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## MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Monday 14 October 2024 at 5.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Grahl (Chair), 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 15 July 2024, 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**

The Chair welcomed representatives from Care in Action (CIA) and Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) to the meeting and invited them to provide updates from the groups.

J informed the Committee that CLIA had taken part in a residential at the end of July 2024 which had involved activities such as kayaking, abseiling and campfires. CLIA were doing participation work to encourage more care leavers to get involved with the group, and felt that planning more residential and activities would encourage that and bring new people together. J and another care leaver had been successfully appointed as Care Quality Ambassadors.

H told the Committee that the Leaving Care Manager organised weekly football which he took part in and enabled him to meet new people and make friends. H had been pleased to attend a box at Wembley Stadium the previous week to watch England vs Greece. Nigel

Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) added that Wembley had offered those tickets through the Council's connections for that particular event, but officers hoped to keep pushing for tickets for children in care and care leavers as part of Wembley Stadium's commitment to social value in the local area.

N highlighted the summer fun day for care leavers, foster carers and social workers that took place in August. Some activities included football, basketball, t-shirt designing and prizes. N and another care leaver had been part of a recent interview panel for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) position, and had found it informative to listen to the candidates.

The Chair thanked those present for their updates, and invited comments and questions from the Committee, with the following points raised:

The Committee asked whether those involved in interviewing found the process to be robust. J explained that he had taken part in interviews where young people had a separate panel and more recently where young people had joined the professional interview. He felt it worked better when young people joined the professional interview because this allowed the candidates to be assessed with the same questions instead of having two different panels looking for different things and resulting in clashes of opinion and different outcomes.

Kelli Eboji (Head of Service – LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) invited councillors interested in playing a game of football with care leavers to a care leavers vs staff football match taking place during care leavers week.

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. Report from Brent Care Leavers on Care as a Protected Characteristic**

N (CLIA) introduced the report, which provided an initial overview of the conversations and thoughts that young people had regarding care as a protected characteristic and the further work that was expected to be carried out going forward. In introducing the report, she advised the Committee that, over the past few months, young people and participation workers had been discussing the prospect of care experience as a protected characteristic in several different sessions hearing from a range of young people about their views, and in September four young people had come together to bring those conversations into a report. The Working Group had also researched what other boroughs were doing in this space, for example, Camden Council provided free WiFi for care leavers.

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) added that children and young people and staff alike had been on a journey of understanding what care as a protected characteristic would mean for children, young people and the Council and how it would benefit children and young people in the borough. With the research and reviews that young people had undertaken, there was now support for recognising care as a protected characteristic and adopting it as a Council principle to address issues of equality and protection. She highlighted that, even though this would not be enshrined in law at this point, as a Council principle it would mean all Council decisions, reports and activity would need to consider the impact on care experienced individuals.

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

The Committee felt the report reflected the meaningful process CLIA and officers had undertaken to agree a principle and were pleased to see significant engagement from children and young people in this work. It was felt that by adopting this principle, the Council could more strongly tackle forms of discrimination that care experienced young people faced. For example, the Committee recalled the stigmatised attitudes the Council had faced from some members of community towards the decision to open a children's residential care home in the borough, which the Council could have been tougher against if care experience was protected and enshrined in Council policy. Care as a protected characteristic was also seen by the Committee as an opportunity to educate other staff outside of children's services about the barriers faced by care experienced children and young people and make them aware of the Council's obligations to them.

Nicole Levy highlighted that, in feeding back to officers about care as a protected characteristic, young people had made a strong request for the local authority to lobby central government to enshrine care experience as a 10<sup>th</sup> characteristic by law, which other local authorities had also done.

#### RESOLVED:

- i) To endorse the adoption of care experience as a protected characteristic by the Council.
- ii) To support and explore care experience having a similar status to other protected characteristics, including aligning this with Council activity to review Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) and the adoption of a socio-economic duty outlined in Section 1 of the Equality Act (2010).
- iii) To agree that young people have a key role in monitoring the practical implementation of care experience as a protected characteristic.

