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## MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Monday 24 April 2023 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Grahl (Chair), Collymore, Dixon, Gbajumo and Mistry (substituting for Councillor 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 Hirani, who was substituted by Councillor Mistry.

### 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 1 February 2023, 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**

J (Care Leavers in Action) informed the Committee that he had been involved in speaking to Ofsted during their recent inspection of local authority children's services in Brent. J had been asked about what services were available to care leavers and what could be improved, and care leavers had given some ideas of services they would like to see. One idea was subsidised driving lessons. The inspectors had been very friendly and spoke to each care leaver representative individually to understand the viewpoint of different types of care leavers. Another project that J had been involved in was around housing, looking at where care leavers could go to find information for accommodation when they became independent. They had made the suggestion that all services should be available in one

place as a 'one-stop shop', and that it was important to ensure there were staff available who could communicate with people who had language barriers.

C (Care Leavers in Action) told the Committee about the trip that Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) had been preparing for, to see *Wicked* in the West End. CLIA had been on trips in the past, but it had been a while since the last one. CLIA would get the opportunity to meet the cast after the show and talk about inclusivity in the group, to look at ways to increase the membership of CLIA. The Committee heard that the work around building trusted relationships had been completed at the last CLIA session. That piece of work would be tracked to see its impact. One way this was being done was through a QR code on posters about building trusted relationships, where the reader could scan the code to be brought to a survey and feed back about the information on the poster. The group had also spoke about the national consultation and found it very interesting because the group had already been looking at ideas on a national scale, looking to other boroughs to see what they did.

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

The Committee noted that the previous (2018) looked after children sub-judgement within the Ofsted inspection of children's services had been rated 'outstanding' in comparison to the new rating of 'good'. They asked what the members of CLIA felt had declined over the last few years to have reduced the Ofsted rating. C explained that Covid had a big impact on services everywhere. He felt there was a much more severe impact on care leavers, because many had reached the point where they lived alone, so when lockdown had been in effect care leavers' mental health had took a decline as a result of loneliness and social isolation. C highlighted that healthy social interaction had a positive impact on mental health, and so it was difficult for care leavers without that. In addition, there had been a change in the office where, previously, care leavers had been able to drop in to say hello to staff from the LAC and care leaver team, and now they were no longer able to do so. As a result, he felt that there was not anything in particular within the service that had declined, but that the service was going through an adjustment period where things had changed so quickly and drastically following Covid.

The Committee asked whether there was enough support from community organisations to support the ambitions of looked after children and care leavers. C felt it would be a good idea to further tap into different communities using community organisations as there were looked after children and care leavers from different ethnic backgrounds, religions and cultures and it was important that there was integration and recognition for those young people.

In noting the update from C about trying to get more members involved in CLIA, the Committee asked what had been done so far. C told the Committee that he had spoken to friends who were also care leavers in Brent to get them to come to CLIA, but it was difficult to get new people because it was a difficult concept to explain and because the group had involved the same people for the past 5-6 years. The Committee expressed that they were grateful to young people for their efforts in engaging peers to come along.

Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised the Committee that they had been looking at the membership for CLIA, and were considering bringing together the 2 groups of CLIA and Brent Care Journeys, which Barnardo's were currently running. The Council were also working with the Young Brent Foundation looking at a space to use as a long-term base for young people in care and care leavers. At the moment, Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) highlighted that she had secured the space in The Curve for children and young people to use.

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. **Overview of support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)**

