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MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Monday 17 July 2023 at 5.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Grahl (Chair) and Councillors Dixon, Gbajumo, Hirani and Kennelly (substituting for Councillor Collymore)

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 Kennelly.

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 24 April 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 the group had seen Wicked at the Theatre and it had been nice to see a live show. The group hoped to do more theatre trips including to see Hamilton, and other different types of activities to cover a range of interests. The group had started planning the Summer Fun Day and would be having dinner the following week to discuss the role Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) would play in the planning of that. CLIA wanted to bring back mentoring between CLIA and CIA, which J had been part of when he was part of CIA many years ago. He felt it was a good opportunity to get to know each other, for CIA to learn from the experience of CLIA members and for CIA to feel confident in taking over when members of CLIA left. CLIA would be involved in some upcoming interview panels for job roles and J hoped to get CIA involved in interview panels in the future. J had also been involved in cooking lessons with

Brent Care Journeys where they had learned to make desserts, including apple crumble and Eaton mess. J had been invited to Buckingham Palace with another care leaver which had been a good experience to see the gardens and meet the King. He concluded his update by informing the Committee that CLIA enjoyed the Hub where once a month they went to get food and meet each other with a member of staff present.

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 asked what other activities the group was looking to do. J replied that he would personally enjoy doing more outdoor activities such as camping or glamping. The Chair added that she had been in touch with OVO Arena about getting tickets for events for children in care and care leavers and she would follow that up in September in the hopes some tickets would be secured for future activities. J expressed he would be interested in travel projects that engaged in various activities such as training abroad or in other areas of the UK.

The Committee asked how J had found the mentoring scheme when he took part in it. He explained that his mentor had taken part in Corporate Parenting Committee and J had accompanied him to that. As a result J had been able to get to know his mentor and become comfortable with other care leavers in the group, and was more comfortable in formal meetings such as Corporate Parenting Committee where he could talk without being nervous.

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 Annual Report 2022-2023**

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which presented the 2022-23 annual report on outcomes for looked after children and care leavers and a summary of the activity taking place. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- There was a total of 319 children in care in the reporting year compared to 341 the previous year which was a 7% decrease. She explained that this was a result of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) turning 18 during that period.
- The Council had received positive feedback following its Ofsted ILACS Inspection in February 2023 regarding placement stability for children. There had been a reduction in movement of placement of approximately 3% in the reporting year.
- Comments by the inspector stated that the Council had embedded permanency planning for children and achieved permanency for children without delay, and the Council was making strides with early permanency with Adopt London West (ALW).
- There had been a lot of participation activity over the past 12 months, and the service intended to merge Brent Care Journeys and its Children in Care Council (Care in Action and Care Leavers in Action) into one single offer. Children valued the offer of those activities, particularly the hub, and there had been good success with the participation in the Grand Mentors scheme.
- Priorities for the coming year were around stabilising and retaining workforce so that children could benefit from stable, long-term relationships. There was a continued focus on working with partners to improve health outcomes, particularly emotional wellbeing. The service envisaged future development work with Brent Care Journeys in anticipation of the end of the 5-year partnership with Barnardo's

and continued to engage young people in that work. Another priority was around improving accommodation pathways and independent development for care leavers. The Council was also reinvigorating life story work for children in care to help them understand their narratives for why they were in care.

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

The Committee asked for further information regarding the priority for staff retention. They asked whether staff were leaving due to feeling overworked. Kelli Eboji highlighted that the Council was working hard to ensure there was a competitive offer for staff. The Council had also broadened its options for recruitment, including looking internationally, and would now be welcoming a cohort of international staff over the next few months. In relation to the reasons staff left, she highlighted this was for a myriad of reasons but nothing specific. Following Covid, many staff relocated or moved to remote working which had impacted the workforce, particularly in London. Staff were not necessarily leaving due to money but because the type of work was very stressful and complex, and the workload was such that people did not want to do it anymore, particularly if there were other pressures in their home that made the pressure of the work incompatible. The Council was offering a flexible working policy and training to combat some of this. Palvinder Kudhail (Director for Integration and Improved Outcomes, Brent Council) added that the Council had some very good agency staff who loved working with the Council and the Council was approaching agency staff at every opportunity to convert to permanent staff. The incentives offer had been revised recently which was improving the story around what the Council paid, and there was also the benefits of the Civic Centre building and supportive managers.

In response to how many staff were permanent compared to agency, Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) explained that, for the whole of the children and young people department, there was probably about 20% agency staff. In some areas of the department that figure was much higher, such as in locality services where some teams were around 50%. He highlighted that the Council employed a lot of long-term agency staff, so the number of agency workers had not been flagged as an issue during the recent Ofsted ILACS inspection. The Council preferred staff to convert to permanent rather than stay as agency and so there needed to be benefits to going permanent. However, he highlighted there was a pattern of staff generally not staying in social work posts long term anymore, with the average being about 5 years since qualifying. He explained this was not just being experienced in Brent, but in response the Council was doing as much as it could to support the workforce.