## 9. **Bright Spots Survey Presentation**

The Committee received a presentation from Alice Weavers (Participation and Engagement Manager, Brent Council) and members of CLIA which provided an analysis of the Bright Spots Survey 'Your Life, Your Care', which garnered the views of looked after children and young people aged 4-17 years old. In presenting the findings, the following key points were highlighted:

- There had been three different versions of the survey to cater to each age range, 4-7 years old, 8-11 years old and 11-17 years old, which had garnered a total of 82 responses.
- The survey had either been filled out by the young person themselves or alongside a trusted adult who was separate from the child's social worker or foster carer, or someone directly involved in their care.
- The survey asked about the child's experience of being in care, what they thought could be better and how they felt about themselves.
- Some of the areas of success were highlighted in terms of placement:
  - 11-17 year olds in Brent were statistically more likely to have stayed in the same place since going into care compared to those in other local authorities.
  - 93% of 4-17 year olds reported 'always' feeling safe where they lived, which was higher than the general population.
  - All 4-7 year olds felt settled at home and liked their bedrooms, and all 4-11 year olds trusted the adults they lived with.
- Areas of success were also noted regarding social workers:

- 11-17 year olds in Brent were statistically more likely to have kept the same social worker in the previous 12 months compared to those in other local authorities.
- All children aged 8-11 years old knew who their social worker was.
- There were high levels of trust in social workers, with 100% of children aged 4-11 years old reporting they trusted their social worker.
- 11-17 year olds were statistically more likely to have had a full explanation for why they were in care (96%) compared to those in other local authorities (78%).
- There had also been successful outcomes in feelings towards education and wellbeing:
  - 83% of 11-17 year olds liked school or college ‘a lot’ or ‘a bit’, which was higher than the general population.
  - 91% of 8-17 year olds felt the adults they lived with showed an interest in their education.
  - More 11-17 year olds had spent time outdoors at least once in the previous week than the general population.
  - 87% of 11-17 year olds reported being happy with how they looked.
- Alongside successes, there were some areas which needed focus to improve:
  - More young people in Brent reported not having a good friend compared to the general population.
  - Some young people were struggling with low levels of positivity about their future and life satisfaction.
  - 25% of 8-11 year olds did not know they could ask to speak to their social worker on their own.
  - Some young people wanted to spend more time with their family, including parents and siblings.
- Next steps were for the Brent Care Journeys 2.0 Younger Group to review the findings in a workshop to come up with potential solutions and projects. Service areas would then develop an action plan in consultation with young people, using the principles of co-design and feedback so that young people were leading on projects. Brent Care Journeys 2.0 would also review the care leavers survey when the results had been received.

The Chair thanked officers for the updates and then invited comments and questions from Committee members with the following raised:

The Committee raised concern that 25% of respondents did not know they could speak with their social worker alone, and asked whether young people were given a set of expectations when they met their social worker. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) advised the Committee that there was no standard introduction when a child met their social worker with no set script. Going forward, she thought this would be something that could be introduced, using a checklist introduction. It was highlighted that those messages should be reinforced at set intervals, as when a child first came into care they were given a lot of information at a potentially traumatic time and may not retain information given to them immediately.

In considering that some children in care did not know they could speak with their social worker alone, the Committee asked how a child who was struggling and not feeling settled in their placement could raise their concerns if they did not feel they could speak with their foster carer. Officers highlighted that concerns could be raised with trusted adults at school or their Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). There was also an Independent Advocacy Service commissioned by the Council that children in care could use. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) highlighted the importance

of children having a consistent social worker who built a good relationship with the young person and was speaking to the young person on their own at every visit so that they could hear how the young person was feeling.

The Committee were pleased that 100% of 4-11 year olds trusted the adults they were placed with.

In terms of the response rate of 32%, the Committee asked whether this was comparative to other boroughs and what the Council did to encourage engagement with the survey. Kelli Eboji highlighted that it was a collective effort across children's services to receive responses, with members of participation staff and personal advisors also trying to get responses. The challenge in gathering responses was because the trusted adults who assisted children to complete their responses could not be their primary carers or social worker but key people in their life such as IROs, trusted adults in schools and contact workers. Officers first port of call in getting responses to the survey was to engage the Brent Virtual School (BVS) who would then contact all the trusted adults within a school. However, it was highlighted that the survey was long and could raise emotive themes for children in care, with feedback suggesting that children and young people did not want to disclose some information to a professional they did not know well, and some young people did not want to speak about their life experiences in a school environment, preferring for that to be kept separate. As such, the service then looked to engage other professionals such as pastoral support from the Brent Virtual School and personal advisors. This was more successful in reaching children and young people within the borough but was more challenging for those out of borough.

RESOLVED:

- i) To note the content of the report and acknowledge the improvement in social worker stability.