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which informed members of the Council's legal responsibilities towards Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) under the Children's Act 1989. She explained that UASC was defined as 'at the time of making an application that the person is or appears to be under 18 and is applying in their own right because they have no guardian or relative in this country'. The number of UASCs in care had grown by approximately 34% in the UK over the past 12 months. This had been especially true for London, which continued to have the highest proportion of UASCs in the UK by a considerable margin. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- UASCs became known to the Council through different routes. They could present directly to the local police station or council offices, or may be a previously dispersed asylum seeker. There was also the pan London rota to fairly distribute presenting UASCs and the national transfer scheme managed by the Home Office.
- Since August 2021, 59 people who were placed in hotel accommodation in Brent presented to the service as a UASC. This meant the service needed to assess those 59 people's age via age assessment. A significant number of those 59 were found to be adults. It was not an exact science and there was a need to be sensitive due to the risk of judicial review. The Council normally worked to a margin of 5 years.
- A dedicated UASC team had been created in Brent following the large influx of asylum seekers residing in hotel accommodation in order to respond to that specific pressure. There were social workers in that team who had specialist UASC knowledge and experience in completing age assessments.
- As of March 2023, Brent had 43 young people in care who were UASCs, a significant drop from the previous year which was 74. Brent had 153 care leavers who were former UASC, making up 35% of the care leaver population.
- In relation to support for UASCs, there was close working with the Brent Virtual School to ensure that, whether being assessed for their age or having had their age assessed and accepted, there was access to education. There was also close working with health partners to ensure quick health assessments and screenings. Regarding mental health and wellbeing support, there were several support services available. There was the WEST service delivered through the Anna Freud Centre, and specific group and 1-1 support for UASCs. Other community resources included WDP and Elevate, and there were other organisations that the Council linked with such as Young Roots and the Refugee Council. The Care Leavers Hub was also available to UASCs which they were encouraged to use, including the weekly football sessions run by the Leaving Care service which were particularly popular with UASCs and former UASCs and therapeutic Art sessions through Brent Care Journeys.

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

The Committee asked how many UASCs had a learning disability. Kelli Eboji explained that this would likely be determined through the Brent Virtual School. If there were concerns for a child's learning ability, they would be referred to an educational psychologist for an assessment through the Inclusion Service. More frequently, there were concerns about a child's mental health and the presentation of their emotional wellbeing could create some

uncertainty about their learning needs. She felt this was an area that needed more focus as it could take a long time to establish if a learning disability was present.

In relation to age assessments, the Committee asked what would happen where it was not clear how old a presenting asylum seeker was. Kelli Eboji highlighted that the Council worked to a margin of error, usually of around 5 years in order to then initiate an age assessment. If the Council determined that someone was between the ages of 18-25 then they would accommodate them and provide services under Section 20 of the Children's Act, and if they were assessed to be over 25 they would not be accommodated and would be referred back through the Home Office route. The assessment initially looked at the welfare of the person, then a social work judgement was made as to whether the person looked to be under 18. The person's claimed age was often in direct conflict with the Home Office assessed age and a judgement would be made depending on what the social worker was seeing and what the person was saying. Sometimes, if a person was assessed to be over 25 and therefore not accommodated, then this could lead to legal challenge. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) confirmed that if there were any doubts about someone's age they would not be placed in a foster home with younger children and more likely would be placed in semi-independent accommodation or in a foster home with older young people. He highlighted that the Council took the position of listening to the people coming forward and giving them the benefit of the doubt, veering away from a culture of disbelief.

Continuing to discuss age assessments, the Committee queried whether they were particularly distressing for the people coming forward. Kelli Eboji advised that they could be distressing because very often the people coming forward were already distressed and relaying distressing stories. Sometimes age assessors would hear very similar stories where people may have been told what to say, which they then needed to unpick to understand the truth. Age assessments would look at the person's health and family history but could not use medical determination such as dental records. There were interpreters, 2 assessing social workers, and independent support at the time of an assessment. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that the Home Office were now setting up their own age assessment unit, with social workers employed to do assessments that would include bone density and dentistry tests, which the Home Office considered to be a more objective view on age. There was a difference of opinion of how certain that could be as it was not an exact science, but this would be done centrally by the Home Office and that responsibility for age assessments would be taken away from local authorities at some point.

The Committee highlighted that many older UASCs were more independent than their looked after peers and often went out by themselves a lot, becoming difficult for their foster carer to keep track of. They queried how the foster carers remained curious enough to be assured the young person was safe. Kelli Eboji explained that the Council tried hard to place a young person under 18 in a foster care placement, but this depended on the information they were able to learn about the person and others already in the foster care placement. Most UASCs were in semi-independent placements, but the one's who were in foster care were often more independent and there was a need to explore that with the person, explain the rules and find out why they were not abiding with them. This was work that the social workers should be doing and supporting the foster carers with.

In considering whether the right foster carers were available for UASCs, the Committee heard that there was a diverse group of foster carers and a set of carers who took only UASCs. However, the service felt that there was always room for more. There was good language and culture crossovers for most UASCs, but there was a low number of Afghan foster carers.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

## 9. Outcome of Ofsted ILACs Inspection

The Chair introduced the item, which was the February 2023 Ofsted inspection report of children's services in Brent Council, and congratulated all staff who had been involved in the inspection. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that more detail would be provided at the next meeting regarding the actions the Council were taking in response to the inspection report.

