

Public Document Pack



MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Wednesday 20 July 2022 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors 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 19 April 2022, 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**

A member of Care in Action (CIA) highlighted what the group had done at the most recent CIA sessions. They had ice breaker games to welcome new members following a recruitment day, focusing on team building. One of the games was a cookie decorating competition, where each member of CIA decorated a cookie to best reflect their personality. Each member then had to explain how the cookie reflected their personality and answer questions from the rest of the group.

Another member of Care in Action (CIA) updated the Committee on the work CIA had been focused on since the last Corporate Parenting Committee. This was work following the most recent Bright Spots Survey on helping children in care understand why they are in care and relationships with carers, which had been selected as priorities by the group. The member of CIA had also contributed to a poster to be given to children in care when they

first entered their home, to ensure it included information on how to communicate dietary requirements.

Care in Action had also been planning a residential trip for October half term.

Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) had took part in the interview panel for the Corporate Director Children and Young People. They felt it went really well and had enjoyed being part of that process. CLIA had also had a joint session with all age groups where young people had performed poems and dances. CLIA members had enjoyed this as they did not often get to interact with the other aged groups. CLIA were also planning a residential for that weekend at the Gordon Brown Centre doing events such as night walks, laser tag and high ropes. Members had been planning work to advance recruitment campaigns for the group and were hoping to create a video during the residential weekend to be shared across children and young people. This member of CLIA had been attending the Voice and Influence Subgroup meetings which took place every month, planning participation events throughout the year. They had also discussed opportunities to give young people the skills to co-facilitate sessions which had been raised at the last Corporate Parenting Committee meeting.

Another member of CLIA had chaired the interview panel for the Corporate Director Children and Young People role. He had helped with the planning session including the ordering of questions and who would ask each question. He had also taken part in co-facilitating interview panel training, and those skills were then used for the interview panel. CLIA had recently had a graduation dinner which had been arranged to thank all care leavers who had turned 25 years old for their work and contributions which the Operational Director had attended.

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:

Members highlighted how busy CIA and CLIA had been and felt they had been doing an incredible job. Members asked how CIA / CLIA approached portraying the benefits of joining the groups to other potential group members. The CIA / CLIA representatives felt that benefits included the opportunity to be around others with similar life experiences. Being able to voice opinions to very senior officers was a big benefit, as was being able to see change being made as a result of the input given. CIA and CLIA members agreed that being able to make things better for future generations was another big benefit of being part of CIA / CLIA.

In terms of the barriers faced by the CIA and CLIA groups, representatives felt that things could take a long time to get done due to the processes that needed to be followed. The Committee queried how members stayed motivated when things took time. They responded that they reminded themselves that there was always a way to solve a problem and progress something and reminded themselves to recognise when things were moving in a positive direction.

The Committee asked about the experience of participating in the Corporate Parenting Committee and the more formal aspect of the Council. CLIA agreed that participating could be scary, particularly having to speak in front of senior officers and councillors. However, they understood that the meeting was a formal Committee and should remain so, and it gave an opportunity for young people to blossom into themselves and come out of their shells. They highlighted that the Committee was a good place for young people attending to find their feet professionally. CIA members added that they could feed back to other young people about their experience of coming to Corporate Parenting Committee so they knew what to expect when they came to the meeting, mentoring other young people who

may want to come forward for the meeting. One action arising from the discussion was for members to be identified by first names as well as surnames on nameplates to make the Committee feel less formal.

CLIA and CIA concluded their update by thanking Gail Tolley, who would be retiring as Strategic Director Children and Young People at the end of August. They advised that they felt privileged to have worked alongside her and wished her the best for the future.

The Committee thanked the representatives for the updates and RESOLVED:

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

8. **Annual Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Report 2021-22**

Sonya Kalyniak (Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, Brent Council) introduced the report, informing the Corporate Parenting Committee of the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to the quality assuring and improvement of services for Looked After Children (LAC). She explained that Brent Council had a hybrid model of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), with both in-house and external IROs. External IROs were commissioned through AidHour, who had been providing the service for almost 20 years. They had known the young people they worked with for a very long time and were often the most consistent person in their life. The service was commissioned until October 2023, and the Council would begin reviewing what the service would look like in the future 6 months prior to that. For 2021-22, there were 925 reviews for LAC, overseeing care plans for 509 children, which equated to approximately 75-100 reviews per month.