The Committee highlighted the fact that cases going over 26 weeks in court created a burden on the child because a decision was needed ASAP, and asked if there was a percentage breakdown of the reasons for delays. Kelli Eboji explained there was no percentage breakdown because there were often many reasons for delays, mainly due to the complexity of cases that Brent had.

The Committee asked how the 3-month trial to support permanency detailed in section 5.10.3 of the report was going. Kelli Eboji replied that the trial was one month into starting with someone in post doing a lot of liaising with social workers. However, the service was unsure whether the trial could be sustained due to the need for social work capacity to deal with the day-to-day work.

The Committee was pleased to see an increase in post-16 young people accessing education, employment and training. They asked for examples of how the Council had worked to increase those numbers and what type of employment, education or training young people were going into. Sharon Bucky (Head of Inclusion and Brent Virtual School) explained that the post-16 team was very focused and undertook a lot of work with the LAC

and permanency team on this work. The majority of work focused on bringing the team together with Brent Works. There was a Supported Targeted Interventions Team with Prospects who had additional investment through the GLA to support young people who were more challenging, such as those who had a difficult year 10 / 11 and did not have a sense of agency in their own education, employment and training. That team had a particular programme looking at cognitive behavioural job coaching and helping people into work through a supportive internship approach, building their skills to go into further training. This had been successful but there was still more work to do on that front with additional funding now available to do that alongside relevant partners. The Council also had apprenticeships available and were placing care leavers into apprenticeships in most Council departments. Kelli Eboji added that, from September, a new programme for work experience placements for young people in the Council would be launched for where young people were not yet ready for an apprenticeship in order to prepare them for one in the future. It was highlighted that young people were very interested in their own enterprises now so it was important to support young people into that.

The Committee had concerns that, although the numbers had decreased, there were still a number of children going missing from care. They asked for further information about the action taken when a young person went missing, what the main barriers were to finding them, and whether there was enough support from police to fully investigate and prioritise these instances. They were particularly concerned following the Casey Review which found failings of the police in 75% of child protection cases. Kelli Eboji explained that when a child went missing from care there were a number of protocols that the Council needed to follow. If a child was missing then there should be a named police officer responsible for the case. A Strategy meeting was required within 72 hours of the young person going missing which pulled together the entire professional network that might be involved in the case, including the police who were required at those meetings. The meeting would then explore the missing young person's connected friends, networks and school connections. She highlighted that the school had been a key contributor at a recent missing persons case as the child had been missing from placement but in contact with their school. She highlighted that the response differed depending on the contact partners received from the young person, as some children missing from placement still kept in contact. This complicated matters for the police as they would no longer consider them as missing, and, as a result, sometimes the Council would need to escalate these cases. Sonya Kalyniak (Head of Quality Assurance and Safeguarding, Brent Council) added that when the service had difficulties getting a police response they went to her for support and she could get someone to look into it quickly. Social workers were also good at escalating concerns.

On the whole, it was felt that the Council had a good relationship with the police and in meetings partners were clear on who should do what. Police would lead on intelligence, including known addresses, phone work and visiting locations the child was connected to, while social workers phoned networks and stayed in touch with the young person if they could. In some extreme cases, the Council had agreed the release of a photo of a looked after child or alerted the British Transport Police if it was thought the child was moving via public transport which then involved police forces in different parts of the country, meaning that the case could move from the local professional network to a much wider network in some cases. In all cases, safeguarding and protection was a priority including seeing the child as a victim rather than perpetrator if they were involved in county lines due to vulnerability and exploitation. When a child was returned to home or care a dedicated staff member conducted 'return home interviews' to obtain information about why the person went missing and where they went. This happened independently from the practitioner involved in the case to have a more open conversation with the young person. In response to what learning had been obtained from those who repeatedly went missing, Kelli Eboji highlighted that relationships made the difference. When a looked after child had many changes of people in their lives having one or two people who related to them was important. The child would often be challenging to engage with as they had been hurt and

did not trust very easily, so it was important to find the best person they could relate to in order to have those conversations. Going missing from placement was often a typical reason for placement breakdowns as those vulnerabilities and uncertainties made it difficult for foster carers to manage and created instability.