The Chair invited the comments and questions from the Committee, with the following issues raised:

The Committee highlighted comments in the report about the attendance figures for children in care reviews and the quality of those reviews and queried whether that was the norm. They were advised that the attendance numbers were similar to the last inspection, so they had not declined but it was possible that expectations had increased. Most children did take part in their review in some way, usually through speaking with an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) or putting their feedback in writing. In having reviewed those interactions with IROs, Nigel Chapman advised that there were 1-2 employed through the IRO contract that were felt to be not offering as high a quality as would be preferred, where their language used had been officious and not child friendly for example, and which may have been missed in quality assurance work.

The Committee asked about care leavers' understanding of and access to their health histories, which was a recommendation for improvement. Nigel Chapman highlighted that this was common with care leavers, who sometimes had a fractured history prior to care. The inspectors had found that care leavers, when spoken to, were not able to confirm they knew where their health history was and who to speak to if they needed it, and some personal advisers could not point to where they would get that information. He expressed the need to focus health colleagues and Council staff to be confident in knowing how to access that information. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) added that care leavers could access their health history via their GPs and the information for doing that was provided to them at their final LAC review, but they may have lost that information or need reminding, so they were now looking to communicate and remind care leavers how to do this at multiple points.

In relation to private fostering, the Committee highlighted the Ofsted finding that a small number of private fostering arrangements did not meet regulation and asked how that would be improved. Nigel Chapman advised that there was a very small number of children who were subject to private fostering arrangements, at less than 10 in Brent. An issue across all local authorities was awareness raising of what private fostering was and ensuring everyone knew how to make referrals. As such, the low number of private fostering arrangements in Brent was likely to be higher in reality and there were likely more children out there being looked after by a relative that would not be considered a close relative, or a friend. As part of member's safeguarding training, members were informed about what private fostering was, how to recognise it and how to report it. As a result of the Ofsted finding, Nigel Chapman had asked for an action plan to address those areas where they had not been compliant with regulations, and he was confident in that plan and the monitoring arrangements in place for that.

The Committee queried what item 38 of the report meant, which stated that 'the systems in place have not identified effectively the shortfalls in practice for children who are privately fostered or in areas of practice for children in care and care leavers that have declined'. The Committee were advised that this was the first time Ofsted had separated children in

care and care leavers as 2 separate judgements. The judgement was likely a result of the effect of turnover of social workers in LAC teams on some children's cases and the disruption in that relationship. For example, in some cases there were examples of inconsistent recording of supervision and higher caseload in some teams. An issue for the department was that there was confidence that having a consistent social work manager and independent reviewing officer was a mitigation for social work turnover, but it had not been possible to clearly evidence that in the time that the department had with the inspectors. Overall, the inspectors had seen good quality but there were some cases that were not consistently good, and the service was striving for an even distribution of consistently good work.

In relation to comment 36 of the Ofsted report regarding young offenders, where some personal advisers had taken a more 'befriending' role instead of advocacy following a serious incident, the Committee queried whether personal advisers were given training to provide that advocacy to young people. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) confirmed that personal advisers had not had training on advocacy but there were plans to implement that as a result of the finding as part of an action plan to upskill personal advisers. There were also mentors and advocates through various different options available for young people in the criminal justice system, such as through Coram Voice. In relation to mentoring and advocacy for children and young people more generally, along with the commissioned advocacy services used the Council also had a "Grandmentors" scheme, where older people were matched with a care experienced young person as a grandparent type figure. There were approximately 20 matches within Brent.

The Committee asked whether care leavers had any entitlement to free public transport. Nigel Chapman advised that currently there was no London wide agreement from TfL about transport costs but there was a campaign to lobby TfL to do free transport for care leavers. Any support the Committee could put to that campaign would be appreciated. The Council were providing travel costs for care leavers to attend training and University.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

#### 10. **Brent Adoption 6-Monthly Report: 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023**

Debbie Gabriel (Adopt London West) introduced the report, which updated the Committee on adoption performance data for the reporting period and the progress and activity of Adopt London West. The report included a summary of the psychological services that Adopt London West could provide as there was now an increased, more consolidated offer. Something new and different that Adopt London West had done during the reporting period was the drama group that had ran throughout October which had been well attended with 10 young people attending every day of the programme. As a result of that success another drama group would run in May. Adopt London had also been working on the Black Adopters Project and had hosted a theory of change workshop, which Councillors Collymore and Gbajumo had attended. Debbie Gabriel thanked the councillors for attending as it was unusual to have councillor engagement to that extent at events and this had been appreciated by the whole project group. Adopt London West's partnership board had agreed to extend the contract with Kinship, providing kinship carers with tailored support. In concluding the introduction, she highlighted that Adopt London West had been very pleased with Ofsted's positive comments that the relationship between Brent and Adopt London West worked well and that the arrangements and bespoke offer for special guardians in particular were good.

