

MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE
Wednesday 19 October 2022 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Grahl (Chair), Chappell (substituting for Councillor 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

Apologies were received from:

- Councillor Collymore, who was substituted by Councillor Chappell.

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 20 July 2022, be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

6. Matters arising (if any)

None.

7. Update from Care In Action / Care Leavers in Action Representatives

T (Care in Action) informed the Committee that the Bright Spots Survey was now officially finished, and the Care in Action (CIA) group were preparing for the next survey launch and designing posters for publicity. The CIA group had also designed a 'dos and don'ts' leaflet for foster carers which was now being shared with the Fostering Support Team and Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) for comments and incorporated into foster carer training. The leaflet focused on day-to-day life, such as how foster carers could accommodate a child's needs including dietary requirements, religious beliefs and cultural celebrations. CIA had trialled some other venues to run their group sessions and were now back at the Civic Centre as it was felt to be a trustworthy, safe and comfortable space. Over the summer, CIA had arranged a members meet up with activities such as quizzes, prizes, catering, a bouncy castle, pool table, crafts, and a DJ, and had over 50 people attending. There had been many leaders in attendance and T felt it had been good to see them in a more relaxed space outside of their professional capacity. CIA also had a residential trip scheduled and T was excited for the people attending that and hoped they had a good experience. One of the main projects T had been working on was with the Brent Care Journeys Team, co-designing a crafts project to capture the memories

of looked after children. T shared the memory book she had created as part of the project, which had made her feel like important and valued. She would be feeding back the pros and cons of the project and hoped it would soon be available for other foster children to access.

J (CLIA) informed the Committee that CLIA had been involved in a play at the Kiln Theatre with Brent Care Journeys, following personal stories about people's experience in care and how they felt. He felt it had been a good experience to get voices heard. There had also been a display wall featuring poetry, model boxes and other work CLIA had been doing over the last few months. CLIA had already had their residential trip, doing activities such as archery, laser tag and making bracelets. Newer members of the group had attended, and everyone got along well so it had been a good bonding experience. J gave feedback that the beds at the residential had been too small. Two of the areas of focus that CLIA were now working on, following the Bright Spots Survey, were housing and issues relating to trust. J had co-facilitated training around this, with the objective for staff to understand that young people needed at least one trusted person in their life. Good collaboration and partnerships had formed while doing the piece of work and J hoped it would enhance his skill set.

C (CLIA) had been part of a commissioning panel for a targeted mental health and emotional wellbeing service for children and young people. C was also involved in the work on the Bright Spots Survey and was currently looking at how to get more responses from young people and the communications channels that could be used.

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 were impressed with CIA / CLIA representatives presentations and felt that it had given them a good picture of what the group did. They had been particularly moved by the memory book T had shared with them.

The Committee asked how more looked after children and care leavers could be encouraged to take part in CIA / CLIA. C advised that one of the benefits he used to encourage his peers to join was that there was a free meal for participants during or at the end of sessions. He felt that his peers needed a reason to turn up and therefore this was something that might entice someone to join.

The Chair highlighted the feedback that there was a lack of things to do at weekends and asked what CIA / CLIA would want to be available from the Council to help with access to activities during weekends. C acknowledged that this would depend on the age bracket, but there were several leisure centres in Brent. He thought the Council could speak to managers and owners of these leisure centres, such as the Trampoline Centre in Brent Cross, Inflate Nation in Colindale, and the Ball Park in Vale Farm to arrange a day every month where children could go to do different specific things. There would only need to be 3-4 activities and then children would have something to do every weekend. Within the care leaver age bracket, help with gym memberships and securing library cards, as well as dealing with overdue library bills, may help. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) would speak to Wembley Stadium about arranging a regular supply of event tickets for looked after children and care leavers. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) added that the department were currently working on communications to children in care and care leavers about free access to all Brent Leisure Centres. The department also had allowances for gym membership contributions. There were also good links with local theatres and support from the Kiln where children and young people could get involved.

The Committee asked about the outcomes of the Bright Spots Survey. C advised members that the figures showed that fewer children and young people between the ages of 8-18 in Brent reported having a pet compared to the general population, and 1 in 10 survey

respondents reported that they did not take part in any hobbies. Fewer young people reported regularly talking to their carers about the things that mattered to them, and in the ages of 4-7 fewer felt settled. The positives from the survey included the finding that all of the children who took part in the survey felt safe where they lived now, and 92% reported always feeling safe in their placements, which was noticeably higher than children in the general population.