Continuing to discuss the process when a child went missing from care, Nigel Chapman added that there was a senior police officer responsible for bringing together a weekly meeting to discuss children missing from home and care which picked up any trends and contextual safeguarding issues. Nigel Chapman received weekly reports on those who were missing, and for those who were missing for longer periods of time he received information on where the police were in finding them. The Safer Brent Partnership had recently had a discussion about the police response to the Casey Review at a local level and sought an update from the Chief Superintendent. The response to the Casey Review was being dealt with as a Met-wide issue but the NW BCU had a willingness locally to do things better.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

9. **Annual Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Report 2022-2023**

Sonya Kalyniak (Head of Quality Assurance and Safeguarding, Brent Council) introduced the report which informed the Corporate Parenting Committee of the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to the quality assurance and improvement of services for looked after children (LAC). She informed the Committee that the IRO role was statutory to ensure LAC needs were fully met and that their care planning was progressing as it should. The report identified areas of practice strengths and weaknesses. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- Brent had 2 in-house IROs who were permanent members of staff and commissioned the remainder of IROs to Aidhour. Aidhour had been contracted with Brent for over 20 years, meaning the IROs had been in place for a very long time and knew the children very well. Some IROs from Aidhour had started to retire from their role so there had been some staff turnover and it was important to ensure there was sustained stability there. The service was looking at options to gradually bring more IROs in-house as it was seeing a lot of stability with in-house IROs presently.
- There was a strong focus on the advocacy service for IROs, who routinely checked that children and young people knew about advocacy and how it could support them. Brent's Advocacy Services were provided by Coram Voice for LAC and care leavers, and they had exceeded their target specifications of providing 500 advocacy hours per year to 60 children. In the reporting year, they had provided 697 hours of advocacy support to 67 children and young people. This included advocacy for children with a child protection plan.
- The Ofsted ILACS Inspection had reviewed the IRO service in February 2023. The inspectors had found that most IROs were monitoring the progress of children's plans, that actions were progressed and letters from IROs to children following review were child focused and easy to understand. However, the inspection had found that the consistency of those letters required improvement and there was a need to ensure children were active participants in their review.
- There was a lot of work being undertaken on participation and ensuring IROs found creative ways to ensure children engaged in their reviews. That work would continue into the next reporting year.

- Following the Ofsted ILACS Inspection, the service had done some in-depth audit work into some of the themes the inspection had found and put some improvement work in place which the service was now seeing.

The Chair thanked Sonya Kalyniak for her update and invited comments and questions from Committee members with the following raised:

The Committee asked why table 7 of the report indicated that over half of LAC did not participate in their review meeting. Sonya Kalyniak explained that the IRO would aim to speak to the child in advance of the review and make every effort to speak to the child, see them in person, offer advocacy support or speak to someone else who knew the child very well. The service could undertake some benchmarking compared to other similar local authorities as to the number of LAC participating in review meetings and provide that information to the Committee in the next report. Sonya Kalyniak was of the view that it would be relatively comparative to other local authorities. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) added that Brent had similar participation figures at its last Ofsted Inspection but it had not been flagged as an issue previously. There was no national data captured so benchmarking data was not readily available, but the Council was generating some of its own performance indicators on this to monitor how many children were participating in their reviews. In addition to this, a Team Manager would be involved in the IRO review for any child that had not been directly involved to see what could be done differently next time. In response to whether hosting IRO reviews online could increase participation, the Committee heard that the Council tried to ensure as many reviews as possible were done in person to ensure the relationship work was done. However, the service had found that participation during lockdown was quite high because children found their reviews to be less intimidating online so now officers checked with young people to find out how they wanted to participate. Some children would only do their review online, but it was still important that the IRO met the child in advance to build their relationship. This would then count towards attending reviews directly.

The Committee asked whether having a case load between 60-65 children was in accordance with national guidance, as detailed in paragraph 7.1, as this seemed quite high. The Committee was advised that a caseload of 60-65 cases was the number nationally recommended in the IRO handbook. Although IROs did work directly with children in advance and during their reviews, they would not have day-to-day contact and so 60-65 cases was seen as a reasonable caseload.

The Committee asked for further information about paragraph 9.1 which detailed looking at social pedagogy approaches. Sonya Kalyniak explained that this was one of the approaches in the Brent practice framework which foster carers had received training on. The approach was a way that young people could learn or build relationships through activities done together. For example, during a LAC review it could be cooking a meal together and conducting the review while having the meal around the table. This approach took a lot more time and consideration, but it was Brent's ambition to do more of that type of review, depending on what the individual child wanted.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the report.