## 10. Updated Care Leaver Offer and Care Leaver Charter

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report which presented the revised local offer for care leavers. In presenting the report, she advised members that the local authority was required to consult on and produce a local offer for care leavers under Section 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The offer provided care leavers with information about services and support available to them including both statutory entitlements and discretionary support. The local offer was first implemented in 2018 and refreshed in 2022, and it was now being presented with a refreshed offer again alongside an updated care leaver charter. The revised offer also made links with the previous item on the agenda considering care as a protected characteristic.

In detailing the revised care leaver offer, Kelli Eboji highlighted that, as of the end of March 2024, Brent Council was responsible for 564 care leavers, 164 of which were between 22-25 years old. Some of the additions to the offer were outlined in section 4.4 of the report and included; eligibility to apply for the Digital Resident Support Fund for a device and 12-month free fibre connectivity in their home; all eligible care leavers claiming universal credit would be able to apply for free internet access from internet provider TalkTalk; and expansion of the Grandmentors scheme to recruit mentors from within the Council and offer mentorship to care leavers; a rent deposit scheme to care leavers for whom private rented accommodation was deemed a suitable housing option; half price bus and tram travel, or free bus and travel for care leavers in education, employment and training with the Council paying the remaining half; an increase in the statutory care leaver allowance for care leavers to purchase essentials when they move into their first home, at £3,000, or £3,250 for single parents; an increase in festival and birthday allowances, in line with similar London local authorities.

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

CLIA fed back that free internet and discounts on bus and tram travel would be particularly useful for them. They queried why the birthday and festival allowance only applied to those under 21 years old when the Council had a duty to care leavers up to the age of 25. Afzal Ahmed (Service Manager for Leaving Care, Brent Council) explained that the Council's financial duties were up to the age of 21 and anything additional provided to 21-25 year olds was discretionary. The majority of local authorities stopped birthday and festival allowances at age 21, although there were other financial incentives available for care leavers between 21-25 years old. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised that increasing the age that care leavers were eligible for a festival and birthday allowance was aspirational, but the Council needed to balance that against budgetary pressures, with children's services stretched in what it could do to expand that offer. He highlighted this could be looked at again in future if budgetary pressures were alleviated.

Nicole Levy (Service Manager- Quality Assurance and Learning and Development, Brent Council) advised members that, in the discussions officers had with care leavers regarding the local offer, they had considered what the Corporate Parenting Committee could do politically to promote, enhance or advocate for additional offers for care leavers. The Chair highlighted that a motion would be presented to Full Council regarding care as a protected characteristic which would provide a strong and practical way forward to ensure care experienced young people were considered in all Council services and decisions. CLIA asked to be involved in the preparation of any motion to Full Council.

The Committee asked how often the local offer was reviewed and revised, noting the incoming Autumn Budget due from Central Government at the end of October might bring additional options for the local offer. They were advised that the local offer was usually revised on a three-yearly cycle, but if the government announced significant changes in funding for local authorities then officers and young people would need to revise the offer or annexe it with changes.

Going forward, CLIA asked for a feedback loop from Committee members where they had taken away actions to progress the local offer.

As no further comments were raised, the Committee **RESOLVED** to endorse the updated Care Leavers Offer and the work undertaken to date to ensure that the local authority and partners were effective corporate parents.

#### **11. Brent Adoption 6 Monthly Report - 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024**

Mandy Wilkins (Adopt London West) introduced the report which provided information relating to adoption performance data for the reporting period, the progress and activity of Adopt London West (ALW) and the outcomes being achieved for children. In introducing the report, she highlighted the good practice she had seen in Brent around life story work with good partnership working. She had recently run life story training sessions with good attendance from Brent staff, and she offered consultation for social workers which was being well utilised in Brent.

In highlighting the main points in the report, Mandy Wilkins drew the Committee's attention to adopter recruitment, which was not on target due to issues with capacity in the team. Interviews for an additional post agreed by the Partnership Board would take place during the week and it was hoped there would be success in appointing a candidate. She

highlighted the difference it made when ALW adopters were placed with Brent children as the adopters were trained by ALW and ALW knew the children well.

It was highlighted that ALW had introduced an early support service two years previously which was available to special guardians, of which 26 special guardians were making use of. This was where special guardians did not need an allocated worker so ALW would provide an early support offer and check in with them every 2 months. This had helped to reinforce the message for special guardians to call the service if they needed any support and there had now been good engagement there.

Aligned with the modernised adoption agenda, Mandy Wilkins advised members that ALW was encouraging adopters and families to think more openly about engagement and keeping in touch with each other. There had been huge growth in that area with 113 letter exchanges and 42 direct contacts of adopted children and adopters with the child's birth families, and in surveys it had been found that the vast majority said they wanted more contact, information or meaningful relationships with their family, particularly siblings.