Councillor Gbajumo spoke on the Black Adopters Project event she had attended, confirming that there had been a very good turnout where they had heard from some professors. During the workshop, she had raised the theory that there was a tendency to believe two adults were needed to adopt, but a single person was able to adopt if they fulfilled the criteria. Debbie Gabriel agreed, confirming that there were a number of singles who were in the process of an assessment, particularly post-covid with many singles reaching middle ages and re-evaluating their life and goals. The previous month, Adopt London West had approved 3 single women.

The Committee were advised that the financial aspect was a challenge to many looking to adopt, including housing. This was not something Adopt London West could change but they were looking at targeting directly and encouraging people to be open and honest about their financial situation early on in the process so that financial offers could be made, for example through an adoption allowance. Having said that, the bigger issues around housing would remain. These factors would be looked at in detail and included in the next report.

The Committee asked whether there were any communities where there was a shortage of adopters, and heard that there was a shortage of Black adopters. There were many Asian adopters but few Asian children to adopt.

The Committee felt that early permanence placements was a good initiative, and asked whether the young people ended up staying on in those early placements. Debbie Gabriel confirmed that regionally, for Adopt London West, all children and young people had remained in their early permanence placement, but that had not been the case nationally. She highlighted that one of the most difficult balances was that the court may chose to place the child with their family, which was heart-breaking for adopters but great news for the family. This made adoption very complex and uncertain, and so nationally that message was important. Early permanence was a good way to have that conversation. A good example in Brent was where particular circumstances of a case meant that the child could be placed in February 2022 but the final adoption order was not made until November 2022, but that child had been with the family for months already where previously they would not have been.

Debbie Gabriel confirmed that foster parents could become adopters.

In response to why panel meetings were done on MS Teams, Debbie Gabriel explained that all assessment visits were done in person but there had been a decision for panels to remain on Teams. This was following research that this was preferred and was more comfortable for adopters.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the report.

#### 11. **Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report Quarter 3: 1 January 2023 to 31 March 2023**

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which detailed the activity of Brent's fostering service from 1 January 2023 to 31 March 2023. She advised the Committee that the priorities for the service moving forward were the recruitment and assessment of foster carers. The service was currently reviewing the marketing and recruitment strategy and setting targets for the new year, and lots of work had taken place around foster carer retention, including looking at the package of support

and allowances. The service was also developing it's kinship carer work and community space.

Elena Muller (Service Manager – LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) advised that the service was trying to engage with the kinship community and bring them on board. Brent was very fortunate to have a very vocal and passionate representative from the kinship carer community who was advocating for kinship carers and helped to organise some forums for kinship carers. The forums had helped the service hear what kinship carers found helpful and what else was needed in the way services were provided. As a result of those sessions a meeting with the web design team was arranged to look at how the community perceived the service and how the service responded to their needs at the first port of call. Councillor Grahl hoped that the service could look to other areas for best practice in relation to kinship carers, such as Liverpool who had recently developed a Kinship Charter.

In relation to training, the Committee heard that all training had moved online during Covid. The choice of online was still the preferred option but the service still made sure to offer a mix and wanted a balance so that as many people as possible could benefit from training. The figures in the report on uptake were positive and that continued to improve. In addition, the service was listening to feedback about what carers wanted to learn and alongside their core offer had additional options, such as adolescent mental health and contextual safeguarding which were in high demand. The service had started to engage with what children and young people thought would be helpful to include in training, and there was an ongoing project where young people were now part of educating foster carers and delivering some of that training.

The Committee felt that it would be good to have training for councillors on the issues around fostering and adoption. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) highlighted that it was 'Fostering Fortnight' in May and some communications could be disseminated to councillors to invite them to some of those events.

As no further issues were raised, the Committee RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

## 12. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 18:35 pm

COUNCILLOR GWEN GRAHL  
Chair