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MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITY AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE **Monday 28 April 2025 at 6.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Ketan Sheth (Chair), and Councillors Fraser, Afzal, Chohan, Clinton, Ethapemi, Mistry, and Smith, and co-opted members Ms Rachelle Goldberg, Archdeacon Catherine Pickford and Mr Alloysius Frederick (online)

In attendance: Councillor Gwen Grahl, Councillor Neil Neva

The Chair led introductions of those present and highlighted he was pleased to announce that Brent Youth Parliament had been nominated for an award, offering congratulations.

1. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Rajan-Seelan.

2. Declarations of interests

Personal interests were declared as follows:

- Councillor Ketan Sheth – Lead Governor of Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust
- Councillor Ethapemi – governor for Brentfield Primary School
- Alloysius Frederick – Chair of governors for All Saints Trust, consisting of a number of Brent schools
- Councillor Fraser – close family member employed by Brent social services

3. Deputations (if any)

There were no deputations received.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 March 2025 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

5. Matters arising (if any)

There were no matters arising.

6. Annual School Standards and Achievement Report

The Chair opened the discussion by welcoming and thanking colleagues for attending, including 4 headteachers from various Brent schools. He invited Councillor Grahl, as Lead Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools, to introduce the report.

Councillor Grahl began by highlighting that the report provided the opportunity to recognise the strengths in what she saw as a thriving school community as well as identify weaknesses and discuss challenges facing schools, staff and young people. As detailed in the report, she felt there was strong performance in many areas of children and young peoples' educational journeys with nearly every school in the borough rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. There were also very good outcomes for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) who had always been a priority in Brent, and this was reflected in the recent CQC SEND Local Area inspection of Brent. She also drew members' attention to the current reforms going through parliament in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill which would help to support some of the work the Council and partners were doing to tackle inequalities, such as universal breakfast clubs and ending forced academisation.

Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children, Young People and Community Development, Brent Council) added that, overall, he felt satisfied with the outcomes in Brent schools, whether that was Ofsted ratings or overall outcome measures for individual children. He felt the Brent school system, regardless of how that school was governed, all worked closely in collaboration with each other and the local authority. He reassured the Committee that there was no complacency and it was recognised that there were groups, as referenced in the report, who were not performing as well as the rest of the cohort. However, by the time disadvantaged groups had finished secondary school they had performed well, and he felt this was a testament to the strength of the school system overall that once children were in school and remained in school their outcomes were positive. Attendance had been a big focus since the Covid-19 pandemic and Brent was above the national average for overall attendance of children in schools, which was attributed to school leaders' ability to encourage and provide a welcoming and appropriately challenging atmosphere for children.

In relation to attendance, Nicky Lobo (Headteacher, Roe Green Infant School) added that there had been a change in expectations to monitor the attendance of under 5s for infants and early years settings. She highlighted that it was very challenging to ensure the attendance targets for under 5s were on par with primary and secondary school and it was a time-consuming process to monitor. Roe Green Infant School reviewed attendance every week to maintain overall outcomes. Whilst she highlighted the challenge in meeting and monitoring attendance targets for under 5s, she did feel that it was a step in the right direction that this was something that the government wanted to focus on.

The Chair thanked presenters for their introduction and informed the Committee that a request to speak in relation to this item had been received from Mr Martin Francis. He invited Mr Francis to begin his remarks, for which he would have up to 3 minutes.

Mr Francis introduced himself as a former teacher, head teacher and local authority school governor. In addressing the Committee, Mr Francis emphasised that the under-achievement of boys of Black Caribbean heritage had persisted over several years, highlighting the consideration of a report by the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee in 2018 which showed that the attainment gap for boys of Black Caribbean heritage, compared to the national average for all pupils, had widened to 23 points below the national average. He noted that a specialist centre for Black Caribbean Achievement had been set up, led by Chalkhill Primary School, with Boys of Black Caribbean Heritage Achievement Champions in each school, and detailed analysis of achievement by ethnicity was provided to the School's Forum, where he noted some schools' reluctance to provide that data.

In noting that the current report presented to the Committee treated the attainment monitoring data of Boys of Black Caribbean Heritage as confidential, Mr Francis queried why that data was not available in the public domain. Further referencing the report, Mr

Francis highlighted paragraph 3.12.8, detailing the Brent Schools Race Equality Programme which aimed to significantly increase the attainment of underperforming ethnic groups, and paragraph 7.4, which stated that the data indicated a more collaborative approach was required to improve outcomes and ensure this cohort did not continue to be left behind. As such, he raised concerns that a problem had been identified and was being monitored but the community, parents and other interested parties were not permitted to view the data and assess the extent of the issues and the success of the initiatives put in place to improve attainment for Boys of Black Caribbean Heritage. He felt that this indicated a lack of transparency and could give rise to a lack of trust in the system. In bringing his remarks to close, he called on the Committee to recommend:

- i) That the data referred to in paragraph 3.12.6 of the report be made available to the public.
- ii) In order for the Committee and public to understand the full context of the data, to receive ethnicity information on the following: absence rates; exclusions; number of pupils being home-schooled; extent of any off-rolling; the impact of Covid and; the number of Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) in the borough.

