with care leavers for the following Friday, and a committee structure had been formed for 5 care leavers to arrange activities, of which S was events co-ordinator.

Care leavers acknowledged that the beginning of the lockdown had been lonely but they had managed by seeing partners, friends and family as lockdown had eased, and going to the shops and exercising.

The Committee heard that care leavers had been supported to talk about Black Lives Matter online by Brent officers and it had made them feel comfortable and like they were having a mini-protest.

Care leavers had received laptops to ensure that their activities could continue, although it was noted that many applications required a student ID which not all care leavers had. Care leavers were advised to inform their Personal Advisers which applications they needed access to so that it could be coordinated.

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. Corporate parenting support during COVID-19 pandemic

Onder Beter, Head of Looked After Children and Permanency presented the report which provided a summary of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on children in care, care leavers and foster carers, detailing Brent's response as a Corporate Parent during the period.

Members heard that robust risk assessments for all children and foster carers had been conducted separately to ensure their safety during contact between children and loved ones. Based on the outcomes of the risk assessments some children could not see parents, family or loved ones face to face and it was acknowledged how difficult that would have been. As the guidelines were gradually being relaxed members hoped to see more young people seeing family members face to face.

Foster carers had access to an online foster carer support group, and had been appreciative of Brent's support offer.

Brent were investigating further financial support for care leavers with a £20 supplement to the weekly allowance in line with Universal Credit increases, highlighted in the final paragraph of the report. Nigel Chapman (Operational Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) informed the Committee that this levelling up was something the Council would only be able to offer for the current year as it was a one-off in line with the position taken by government. Members of the Committee highlighted the difficulty of offering something and then taking it away and requested this was taken into consideration during budget setting in March 2021. Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources, Brent Council) agreed that it was important to ensure what care leavers had was sustainable beyond March 2021 and they would see what could be done with the funding they had.

In relation to budget, members of the Committee heard that the overall position for the budget as a whole had been a challenge and the main cost was placements for children in care and agency social workers. Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) explained that Brent was the 5th lowest funded children's services in London so delivery needed to be impactful. There was placements budget pressure. Brent was now a place of choice for social workers therefore was much stronger on employment of permanent staff.

In response to member's questions, Nigel Chapman advised that there had been a small number of placement breakdowns as a result of COVID-19 mostly due to young people finding it difficult to adhere to the stricter guidelines of lockdown and the providers of those placements having concern about the impact on other young people in the placements. Where there were placement breakdowns in semi-independent providers this caused a strain on the placement budget due to the rates for the subsequent placements for those more challenging children. Gail Tolley highlighted that IFAs and semi-independent providers had sent letters asking for placement fee uplifts as a result of COVID-19, and there had been a firm rebuttal on that pan London.

Further discussing semi-independent and independent providers, members heard that overall Brent had maintained good liaison with semi-independent provision and had seen a greater level of flexibility than anticipated, but there had been some independent fostering agencies where Brent had experienced breakdowns which had been raised through commissioning colleagues as it was felt their tolerance level of behaviour and willingness to be flexible was limited.

Officers did not have the number of young people who had accessed the Safe Base programme for online therapy requested by members of the Committee but would be happy to bring a brief report to the next Committee that covered support for the emotional and mental health of care leavers. It was added that the hours and availability of the online therapy had been expanded and feedback had been positive.

Care leavers had not been asked to leave University accommodation by providers and some had preferred to stay in their accommodation. For those care leavers who wanted to return to London and be close to their networks the Council had provided financial support for accommodation.

Officers acknowledged that Brent had been able to work with health partners including the Designated Doctor for Safeguarding and Looked After Children to continue to conduct health assessments for looked after children, and members and officers expressed gratitude to colleagues and partners that had enabled this work to continue.

Members of the Committee noted the increased attendance and engagement from care leavers as a result of virtual meetings and suggested moving forward the approach could be a mixture of face to face and online virtual meetings.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the content of the report.

9. Annual Corporate Parenting Report 2019-20

This report provided a profile of Brent's looked after children and care leavers during 2019-2020, reporting on annual activity, highlighting strengths and areas for development in supporting looked after children and care leavers in Brent.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the content of the report.

10. Annual report from the Brent Virtual School for looked after children 2018-19

This report outlined the activity and impact of the Brent Virtual School (BVS) during the academic year 2018-19.

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) informed the Committee that Sarah Miller (Head of Inclusion, Brent Council) would be moving on from Brent and they would be sorry to lose her. Michaela Richards (Deputy Head Teacher Brent Virtual School, Virtual School) was present to introduce the report.

The Committee heard the positives and areas for improvement for the academic year 2018-19. Some positives included good outcomes for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 and there had been no permanent exclusions that academic year. The overall attendance had increased from the previous year and multiple residential trips had taken place. Some of the challenges had been outcomes and attainment at Key Stage 4, which was a focus for the current year.