In relation to the Bright Spots Survey, the Committee queried how 4-7 year olds had been surveyed. C advised that the questions had been phrased to them in a child friendly manner and then 'aged up' for inclusion in the survey.

Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that a report would be brought back to the Committee with all the details about the Bright Spots Survey, outcomes, and plans 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. Placement Stability Report 2021-22

Zafer Yilkan (Director for Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) introduced the report. He highlighted there had been a slight increase in placement moves since 2021, mostly due to covid-19 and the number of contacts coming through to children's services. In terms of the placement pattern, there were a large number of over 16s coming into the system under emergency arrangements and a large number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASCs). Linking those issues with the national shortage of placements meant that Brent had a challenge in terms of placing children and young people. There were a number of local authorities bidding for one placement every day, and the competition caused the cost of placement to rise. The department were implementing a number of strategies to ensure placements remained stable, including placement stability meetings, care packages and wraparound support. In addition, there were challenges with recruiting foster carers. In relation to care leavers, the percentage of staying put arrangements in Brent was relatively high, which meant those children were in stable, long-term placements with their foster carers past the age of 18, but the placement was then not available for other children to move in to.

The Chair thanked Zafer for his introduction and invited contributions from the Committee, with the following points raised:

The Committee noted that Brent's fostering allowance was below the average compared to the rest of West London and asked if it could be changed. Anecdotal evidence suggested that other local authorities were paying around £100 more per week than Brent. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that historically Brent had paid lower due to budget constraints. The allowance worked on a graded approach, aligned to the age of the child/ren being placed. He felt that the allowance was not the only reason people became foster carers, as the support available also attracted foster carers. Brent was looking at their arrangements currently, working with Ealing and Harrow around the possibility of combining services. If the department made the case to level up allowances to attract foster carers, this would have implications on the cost to the budget. It was highlighted that when people stopped foster caring their reasons for doing so were not usually related to allowances.

The Committee queried whether there was anything IFAs were doing better than Brent that the Council could learn from. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) advised the Committee that IFA recruitment processes were not different from Brent's processes. In terms of retention, the department were looking at how they could further

support foster carers with a therapeutic offer, looking to see what additional benefits could be offered within the resources it had, because IFAs often had good out of hours support systems that could be accessed 24/7. Zafer Yilkan added that most local authorities were very clear about the fostering guidance and followed the same processes. Brent's placement sufficiency for bed capacity was relatively good and the department maximised that capacity where it could. The service foster carers received from Brent was very similar to other local authorities and IFAs and there was well established support for clinical supervision from the Anna Freud Centre to help sustain placements.

The Committee highlighted that the report showed that the data relating to older children referred to an increase in UASCs, and queried whether there were any unique challenges for that group of children. Nigel Chapman advised that the previous year there had been the challenge of the use of hotels in the local area, where the Home Office had initially placed people as adults who were then presenting as children at the Civic Centre. The initial challenge of that had been conducting age assessments quickly and fairly, and for the child there was the stress and uncertainty of being believed and what would happen to them. There was a dedicated team doing that work as quickly as possible. UASCs also had potential trauma from what they had experienced in their own country and their journey to the UK, so there was dedicated therapeutic support for UASCs. The number of UASCs fluctuated and had recently increased again as the government now required local authorities to take 0.1% of asylum seekers, compared to 0.07% previously, and this added pressure to the local placement challenge.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report and activity undertaken to enhance placement stability for looked after children in Brent.

9. Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report Quarter 2 – July 2022 to September 2022

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report. she explained that there had been a change in the fostering team's structure and two fostering teams had now amalgamated into one team. She introduced Elena Muller as the new Service Manager for Fostering and Kinship. Work in the team was currently focused on how value could be added to fostering support, using internal resources where possible. For example, how the in-house trained social pedagogue could be used to support placements.

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

In relation to recruitment, the Committee queried how the Council promoted the need for local foster carers and whether the department were in touch with organisations such as Brent Hubs to help spread that message. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) informed the Committee that there was a Marketing Recruitment Officer within the team who was plugged in to the communities team and the different events that were occurring through the Council and through community organisations. Outreach work had been targeted at specific communities including Somali communities with some success. Much of the outreach work involved educating communities as to what fostering was and the department had done work with Brazilian communities and Brent faith forums to reach newer communities. The data on outreach work would be included for future reports.