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

The Committee asked for further information about the contact children were having were birth families and the benefits that provided. They heard that Adoption England were currently running webinars about this particular point, due to a statistic demonstrating that over half of adopted children thought about why they were adopted at least once a week. Nationally, officers were seeing a shifting culture in adoption in relation to maintaining contact with birth families and there was also new research to encourage maintaining a relationship with foster carers who supported transitions into adoption.

The Committee asked whether there was any research and learning from international models of adoption. Mandy Wilkins advised the Committee that the Adoption England resources available had been adapted from Australian models of adoption.

The Committee asked for reassurance that those children who were good candidates for adoption were able to move through the process as easily as possible. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) advised the Committee that the numbers of children adopted in Brent were low and the number of children in care was relatively low. He reassured the Committee that the Council looked at all forms of permanency for children, with adoption included as an option, but the majority of children returned home or stayed with a family member. The Council's approach was that the child was best placed with their parents or family where possible. Where children had been matched but were still waiting to be placed, this was usually due to delayed court processes which skewed the average figures due to the low number of children.

The Committee requested an update on the Black Adopters Project, noting the lack of attendance by staff at a recent safer space session outlined in the report, which was attributed to work pressure and caseloads. Mandy Wilkins explained that the Safer Space sessions were one aspect of the project and ALW was doing everything it could to encourage staff to make protected time for these. Now when those sessions were scheduled officers ensured they did not clash with meetings or staff leave. A Programme Lead had been recently appointed, who she felt was very dynamic and would help the project to move forward at pace now there was a dedicated lead. The upcoming focus of that project would be to look at data where families had barriers in accessing adoption support.

As no further issues were raised, the Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

## 12. **Annual Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Report 2023-24**

Palvinder Kudhail (Director Early Help and Social Care, Brent Council) introduced the report for noting. The report provided the Corporate Parenting Committee with information regarding the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to the quality assurance and improvement of services for Looked After Children (LAC).

Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children and Young People, Brent Council) highlighted that the service was recruiting two permanent in-house IROs to support the consistency of relationships with young people.

The Committee requested further figures relating to timeliness of reviews, noting that only 83% were happening within statutory timeframes. Officers committed to providing information to show how much timeframes had been missed by, as often the delays were due to health being unable to obtain the data to complete a health review. Where it was clear there was a risk of a review falling out of timescales the IRO would often do the review in 2 parts to meet timeliness.

## 13. **Brent Fostering Service six-monthly Monitoring Report - 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024**

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report which provided information about the general management of the in-house fostering service and how it was achieving good outcomes for children.

In considering the report, the following points were raised:

In response to a query on the activities that took place during Kinship Care Week, Kelli Eboji listed the coffee morning which had been a success and a Fun Day which had a much improved turnout compared to the previous year. A care leaver had been employed as a photographer for the events. There had also been a wellbeing session with WEST which took place during the coffee morning. She thanked staff involved in the preparation and organisation of the events.

The Committee asked how the service went about finding kin. Officers explained that a variety of routes were used. The child's parents would be the first port of call or the child themselves if they were of an age to be able to tell the service who their family was. Many families had a long history with the Council or other local authorities so there would often be records available. When the service found a link with someone this often led to finding other links, including grandparents, aunts and uncles.

The Committee heard that the government had recently announced a new Kinship Care Strategy. Officers had been working on the Council's policy but as the new strategy had been published the policy was being reviewed to ensure consistency with the government's strategy. It was agreed that the next meeting would consider the Kinship Care Strategy.

Nigel Chapman provided an update on the DfE funded pilot programme on the fostering pathfinder which was still in operation working with all other West London local authorities. The pilot had been extended to Autumn 2025 which the DfE had agreed to fund, but the Council now needed to see evidence of its impact and whether it was resulting in the Council obtaining more foster carers compared to in-house. Officers committed to updating the Committee every 6 months so that they had oversight and assurance that there was a cost effective local system.



Kelli Eboji highlighted the 'everyone' marketing video that would be launched on 17 October 2024 and agreed to send the video to members. A fostering friendly marketing campaign would be launched as part of the new fostering offer, and a Brent employee who was already a foster carer in Brent would be part of that campaign. The Committee requested for promotional materials to be sent to them so that they could share with other members and organisations.

As no further points were raised the Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

14. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 7:15 pm  
Councillor Gwen Grahl, Chair

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