In relation to quality assurance, a key role for the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Team was to ensure consistency of reviews across IROs, and the team met regularly with IROs to see what was going well and what could be improved. The team were also working to ensure children were participating directly in their reviews, and monitored IRO escalations to identify trends and feedback to the service to improve quality.

Priorities for the current reporting year were around timeliness of LAC reviews, with a target of 100% within timescales. The team were working to drive improvement and quality in pathway plans, including ensuring a needs assessment at 15 and a half years old took place. In response to a query from a new member of the committee on what pathway planning was, Sonya Kalyniak advised that the pathway plan advised how to support the young person into adulthood so they had everything they may need to be successful, including housing, education and healthcare. This was then monitored through the leaving care service once the young person turned 18. The importance of pathway planning was emphasised, as it helped the young person to be clear about what their future held and define that as soon as possible. The service were focusing on ensuring the young person was involved in their pathway plan so that they owned it and felt confident raising issues on it.

In relation to a query regarding the caseload for IROs and how that was managed, the Committee were advised that the caseload of between 60-65 children was nationally recommended, which Brent maintained. This was different to a social worker, who may have between 15-20 young people they actively worked with on a daily basis, compared to an IRO who was not as actively involved in a young person's every day life and may only see the young people they worked with every 6 months.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

9. Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2021-22

Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which primarily detailed the activity the Corporate Parenting Committee had observed and monitored throughout the year and which was a statutory requirement that local authorities needed to comply with publishing. He highlighted the key points within the report, including the increase in LAC numbers of 18.4% compared to the previous year. The report also detailed the increased number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASCs). There had also been an increase in the number of young people the Council were supporting between the ages of 18-25 years old. In terms of the profile of LAC, 44% were 16 and above. This meant there would be a growing number of care leavers in the next few years. He highlighted the importance of this as there would be additional financial pressure on the Council going forward. In terms of the reasons for the increase in demand, one was due to the Home Office placing a significant number of asylum seeking adults in 3 hotels in Brent, some of whom came forward to say they were under 18 and were subsequently assessed to be children and accommodated. The Council had also noticed an increase in demand for Children Services post Covid-19 restrictions.

Priorities for the current reporting year (2022-23) were detailed in the report.

The Committee highlighted that many UASCs had very specific needs, and asked how the Council were delivering on that with the increase in numbers. The Committee were advised there were specific programmes designed to meet the emotional wellbeing needs of UASCs. The Council had a commissioned service operated by the Anna Freud Centre called 'West' working directly with UASCs. Specialist CAMHS was available also, and while there were high waiting lists they were focusing a particular interest in UASC. The adult mental health teams had also offered bespoke mental health support for people from Afghanistan. Some money had been secured through the Council to put in place a bespoke programme of support for UASCs, starting at the end of September, and focusing particularly on former UASC (who are now care leavers) who would not meet the threshold for adult mental health services and did not engage with online counselling. The Committee were reminded that the support to looked after children, care leavers and UASCs had been considered a strength by Ofsted in the 2018 inspection.

Nigel Chapman (Operational Director Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) advised the Committee there was good ESOL provision in secondary schools and colleges, as learning English was the first thing a lot of young people arriving wanted.