In response to Mr Francis, Shirley Parks (Director Education, Partnerships & Strategy, Brent Council) explained that the DfE did not publish the data to the level of granularity that Brent was assessing it at, and as such Brent only had access to use that data internally and could not publish national comparators. Without the national comparators then the data was not meaningful which was why it was being treated as confidential. In terms of the general trends of the data, she highlighted that while there were shifts in trends every year, the fundamental trend which had been detailed by Mr Francis and which Brent Council had been addressing for several years was that boys of Black Caribbean Heritage had not performed as well as the Council would want them to. The yearly data did see the attainment of different cohorts go slightly up or down,, overall they were still not achieving what the local authority would want to see.. A number of initiatives had been delivered to address this, including the project to have champions in each school and work on a Race Equality Programme. The previous year, a programme funded by the local authority called 'Leading from the Top' had been delivered by the Brent Schools Partnership, focused on addressing practices in schools that might indirectly impact children and which asked headteachers to be reflective about how their school was moving towards an anti-racist approach. This focused on proactively addressing the achievement of boys of Black Caribbean Heritage. This year, the local authority was funding an anti-racism programme working with Leeds Beckett University that offered the opportunity for schools to achieve an anti-racism award and ensured schools were doing everything possible to support a high quality of access to education for all children throughout the Brent system.

Whilst the Committee recognised the good work being done to address the attainment of boys of Black Caribbean heritage, they highlighted that it had been an ongoing concern for several years and noted that performance had been below their peers over the last year, particularly in early years ages. They queried why the actions being put in place were not working to improve outcomes. Nigel Chapman responded that there had been an impact on attainment from the pandemic and its disruption. Deprivation was also a factor, particularly for families who were more socially isolated. The take-up of the Nursery Education Grant for families from underrepresented groups was lower and those groups' access to early years provision was lower. As such, there had been a focus in early years to encourage take-up of those opportunities and get the message out there that the provision was available. The local authority was hearing reports of children entering reception who were not school ready, lacking physical self-care and social and language skills, and a lot of work was going on in

schools in the very early years that may have previously happened in nursery settings. The impact of poverty and the cost-of-living was playing a major role in attainment and schools were supporting children with skills they might otherwise have had in a different setting through nursery provision. He added that the total population of children of Caribbean heritage was small at around 5% of the Brent population, equating to around 2.5% of boys of Black Caribbean heritage being in schools, meaning that the relatively low cohort size could mean fluctuation in the figures. He was hopeful that the current programme would encourage focus and spotlight on the issue and felt that he would need to see longer-term figures over time to provide a clear narrative, but assured the Committee that this was something he wanted to focus on.

The Committee asked whether any qualitative or quantitative research had been undertaken in Brent to establish the expectations teachers had for boys of Black Caribbean heritage. Shirley Parks referred the Committee back to the Leading from the Top Programme which encouraged schools to ensure they were setting high expectations for all children across all elements of school practice and the Brent Schools Race Equality Programme which provided a framework and toolkit for schools to evaluate their practice with regard to all children to develop an anti-racist approach. The Council had also offered training for school governors so that they could hold school leaders to account for their practice, learning and development professionally. She highlighted that one of the reasons an improvement in phonics had been seen for boys of Black Caribbean heritage was because the choice of literature being used in schools was now much more appropriate for them, which had come about as a result of focusing on the hidden curriculum. Andy Dunne (Headteacher, Newman Catholic College) added that Newman Catholic College was pleased the Council had heavily invested in the programme for primary and secondary schools and they were keen to be one of the first schools to obtain the first level of the anti-racist award. A funded questionnaire known as FLAIR was conducted for all students and staff to offer a baseline understanding of where the school was with race equality, the outcomes of which were available through a platform and could be fed back to staff. That programme had provided targets for where the school needed to improve race equality, and the school was now looking at policy development, identifying any gaps.