10. **Annual Brent Virtual School (BVS) Report 2021-2022**

Sharon Buckby (Head of Inclusion and Brent Virtual School) introduced the report, which outlined the achievements for all children in care that had an assessment during the reporting year. She highlighted the following key points:

- There were 423 children and young people enrolled in BVS during the 2021-22 academic year.
- Priorities during 2021-2022 had been to train social workers on personal education plans (PEPs), measured through how well schools were using resources to improve the opportunities young people had. PEP work was high, with a 95% completion rate. The 5% of incomplete PEPs would likely be due to a placement move or change in education provision.
- The service wanted to focus more on how teachers could utilise young people's own interests for the PEPs rather than have a collective approach, and it was doing this through exploring enrichment provision.
- The attendance rate was high and almost equivalent to the cohort who were not looked after, and significantly higher than other local authorities. This was attributed to the joint work of foster carers, social workers and schools.
- BVS had ensured no child in care received a permanent exclusion. Where possible, education officers manage disruption occurring in school and Sharon Buckby had occasionally stepped in with the Head of the school to ensure any issues were resolved.
- There had been good feedback from Ofsted following the Ofsted ILACS inspection regarding how well BVS knew the children who were looked after and its focus on achievements.
- In relation to progress and attainment, Key Stage 2 had done very well and results were not dissimilar to mainstream cohorts. Generally, the longer a child was in care the better their educational achievements because they had stability and it was easier in Key Stages 1 and 2 to support young people into enrichment activities. It was found that attainment was lower for those who entered the care system late because their education had been disrupted and they lacked stability, so for Key Stage 3 and 4, those young people coming into care late had lower attainment in their GCSE results.
- There was an opportunity for BVS to support young people not going into education, employment and training by encouraging them to stay on into year 12 and 13, which were critical months in a young person's long-term pathway and outcomes.
- A challenge for children who went into care late was issues around trauma and attachment and so a lot of work around mental health had been done. For example, a recent forum with designated teachers had looked at triggers and trauma and how to move forward, and the commissioned contract with WEST at the Anna Freud Centre delivered targeted intervention for young people and the family as a whole.
- BVS conducted direct interventions with the top 50 children of most concern who were likely to be excluded or had poor attendance and there was crossover there with the most vulnerable groups who were missing or known in relation to contextual safeguarding.

In considering the reports, the following points were raised:

The Committee asked what the take-up of WEST's Reflective Fostering Group was, as detailed in section 9.3 of the report. Sharon Buckby explained that take up of that group was very good, where there was a lot of work done around trauma, attachment and support. WEST also ran surgeries and consultations for social workers and foster carers around emotional wellbeing.

The Committee asked whether there were any known reasons for the difficulty in improving grades in maths, which were lower in comparison to reading and writing. They were advised that maths was an issue across all children in the reporting year, including children

who were not looked after. It was a problem in the national education system. BVS did offer booster classes and there were teachers in the school enabled to provide catch up classes online and face to face through PALAC. BVS looked to aim higher for all children, irrespective of where they were in their journey and Sharon Buckby highlighted the importance of 1-1 support and group support within schools. She felt that was something that BVS could do more of, including looking at how education endowment programmes could be used to offer advice on how to improve maths literacy at primary school.

The Committee asked whether past exam papers were used at booster classes and preparatory classes. Sharon Buckby confirmed that was done for SATS and GCSE homework classes in the Civic Centre and online. The challenge for the reporting academic year had been that it was the first time many pupils had done exams since pre-pandemic. She highlighted that Brent had been lucky that all schools had remained open during the pandemic and BVS had pushed to ensure that teachers remained face to face with Brent's looked after children. Following the challenges, she highlighted BVS had been pleased with the results.

The Committee felt that the enrichment programme detailed in section 11.1 was an excellent programme. Sharon Buckby agreed it was a good programme but there were low participation numbers overall at 70 children in total. As a result, BVS was working with the John Lyons Foundation and Harrow, Ealing and Barnet to think about that offer and what difference it was making. The Equine Therapy Programme only tutored around 1 young person per year, but it was very much based around what young people wanted to do.

The action to develop a mentoring partnership with the Football Association and Wembley Stadium, detailed in section 10.1 would be followed up. Officers would report back what had been agreed. In considering other opportunities for enrichment, the Committee heard that BVS was looking to do some closer work with Scouts and Sea Cadets through their relationship with Welsh Harp, and Committee members highlighted links they had with other organisations that could offer enrichment including Brownies, RAF in Wembley, and Northwick Park Gardens.

The Committee noted that the report did not detail work by BVS on career advice and guidance. Sharon Buckby explained that individual schools were responsible for careers advice and guidance and there were hubs available in all schools in every area of Brent. BVS ensured that, through the PEP process, careers advice and guidance was given in years 8, 9, 10 and 11 and followed that through post-16 with supported targeted work with prospects.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the contents of the report.

11. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 6:30 pm

COUNCILLOR GWEN GRAHL
Chair