It was noted that young people often came into care late and in their teens therefore it was common to find some young people coming into care at Key Stage 4 with already complex behaviours to address and a disrupted education. To improve those outcomes the BVS had a full-time post-16 worker the previous year and another member of staff therefore they had been able to split the year groups and have more face to face involvement with the young people. While the BVS did not get any financial support for post-16 education they would support the areas they felt there was a need.

Regarding contact rate and engagement, the Committee were informed that up until June attendance had been 88% which had dropped to 80% in July which was believed to be due to the way data was being collected rather than an 8% drop. In relation to attainment outcomes as a result of COVID-19 the biggest concern was year 5s and year 10s. A package of support had been put together for when lockdown was eased involving more intensive tuition and mental health programs. Gail Tolley reminded members that all vulnerable children in the Borough had access to school throughout the lockdown and social workers and schools had been working closely together to have looked after children in schools. The responsibility for predicted grades and online learning lay with the actual schools and not BVS, which was there to provide additional support and supplement the work of schools.

Two initiatives had been arranged to ensure children were getting access to the internet. The initial initiative was for vulnerable children in year 10 and care leavers to be given access to 4G dongles and the allocation BVS was given had allowed them to spread them wider than the initial group. The second initiative was to increase Wi-Fi and broadband access to all young people in Brent schools in conjunction with BT. This was in the process of being rolled out and BVS hoped to disseminate passwords and licenses the following week.

Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources, Brent Council) informed the committee of a new digital inclusion initiative due to be presented to Cabinet that would include setting up a credit union to give industry loans to residents and provide training and programs for people to access.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the content of the report.

11. Fostering Service Quarterly Report , Q1 (April 2020 – June 2020)

The purpose of this report was to provide information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee about the general management of the in-house fostering service and how it was achieving good outcomes for children for the period from April 2020 to June 2020.

The Committee heard that there had been a reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers presenting to the service, detailed in page 89, paragraph 3 of the report. There was an assumption that this would increase from September onwards therefore services were preparing for that scenario.

In response to how the joint fostering project was proceeding, Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) informed the Committee that 3 Local Authorities had committed to the project. A business case approved by CYP directors and the 3 Local Authorities had been submitted to the DfE and they were awaiting a response on whether there would be any financial support. Officers were optimistic they could receive the funding to develop the model. Currently the service was looking to do some joint marketing activity with Ealing which they could do without DfE funding.

More foster carers had been recruited in the current financial year compared to the previous year, with the fostering service having a strong marketing presence online and through social media. It was noted that there had been an increase in male attendees at online open evenings which was hoped would be retained as part of recovery work.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the content of the report.

12. Six-monthly Adoption report, 1 October 2019 – 31 March 2020

The report provided a briefing to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee in relation to adoption performance data for the six month period and was presented by Debbie Gabriel. It was the first report since Adopt London West and looked at child related data, adopter recruitment, the support offer for adopters, feedback from families, application data and information about the agency, detailed in each section of the report. Debbie Gabriel expressed there had been a seamless transition moving to the new agency and the agency had been fortunate to benefit from the experience and skills of 3 Brent staff that transferred to the agency and the support operationally and strategically from Brent.

It was highlighted that a benefit of the wider group of Local Authorities was that it was possible to connect with colleagues more easily, placing children across the region with the potential to grow that activity.

Regarding the list of services funded detailed in section 14.3 of the report, Debbie Gabriel advised that those listed were just from COVID-19 funding. The terms of the funding were very specific and they needed to be commissioned quickly and delivered by the end of September. The DfE were considering allowing the agency to extend the use of the funding and they were waiting to hear back from ministers. In response to concern at the loss of these services once funding had gone Debbie Gabriel confirmed that as an agency they were committed to continuing the commissioning of the NVR 'Child to Parent' Violence training courses.

In response to concerns around losing COVID-19 funded services, Councillor McLennan (Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources, Brent Council) and Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) agreed to put together a list of emerging costs as a result of COVID-19 and which they would wish to continue after COVID-19.

Regarding the historic capacity and delay issues with court proceedings, Nigel Chapman (Operational Director for Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) advised that during COVID-19 with the use of technology the capacity has been freed up within the court system allowing cases to be dealt with more quickly. It was hoped that the court system would retain some of those new ways of working.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the content of the report.
- ii) To include in the next report data regarding the number of people interested in adoption and following through to application during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- iii) That Children and Young People colleagues would complete a list of COVID-19 funded services that should be continued after lockdown.

Any Other Business

The Committee expressed thanks to the outgoing Head of Brent Virtual School, Sarah Miller.

The Committee expressed thanks to all Children and Young People staff for the work done during the pandemic.

The meeting closed at 6.58 pm

COUNCILLOR MILI PATEL
Chair