Noting that the data members received provided a snapshot going back one year, the Committee highlighted that one cohort could vary greatly compared to another and felt it would be helpful to see data going back over a longer period of time so that they could understand trends and direction of travel. In relation to the data, Nigel Chapman added that there had been two years where there had been no published figures during the pandemic where no formal exams were taken, making it difficult to look across historical data. As such, it was only the last 2 years that the local authority had published data on exam results that could be tracked. However, with the previous two years plus the current year, he felt that would give a good sense of where the trends were going, and from an Ofsted perspective Brent schools had performed well for a number of years. He added that the current trends compared favourably to where Brent had been 5 years ago, with attainment data strong for the whole population for a number of years. He felt it was key to have a strong performing system which could be shown through the data. Alison Loffler (School Effectiveness Lead Professional, Brent Council) further reassured the Committee that when the School Effectiveness Team visited schools they looked at three-year trends with close scrutiny of all the available data and challenged the underperformance of any groups of students as well as their attendance, discussing barriers to performance for students achieving in line with their peers for all groups of children. The Team also looked at partnerships with parents and the suitability and appropriateness of the curriculum.

The Chair then invited school leaders present to explain how they tracked trends in attainment for their individual schools and addressed the performance of their cohorts. Oweda Harrison (Headteacher, Donnington Primary School) explained that Donnington was

an A1 form entry school, meaning there was one class per year group, and every year group would have fluctuations. Donnington worked closely with families to get to know their children well and worked very closely with an organisation called 'All Child' who used a proportion of pupil premium money to provide a Link Worker who targeted 40 children on a 2-year programme who were affected by multiple levels of deprivation. Children were identified for that programme in multiple ways such as through their attendance, socio-economic status or their attainment, and within that programme they received 1 to 1 and group tutoring, a mentor and enrichment activities. As such, children were supported by a familiar adult over a two-year period who got to know those students very well. Attainment, achievement and attendance data was also reported from that programme. Where the performance of individual children was not where the school wanted it to be, which was identified through pupil progress meetings to identify slippage, the school operated a key worker system so that the young person had a key adult they knew well and could speak to. Teachers also had open conversations about the performance of different groups and discussed what was being done to address any issues and took advice from the local authority where necessary.

The Committee asked further details about early years performance and what support was available to ensure good outcomes at a young age. Nicky Lobo highlighted that Roe Green had many different groups of children coming in, with early years making up 50% of the school. There were 117 children in the nursery and a cohort of 24 children had been taken in the previous week. For her as a headteacher, early years needed to be a priority focus within the school because it was at the start of a child's career and the relationship the school built with parents. It was important to take the time welcoming meetings for play group sessions before children even came to the school, ensuring a SENCO and Inclusion Officer were available, and that staff were at the school gates every day to build that relationship. She felt it was important for senior leaders to take the time to get to know this very important group of children. Hermann Farrington (Headteacher, The Village School) added that The Village School had been working closely with the Council as they had identified that early intervention was best and were focusing on effective admissions panels working together to ensure those students that most needed places in complex needs schools got them.

Councillor Grahl added that she had seen evidence of children not being as prepared as they previously would have been in nurseries when she had visited, with children struggling with normal play tasks or unable to put their coats on and generally needing a lot more help and support. She thought this was partly an impact of the pandemic, but also highlighted the impact of staying in temporary accommodation on children's outcomes. The National Education Union (NEU) stated that, nationally, around 1 child in every class was statistically living in temporary accommodation. She advised the Committee that the Council was doing everything it could to minimise the effects of living in temporary accommodation on education, for example prioritising children who were undertaking GCSEs and A-Levels for housing within the borough, but the demand was so high this was not an easy task.

Noting that there were no longer national statutory assessments for Key Stage 1, and the importance of foundation stages being very critical in the life of a child, the Committee asked what measures had been put in place to measure the achievements and performance at each Key Stage, particularly in stages where there were no statutory examinations such as 1 and 3. Shirley Parks highlighted that the report outlined the data available to the Council on national assessments so that Brent could benchmark performance against national comparators, but the Council did look at data from other cohorts not sitting exams and, as part of the School Effectiveness Team visits, data for each year group was reviewed based on progress and attainment and this was used to challenge schools where appropriate.

In terms of Newman Catholic College, Andy Dunne gave an overview of the demographic make-up of the school, which was a Catholic all-boys school for Key Stage 3-4 with a mixed 6th-form. He highlighted the demographics of the school were very mixed with students from