Nigel Chapman committed to inviting a foster carer and kinship foster carer to the next meeting to talk about their fostering experience.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

10. Brent Adoption Report – 6 monthly update – 1 April 2022 to 30 September 2022

Debbie Gabriel (Adopt London West) introduced the 6 monthly adoption update. She highlighted that the partnership in Brent felt very strong and mature, and the performance in Brent was strong. The two major indicators of performance were; the average length of time it took from the court granting a care order to the match with a family being identified; and the amount of time it took to move a child in with the family. The target length of time for matching following a care order was 121 days. The national average for matching was 125 days and the London average was 274, compared to Brent's average of 171 days. The target length of time for moving a child in with a family once matched was 426 days. The national average was 450 days and the London average was 476 days, compared to Brent's average of 328 days. Brent currently had 7 children placed, but it was highlighted that the courts continued to struggle with delays.

Work within the service currently was focused on promoting and developing permanence with adoption and social work colleagues. In addition, Adopt London West (ALW) were working to promote and enhance the take up of advice, support and advocacy from 'Kinship' for kinship carers, regardless of their legal order. ALW had the benefit of an in-house Clinical Psychologist to support foster carers, adopters and children through transitions and developmental trauma. There was also work being done for National Adoption Week which was occurring the week of the meeting, with the theme 'identity'. The campaign assets for that had been shared with Brent's Corporate Communications Team for social media activity.

The Chair thanked Debbie for the introduction and invited those present to make contributions, with the following points raised:

The Committee highlighted the small number of approvals for families from a Black or Mixed ethnicity community in the reporting period, and asked if there was any way to increase the number of approvals. Members highlighted the Black Community Action Plan (BCAP), which had BCAP Champions who ALW could link with to increase the number of approved Black and Mixed ethnicity adopter families. Debbie Gabriel agreed that it would be helpful to connect with someone working on the BCAP. She highlighted that the small number of approvals was likely due to the fact it had been a very quiet quarter for approvals. In relation to the 37 approved adopters, 47% were from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background. Of the adopters waiting for approval, officers would return with the ethnic breakdown at a future meeting.

The Committee asked for the next report to detail the success rate for Special Guardianship Orders.

In relation to the Adoption Support Fund, members asked whether that could be accessed quickly. Debbie Gabriel advised the Committee that officers were under pressure in terms of processing those applications but there was no waiting list as officers prioritised processing applications. Colleagues in other London regions did have a backlog.

The Committee asked about the funding opportunities detailed in the report. they were advised that the bids were going in as part of the wider Adopt London Partnership as that attracted

more money and the resource could then be shared amongst participating boroughs. The funding would be allocated to an early permanence project and a project officer as well as training for councillors and wider staff networks. The bid for a Matching Co-ordinator had been agreed. ALW had submitted an expression of interest for multi-disciplinary teams to grow the psychology offer but had been turned down, so were now exploring other opportunities to fund that.

The Committee asked how the matching process worked. Debbie Gabriel advised members that the child was allocated a Family Finding Social Worker in addition to their Child Social Worker, who worked closely together to look at approved adopters in the Adopt London region to find a match. There was a secure national database where adopters could enter their profiles and look for children to match with that way. It was important that adopters felt a connection with a child and if there was any reason a match did not feel right then it could not proceed, so there was a process of ensuring there was good intelligence about all adopters and children waiting before making a match. The benefit of being able to use a pool of adopters from Adopt London South meant there were more options for matching and matching quicker.

Members recalled that Brent had previously had an in-house adoption panel and asked whether the move to a regional adoption agency had resulted in a loss of the personal intelligence and community feel that the in-house adoption service had. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) agreed that she had been anxious about the move to a regional adoption model, but some of Brent's adoption workers had TUPE'd over to ALW meaning that intelligence had not been lost. She recalled that she had recently been involved in an introductory visit between a family and baby which had been very well co-ordinated and the family finder had done a very good job. She added that the progress in early permanence over the last 6 months and the growth in knowledge around options for children was being demonstrated.

The Committee asked about adoption breakdowns, for example if a transition was made too quickly and resulted in a breakdown further into the relationship. Debbie Gabriel acknowledged the concern and advised that ALW had now moved to a transitional model that slowed down the introduction between a family and child. If the introduction was done right, and that relationship was supported, the chances of the relationship continuing and enduring through childhood to adulthood were higher. Slowing down that transition process could affect performance indicators but was ultimately the right thing to do for the family, and as a result the number of relationship breakdowns was very small.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the report.

11. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 18:35 pm

Councillor Gwen Grahl
Chair