The Committee acknowledged the data which suggested there would be more care leavers over time, and felt it was a difficult time for young people to become independent with the cost of living crisis. They queried how Brent was doing compared to other councils in relation to the degree of support offered to care leavers. Onder Beter advised the Committee that Brent had a comprehensive local offer, as authorised by the Corporate Parenting Committee. There were a number of statutory requirements as well as discretionary Council offers to care leavers. Currently the Association for London Directors of Children's Services were looking to create a London-wide offer for care leavers, which would also look at the possibility of piloting the free bus passes Wales were currently piloting. Brent Council had recently upgraded its offer with additional benefits including gym and leisure activity for looked after children and care leavers. Brent was also one of the first councils who exempted care leavers from paying council tax.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

10. **Foster Carers' Charter 2022**

Darren Johnson (Service Manager, LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, regarding engagement and involvement of foster carers in the revision of Brent's Foster Carers' Charter. The new charter now included kinship carers in the offer and emphasised their importance. The charter set expectations for what Brent wanted from carers regarding the quality of support they provided to children and how they conducted their role, and equally what carers should expect from Brent in terms of the offer of training, support and how carers were treated. In creating the revised charter, officers undertook consultation with foster carers on the offer and what they felt should be included. The Council was responsible for monitoring the impact of the charter and whether it was making a difference. Carers had asked for 6-monthly reviews to ensure the Council were making progress on the areas in the charter, and were pleased with the focus on carers' learning and development needs.

The Committee asked for more information on the foster carer support group, and were advised this had been running for quite some time. Officers hoped to utilise the skills, experience and expertise of foster carers in the design of the service and work in partnership to improve the service.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the report.
- ii) For foster carers to be invited to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

11. **Fostering Service Quarterly Report, Quarter 1 (Apr 2022 - June 2022)**

Onder Beter (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which was a regular quarterly update on the fostering service. He highlighted that there was a challenge in recruiting foster carers in London and nationally, which had been featured in the recent independent review of children's social care. In response Brent was focusing on recruitment, attempting to restructure the service to improve innovation and have more financial investment in marketing and recruitment of foster carers. The Council was in a partnership arrangement with 2 other local authorities to work on recruitment of foster carers, which was due to pick up pace in September 2022.

The Committee noted that the number of looked after children (LAC) placed with independent fostering agencies (IFAs) was above target, and asked for an explanation of the difference between the use of independent fostering agencies compared to in-house carers, in terms of a child's experience and the cost implications associated with that. The Committee were advised that the cost implications were significant, as the local authority paid at least double to IFAs compared to what they paid for in-house foster carers as there was the agency fee also. Most councils were not able to compete with IFAs in relation to the allowance paid to carers, with IFAs able to pay more to carers, but Brent tried to supplement that with an excellent support package to carers, recognising that a carers' motivation may not be money but serving the community. This year, Brent is increasing the support function and trying to bring in a therapeutic element to the support offered to foster carers, although this came with cost implications as there was no budget for this additional support meaning funding would need to be sought. Alongside this, officers were lobbying to level up in-house carer allowances to at least the London average. Onder Beter highlighted

that, nationally, the sector was depending on IFAs as no council was able to absorb the number of children coming into care and needing to be placed.

In response to whether the use of IFAs made it more likely a child would be moved out of borough, Nigel Chapman advised this was not necessarily the case as there were a lot of IFA foster carers within Brent and IFAs gave the local authority a greater choice on where a child could be placed. Some children were placed away from the Borough in their own interest, such as risk factors relating to gangs. The local authority always looked to place a child with a Brent foster carer first, but sometimes further outside of the borough meant more housing space and the ability to keep siblings together.

In relation to recruitment methods, Onder Beter advised that during the pandemic most recruitment activity moved online through local adverts and online recruitment techniques, which research suggested was most effective. The Council were now starting face to face recruitment events in combination with other marketing, such as through the Brent magazine, local radio station, and recruitment agencies. A Marketing and Recruitment Officer was now in post specialising in this area and Brent had begun to see more foster carers being approved. The Committee were asked to support the online activity whenever they saw it and talk about fostering in their surgeries. The Brent Fostering Twitter page was '@BrentFostering'.

- i) To note the report.

12. **Any other urgent business**

Gail Tolley (Strategic Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) informed the Committee that this would be Onder Beter's (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) final meeting, and the Committee thanked Onder for his hard work over the years and making a difference to the lives of young people. The Committee wished Onder luck for the future.

The meeting closed at 18:20 pm

Councillor Gwen Grahl
Chair