over 60 different nationalities, and 77% of students spoke English as an additional language. In the last year, the school identified that 60% of those students were illiterate in their home language. Within Key Stage 3, most schools, including Newman Catholic College, would receive performance data 3-4 times per year. In Newman Catholic College, those figures were based on internal assessments done both informally and formally, such as through a class-based extended writing assessment or a controlled assessment by a teacher, and then twice-yearly formal tests taking place in a timetabled assessment week. Those tests were moderated by departments, and, as an associate member of the All Saints Trust, the College worked with other schools in that Trust to share moderation and practice. There were different systems within different schools to measure Key Stage 3, meaning the data was not always comparative. The Newman assessment system was called KASH which assessed Knowledge, Attainment, Skills and Habits on a 4-point scale across those attributes. He added that the school also had a high number of students from abroad who arrived after primary school had finished for them, so Newman would do its own baseline assessment for reading age, spelling age and a cognitive abilities test. That mix of data was then used to make a judgement about where a student would be. He added that there would be no comparative data for year 11s for the next two years due to the pandemic, so the progress scores schools were usually judged against would not be applied and a focus on attainment would be relied upon. For Newman Catholic College, which had high levels of need and EAL and lower attainment, that was an issue because whilst attainment might be lower the progress was usually very high. As such, he felt the attainment scores would only tell half of the story where some of the students at the college were making progress that was on par with some of the highest performing schools in the country. He emphasised that the KS3 data was important but not recognised by Ofsted and DfE.

Nicky Lobo provided a response from a primary school perspective, highlighting that Roe Green did assessments through from nursery. A reception baseline assessment was conducted, where all children were nationally required to be assessed within their first 6 weeks of school. For all assessments, she highlighted the importance of following through on the outcomes of those. Roe Green's Quality of Education Lead sat with every teacher and asked about every child within that class to understand their results and next steps. The importance of this was emphasised to teachers in their 10% Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time, because assessment could sometimes be less prioritised, and she felt it was for senior leaders to remind teachers to take that time to discuss outcomes.

In relation to how special schools measured performance, Hermann Farrington advised that the focus was destination led. Most special schools designed their own assessment systems to be able to meaningfully measure the steps at the appropriate rate and it was important to quality assure that process and continuously triangulate assessment data, which was measured on a live document with data drops 3-4 times per year to review the progress students were making. There was also a need for the school to be at the centre of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and for those documents to contain student voice, parent voice and professional voice in one, breaking down targets for behaviour and engagement and recognising reductions in the child's ability to self-regulate or socialise. As such, there was regular formative and summative assessments that were vital to the progress of students.

The Chair invited representatives of Brent Youth Parliament (BYP) to address the Committee. They informed the Committee that BYP had discussed what was going well in schools and what could be improved, and over 50% of feedback related to students being unsure how to access specific support for work experience and careers advice. BYP wanted to see more careers advice in school or outside of school that was accessible to everyone, and asked what the Council could or was doing to support this. Andy Dunne responded that careers advice sat with schools as a statutory responsibility to provide, but that had been more challenging in recent years. Schools were required to have a careers advisor available

and often that might be through a Connexions worker, someone already working within the school or someone from another organisation, but he felt that careers advice across schools in general was not adequate and teachers needed support to have a better grounding to understand the world of work. In Newman Catholic College, Key Stage 4-5 students benefited from personal 1-1 interviews with the careers advisor who helped them to look at the type of career they might want, as well as the qualifications necessary, to find something that suited their needs best, but he found that the quality and accessibility of careers advice did vary between schools. Shirley Parks added that the DfE conducted a review in 2023 of careers guidance in schools and pointed out some areas for improvement. Whilst careers advice was managed by schools individually, the local authority did provide a service targeted towards young people at risk of being Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) through a contract with Shaw Trust. That contract was longstanding in Brent and ensured that the number of young people NEET was low compared to nationally, and it was a service that individual young people could seek advice and guidance from outside of the school system.

BYP also highlighted that not all schools had the same resources and funding, meaning their performance could be impacted in interschool events such as sports competitions. They asked what the Council did, or could do, to ensure all young people in Brent had access to the same resources and opportunities to succeed. Nigel Chapman replied that school leaders stretched their budget as far as possible to achieve good outcomes for children. The funding for primary, secondary and special schools was provided to the Council by the DfE and allocated through Schools Forum which had the responsibility of handing the funding on to schools. In relation to the influence the local authority had over that funding at a political level, there was continued lobbying around fair and equitable funding to central government. A pay body review suggesting a 4% pay increase for teaching staff would need to be paid from existing departmental and school budgets would lead to further pressures within schools to find that pay whilst also providing other services. He acknowledged the very difficult reality school leaders were in.

The Committee then asked how SEND pupils were performing in Brent compared to national figures. Councillor Grahl highlighted that there was a fairly strong set of results outlined in Table 12 of the report which showed that SEND results were consistently above the national average in Brent. She highlighted that there was acute demand for SEND support, with the number of EHCPs rising 10% per year for the past 10 years, and there was sometimes a delay in putting extra support in place as funding was needed to do that and then time would be needed to build that additional infrastructure and recruit staff. She was pleased there were representatives from 2 schools in Brent helping to meet that demand through specialist provision present at the meeting, and highlighted that Brent had a very good provision of special schools and was building the new special school, Wembley Manor. There was also the Additional Resourced Provision (ARP) programme within some mainstream settings to provide additional specialist support. She added that one reason SEND demand had increased was the increased awareness and understanding of SEND, learning disabilities and autism, with parents and children more likely to seek support and diagnoses, which she saw as a positive.

Hermann Farrington added that in relation to SEND and boys of Black Caribbean heritage, his school did not have the same challenges with attainment, and those who were not making progress in The Village School were more likely due to challenges related to profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD), for example a non-verbal student needing a very sensory approach. For his school, around 80% of students would meet their EHCP targets.

In relation to Wembley Manor, Andy Dunne advised the Committee that Newman Catholic College was currently hosting it's Key Stage 3 provision onsite in a temporary building, which he described as revelatory to see the cohort of 60 students onsite sharing dining facilities

with Newman Catholic College students. The site also would be hosting an ARP as one of a number of schools in Brent who had agreed to set up new provision, which would house 22 students accessing mainstream curriculum for 20-80% of their timetables and the remainder in ARP. Within the school there was also provision for children with EHCPs in the mainstream setting. He provided a case study of a year 11 student with a visual impairment who had undertaken 3 days of work experience on a building site of an ARP which he saw as a great example of those provisions coming together.

Nicky Lobo spoke about the grants Brent Council had been giving to schools without ARPs and which were not special schools but had children with complex needs, advising members that Roe Green had now created 2 outreach rooms using that money and staff were recognising how beneficial those were. She highlighted that SENCOs themselves were essential in supporting SEND students in schools and applauded them for the work they did. Roe Green was supporting their SENCO by providing one day a week to work from home to complete paperwork and 2 mornings with a PA. She added that SENCOs were an aging workforce and when they began to retire that expertise would be lost, so highlighted the need for focus on that role.

The Committee asked what the Council was doing to help schools with new technology to help manage the workload of teachers and SENCOs in order to give teachers an opportunity to focus on value-added work. Nigel Chapman responded that the use of new technology was emerging including piloting the use of AI to assist with the generation and review of EHCPs. Those pilots were showing a reduction in the time taken to produce EHCPs, and if that continued to be successful then the intention was to see what opportunities could be rolled out to SENCOs.

In noting the multiple references during the discussion to gaps in data caused by Covid, and the recent press announcement regarding the changing of one word Ofsted assessments, the Committee asked how the Council could ensure that the change in assessment did not cause a gap in understanding of how schools are performing. Nigel Chapman confirmed that discussions with headteachers around this had taken place the previous week at the Strategic School Effectiveness Partnership Board. Ofsted were consulting about the new scorecard approach, which did not have universal support, and Brent was waiting to see the final outcome of that consultation. Whatever the new assessment and judgement process was, there would be a way of measuring progress, and the Chief Inspector of Ofsted was keen to ensure that local areas could continue to use the Ofsted inspection process to judge the strength of the local system.

Noting that 98% of schools in Brent were rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted, the Committee asked whether there were any schools at risk of slippage on their judgement. Alison Loffler explained that the School Effectiveness Team worked to ensure that schools were of a good standard. Any school identified as at risk of underperforming would receive a full school review in conjunction with the headteacher, looking at any subject or area found to be underperforming, and then recommendations for improvement were agreed with a rapid follow up. It was added that academies would have their own improvement processes as the Council did not have responsibility for them.

The Committee asked whether there was any learning from the forced academisation of Byron Court School following their inadequate rating by Ofsted. Nigel Chapman explained that the risk areas that were monitored in schools were around significant financial strain within the school system, a significant change in performance data, and for Byron Court the key issues were around the leadership and governance of the school. The learning for the Council was the around the importance of that relationship between governors and the leaders within that school, so, going forward, whenever there was a change of leadership in a school the Council was ensuring that an immediate review was put in place within the first

term to ensure the Council was reassured any issues were well managed. Councillor Grahl agreed that school governance was essential to keep schools on track. She also added that the forced academisation legislation would come to an end in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

The Committee noted that parents were fundamental to a child's success in school and asked what work schools were doing to support parents with their child's education. Hermann Farrington agreed that the relationship between the school and parents and carers was key, and often there were things happening at home or outside of school that teachers might not see, so unless the school worked to understand the whole picture it was difficult to make progress. He liked to get parents on site, but as the majority of students at the school travelled by bus staff saw a very small proportion of parents during pick up and drop off. As such, there was a need to invite parents in and be flexible by offering times that worked for them and something valuable to them. For example, when social workers or health professionals were in the school they brought parents in, and responded to what training needs parents were looking for, such as support with regulation at home or difficulties reaching puberty. Andy Dunne added that the organisation his school worked with, All Child, had a link worker who worked closely with parents to build relationships and trust, and the college had designated staff to engage families, such as a refugee co-ordinator working to engage non-English speaking families and a LAC co-ordinator working with Looked After Children and foster carers. Additionally, heads of year and pastoral team members worked very closely with families.

As no further issues were raised the Chair thanked officers for their time and responses and invited members to make recommendations, with the following RESOLVED:

- i) For the Council to develop a dashboard to be used to track school performance providing early warning indicators that a school's Ofsted rating might be at risk.
- ii) For the Council to support after-school learning opportunities and develop a community group structure that allows learning and mentoring to continue outside the school environment.
- iii) For the Council to commit to a proactive approach in supporting schools to identify staff pressure points and utilise technological solutions to support staff, including reducing admin tasks.
- iv) For the Council to conduct further research on the reasons for the gap in attainment for Boys of Black African and Caribbean Heritage, considering barriers to learning and creating a CoP (community of practice) dedicated to improving the educational attainment, engagement, and well-being of these boys in primary and secondary education.

7. Meeting Adult's and Children's Social Care Workforce Challenges

The Chair welcomed the joint report regarding the workforce challenges facing both adults and children's social care and invited the lead cabinet members to introduce the item, drawing out any points they wanted to highlight.

Councillor Grahl (as Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools) welcomed the opportunity to look critically at how the Council was addressing challenges in retention and recruitment. She highlighted that the report showed Children, Young People and Community Development had done sustained work in this area and some successful interventions had helped bring down the number of agency staff and retain good quality social workers for longer. As examples, she highlighted the generous package of incentives

for new permanent staff, including a golden hello, co-operation with London boroughs through the London Pledge to fix agency wages and promote staff moving to permanent contracts, and offering individualised career support in social work teams to promote permanent contracts and bring placement stability to children and young people. She emphasised the importance of acknowledging that, whilst recruitment and retention was important for the Council to make it more economically viable and minimise risk, it was also important for young people to give them the stability they needed as their social worker could be one of the most important people in that person's life, and having a high turnover of staff meant those crucial relationships were easily disrupted, potentially affecting their outcomes in life.

Councillor Nerva (as Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Public Health & Leisure) highlighted the longstanding parity of esteem issues between children and adults, which was not unique to Brent. He advised the Committee that work was being done in Adult Social Care to level out that parity. He highlighted that Brent operated and lived in a mixed economy in terms of social work, but he highlighted the range of social care support provided by workforces outside of the Council and the importance of training for those individuals. Going forward, training, retention and lifetime career opportunities would heavily feature in the tender approach for the new home care contract.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Members for their introductions and invited the Committee to ask questions of the officers, with the following points raised:

The Committee highlighted section 6.3 of the report which detailed the reasons social workers were leaving the profession, citing poor supervision and management as one of the reasons for 38% of respondents. The Committee felt the report did not address that specific point and at several points had quotes from staff highlighting good management, which they felt was contradictory to the finding and asked what was being done in relation to management supervision. Palvinder Kudhail (Director Early Help and Social Care, Brent Council) explained that the survey referred to in 6.3 had been a London-wide survey which Brent had then used the findings of in its own services. In the children's service, the majority of social work managers were permanent, which she added was not meant to say that a permanent manager could not be a bad manager, but it did provide stability and less likelihood of turnover. That permanency helped with the retention of staff. The service had also recently introduced some specific guidance regarding management oversight on individual cases and case supervision which was prescriptive in terms of the support a frontline worker should receive from their supervisor or manager, and placed an expectation on managers to ensure supervision was taking place on a regular basis to provide oversight and case direction. Audit activity was then done to ensure that support was in place in order to ensure that staff felt supported in the work they did and casework risk was managed appropriately. The feedback from those audits and through 6-weekly open-door sessions with the Corporate Director Children, Young People and Community Development, Nigel Chapman, was that social workers trusted their direct line manager.

Another reason for attrition nationally, detailed in section 7.16 of the report, related to workload and burnout and members did recognise a persistent strain on frontline teams, and asked what was being done to support staff to avoid burnout. In terms of Adult Social Care, Evelyn Amedoda (Head of Safeguarding & Principal Social Worker, Brent Council) advised members that the average caseload for social workers was 13, working to an optimal caseload of around 20. As such, she highlighted there was capacity for social workers to undertake reflective practice, supervision and casework discussions. In Brent, the community was complex in relation to deprivation, complexity of need and entering Adult Social Care much later in life, which could lead to burnout, but caseload was managed well, and over the last 12 months no one had worked a caseload exceeding 20 cases.

Noting that average caseloads were below the maximum of 20 but that most other boroughs also had an average caseload of around 15, and the figures showing that people were leaving the profession due to burnout and workload, the Committee asked whether the target caseload of 20 was too high. In response, Evelyn Amedoda reiterated that the data in the report related to national data around burnout and the reasons for leaving the profession. Whilst Brent had seen attrition and turnover of staff, she did not see a caseload of 20 as too high. Acknowledging that the local community was complex, she highlighted that there were long term case holders but also short-term work around hospital discharge and reablement where there was a faster turnover of cases meaning some cases were held for only a short period. As the Principal Social Worker for Brent, she met regularly with London Principal Social Workers, and confirmed that a caseload of 20 was not an outlier across London, but added that most of Brent's staff did not hold caseloads beyond 13.

From a children's social work perspective, Palvinder Kudhail acknowledged the correlation between workload and social workers leaving the profession, but highlighted that workload was not the sole reason. The pandemic had changed things for people in terms of their worklife balance and people wanting to do something different, and casework and needs had become more complex following the pandemic. She highlighted that what formed a caseload was constantly considered, for example, a social worker might have only 9 cases but those 9 cases may all be complex, so the service would not want to assign them any more. As such, the service ensured caseloads were manageable. Managers also ensured they matched skills according to a particular case and situation and offered additional support or co-working opportunities.

In terms of burnout, the Committee asked what mental health provision was on offer to support staff. Rachel Crossley advised members that there was a good wellbeing offer for staff in the Council, and the Director for Adult Social Care held open door sessions for staff to speak about their concerns. Emotional support was made available for staff with difficult cases and work took place with CNWL around career pathways.

The Committee noted that the vacancy rate for adult social care in Brent was the third highest in London, and asked why that was. Rachel Crossley (Corporate Director Service Reform and Strategy, Brent Council) explained that the challenge in Adult Social Care was retention, the cost-of-living, and people moving around organisations to get more money. Through some of the service restructures that had taken place, the service had looked at the skills mix of teams where there were hard to recruit roles and put in place different types of roles, such as care assessors, to bring different skills mixes into the team. This, as well as retention payments, was seeing an improvement in the number of people converting from temporary to permanent. She added that she did not foresee vacancy rates immediately improving but there was a current recruitment drive taking place following restructure.

In response to a query on what other boroughs with lower vacancy rates were offering that Brent might not be, Rachel Crossley advised that they likely had retention bonuses for staff earlier than Brent had. The London weighting was also a factor. Where people were living, where they wanted to work and the willingness and capability of people to deal with complex cases also factored into people's choices. She advised members that Brent had a complex landscape to work in and often found people underestimated that kind of working across multiple different communities.

The Committee noted the reference in the report to difficulties recruiting specialist therapists. Evelyn Amedoda responded that Brent Adult Social Care had done well for Occupational Therapy with 80-90% permanency in that workforce. Where the service was struggling, which was the case nationally, was for rehabilitation officers for visually impaired adults which was a piece of work being done across the NWL Academy.

In terms of the vacancy rate for children's social care in Brent, Palvinder Kudhail highlighted that it was an improved picture with a significant increase in the permanent workforce, but she felt there was more to do. The data on agency workers converting to permanent contracts was increasing with more than 1 a month converting. Rolling ads were also being placed continually to recruit permanently. The service was now doing work on its PR and looking at what other local authorities were offering before putting some information out to attract more staff.

The Committee asked what was being done to improve retention, including training, cultural competence and incentives. Evelyn Amedoda responded that, from an Adult Social Care perspective, retention was a national issue, but locally Brent appreciated there was something that could be done to improve retention and had started that work. There was now focused attention on exit interviews to understand why people were leaving, and a strengthening of the induction process when people joined the workforce so they had a good experience in Brent. The terms of supervision and training offer were also being improved. She added that, as detailed in the report, staff spoke positively about training and supervision, which was affirmed with the external rating from CQC in terms of the learning and development offer. From a children's perspective, Nigel Chapman highlighted the biggest factor in retaining staff was workload and balance of workload. He felt that the caseloads in London were generally manageable and Brent kept a close eye on caseloads and management of caseloads so that social workers felt able to do a good job. He felt that making staff feel that they had the ability to be autonomous, make a difference and could make informed decisions for their clients was especially important for retention. Councillor Grahl highlighted the broader context of recruitment in social care, feeling that the profession had been undervalued and underpaid, as well as being impacted by Brexit. There had also been changes to immigration legislation where residents from overseas did not have the right to bring partners or family to the UK unless they earned more than £30,000, which affected people starting out in their careers and may put people off going into social work. She highlighted the work being done in Brent to improve recruitment and retention, working with Trade Unions to make Brent a good place to work and ensuring the option to work flexibly for staff. The recent staff survey results had provided some interesting insights and had found that staff found Brent a good place to work.

In relation to national funding for Adult Social Care and the potential for the Council to receive less, the Committee asked how the Council would continually support investment in the workforce. Rachel Crossley advised members that the Market Sustainability Fund had 2 elements, one of which was workforce and one of which was for external care provision. The Council was hoping that the spending review would not see money taken away from local government but make it more consistent and long-term, so that some of the Market Sustainability workforce funding may become part of the Council's base funding or come through the Better Care Fund (BCF). Brent had used that funding mainly for piloting different ways of working and bringing in extra resource to tackle waiting lists and test models or review safeguarding practice rather than use it towards the establishment so that it was not over reliant on that funding in case it did not continue. Not having that funding would mean the Council would not be able to deliver some of those additional pilots but there was resilience built in to ensure there was no cliff edge should that funding stop. In terms of what was being done to ensure it was possible to have the funding as part of the Council's base funding, the Committee were advised that the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) was lobbying in London and nationally for continuation of funding and the options around funding models, but there was no indication yet what the government would do. The Council was being proactive in that space around the BCF for all discharge and admission avoidance, working in an early intervention preventative social care space to ensure staff were doing reviews quicker to stop people moving into crisis.

The Committee asked whether there had been any discussions to create shared recruitment pools with neighbouring boroughs. In terms of children's social care workforce, Nigel Chapman explained that London Social Work for Children was a shared recruitment platform website for each local authority to add their roles and which did a spotlight on particular areas. Each borough paid a small amount to be part of that platform and the site then helped drive traffic towards each local authority. He felt it had been helpful to build that platform together with other local authorities and there was now a spirit of collaboration instead of competition in London thanks to the London Pledge. The Council was also part of an international recruitment framework and intended to work with other boroughs to do joint recruitment from overseas. For Adult Social Care, Evelyn Amedoda advised members that work was underway with the NWL Social Care Academy, of which Brent was a part of, looking at international social work recruitment. There was an appetite to do more collaborative work amongst NWL local authorities in terms of regulated staff recruitment.

The Committee asked what the Council was doing proactively to support staff through technology. Rachel Crossley informed members that Adult Social Care had piloted the use of Magic Notes and wanted to roll that out for frontline workers. The tech had been a positive in reducing admin burdens and allowing quality conversations and time spent with the client. Social workers were feeding back that they were having much better conversations with clients because they were not concerned with the notes they were taking. The service had also been a part of the Council's Co-Pilot pilot and was looking for managers to start using that more in the next year. There were 3 business cases for tech enabled care to support friends and family to check in on people. Palvinder Kudhail advised members that children's social care was looking to do some pilots through multi-agency work and needed to get partners on board with that, which needed careful consideration as some partners did not use AI or had taken a decision not to. The service was also looking at an assessment process redesign to streamline that to a single assessment and single plan that would follow the family around and reduce workload and assessments. The system Mosaic, which social work staff used, was also due for modernisation and a consultant was supporting that.

In terms of the financial challenges facing the Council, Nigel Chapman advised that in children's social services the Council had prioritised a focus on frontline staff and social work services for the most in need, which meant difficult decisions had to be taken in relation to early intervention and early help services to ensure workloads continued to be manageable for frontline workers.

The Committee asked whether the Council did any grow your own schemes to reduce vacancy rates and support local residents into work. Evelyn Amedoda advised that Adult Social Care had a grow your own scheme which had benefited from the Department for Health and Social Care's Apprenticeship Fund, and that scheme recruited only local Brent residents with social care experience so that they could earn while learning to get a Level 6 qualification. That scheme was in its second year. There was also an internal grow your own scheme where colleagues with social care experience could qualify for a degree. For Children's social care, Nigel Chapman advised that students from local universities and living locally were recruited. There was also the Step Up to Social Work Programme which took local young people through social work programmes, and apprenticeships. Children's services was focusing on recruiting locally as much as possible because those with local roots and connections were more likely to stay long term.

The Chair drew the item to a close and invited members to make recommendations with the following RESOLVED:

- i) For the Council to commit to a proactive approach in identifying staff pressure points and utilise technological solutions to support staff, including reducing admin tasks.
- ii) For a future paper to come to the Committee on this subject emphasising the co-ordination between adult's and children's social work and cross-working opportunities, including the recent joint work on transitional safeguarding.

The Committee also made an information request, recorded as follows:

- i) For the Committee to receive Brent specific reasons given by Social Care workers for leaving the organisation at their exit interviews.

8. Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Recommendations Tracker

The Committee noted the recommendations tracker.

9. Any other urgent business

None.

The meeting closed at 8:15 pm
COUNCILLOR KETAN SHETH, Chair