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MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Wednesday 23 April 2025 at 5.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Grahl (Chair), Gbajumo and Smith

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

- Councillor Dixon
- Councillor Hirani

3. Declarations of interests

None.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the last meeting, held on 3 February 2025, be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

5. Matters arising (if any)

None.

6. Update from Brent Care Journeys 2.0 Representatives

The Chair welcomed representatives from Brent Care Journeys 2.0 to the meeting and invited them to provide updates from the group.

N advised members that they had been involved in interview panels for staff for the new Residential Children's Home with some other care leavers, including for the Deputy Manager and other residential staff.

H spoke about the visual arts project – Create Arts – that had been provided to 11-17 year olds over Easter for several weeks which had been enjoyed by all attendees.

J had been involved in delivering a talk for World Social Work Day, attending a well organised event with different speakers. He had spoken about his experience and heard from other people and he thought it was a good way for members of staff to hear his viewpoint.

K had been involved in an event celebrating the Council of Europe. She had also been interviewed for and successfully appointed to the Family Justice Young People Board

which helped support the legal system by helping the judge make better decisions and understand the experience of young people. Palvinder Kudhail (Director Early Help and Social Care, Brent Council) added that the appointments process was very competitive and congratulated her for her successful appointment.

In response to whether there were any particular activities that young people wanted to do in the following year, Brent Care Journeys 2.0 responded that they would like to do a residential trip as it had been a while since they had done one. They also suggested more outdoor trips such as Go Ape, go karting or going to the beach. They agreed to work with the Participation Team to come up with ideas and present that back to councillors.

7. Report on Learning from Brent Care Journeys (BCJ) and Brent's Participation Offer (BCJ 2.0)

Nicole Levy (Service Manager, Quality Assurance and Learning and Development, Brent Council) introduced the report, which provided an update regarding the participation offer, the transition from Brent Care Journeys (BCJ) to Brent Care Journeys 2.0 (BCJ 2.0), the response to the Bright Spots Survey and the progress of the Brent Children and Young People Participation and Engagement Strategy 2024-27. In introducing the report, she highlighted that the Participation Team was now fully staffed which was positive news. Work was underway to design and adopt the new principles of BCJ 2.0. One of the main issues young people fed back when talking about participation was that the established groups were not working effectively, so the new strategy looked to create different forums and spaces for young people where it was fun to engage and participation was interwoven into the activities, which had seen an increase in engagement. Work had also been done in the last year on the outcomes of the Bright Spots Survey which was national research done in partnership with Coram Voice gathering the experiences of children in care and care leavers. The results showed some positive experiences but areas for improvement and further development had also been identified. Brent Care Journeys 2.0 then presented what they had been doing to develop areas of focus for the Participation Team and shared a video.

In presenting the slides, Brent Care Journeys 2.0 shared that they had discussed the Bright Spots findings and identified areas to focus on for co-design projects, including friendships, feeling that things are worthwhile in life and having a trusted professional person to make a difference. These had been established following the findings that more young people aged 4-17 in Brent (9%) did not have a good friend compared with the general population (3%). Young people wanted to co-design projects to improve spaces for young people to come together, make new friends and improve their social skills. Brent Care Journeys 2.0 would reach out to other young people to involve them in co-design projects around friendships, anxiety and having a trusted person who was reliable, consistent and listened without judgement. A video was then shared where young people spoke about the new Participation and Engagement Strategy 2024-27.

The Chair thanked Brent Care Journeys 2.0 for the introduction and invited contributions from the Committee, with the following points raised:

The Committee noted the participation activity detailed in the report and asked what activities young people had enjoyed the most and would want to do again. Brent Care Journeys 2.0 spoke about the Stubbers Residential they had attended which enabled them to take part in canoeing and archery during the summer, and also highlighted the recent Create Arts project which provided consistency and helped build friendships. They highlighted that, for those not involved or interested in Create Arts, there was a gap in activities to get involved in. Representatives also wanted to see the return of Brent Care Journeys Kitchen.

Brent Care Journeys highlighted that most care leavers may not want to be included in activities where they were not paid to take part, or had other life experiences and responsibilities such as parenting that meant they did not have time to get involved. Representatives advocated for care leavers to take ownership of Brent Care Journeys 2.0, with branding, a logo, hoodies and their own space, to enable more young people to get involved.

In response, Nicole Levy highlighted that the Participation Team was now at full establishment so there was capacity to do more. It was noted that, of the total cohort, the activities were reaching a low percentage of care leavers, with around 30 care leavers involved in activities, equating to less than 10% of the cohort. As a corporate KPI that the team reported on, outreach activity was being undertaken to reach more young people. Appia Douglas (Participation and Engagement Officer, Brent Council) agreed that a regularly available space that was fully owned by Brent Care Journeys 2.0 was important.

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

8. Brent Virtual School Annual Report 2023-24

Michaela Richards (Headteacher, Brent Virtual School) introduced the report, which provided the Brent Virtual School (BVS) annual report outlining the activity and impact of BVS during the academic year 2023-24 in monitoring and supporting looked after children to achieve the best possible educational outcomes. In introducing the report, she highlighted that attendance had seen a 2% increase across primary cohorts in the last academic year and a 5% increase in the secondary cohort. She added that the monitoring of school attendance was well joined up with a strong relationship built with schools to do that. There had been a decrease in the number of Fixed Term Exclusions (FTE) in the last academic year at 20 compared to 27 the previous year, which she highlighted as a positive downward trajectory, and there had been no permanent exclusions for looked after children. Where there were issues in schools that risked permanent exclusion, the BVS worked with the school to come up with creative ways to ensure that student stayed on the roll of the school, such as through a mixture of alternative provision and mainstream settings. She advised members that Key Stage 2 results had been good across all measures and an increase on the previous year. In comparison to looked after children nationally, Brent had seen a 20% increase in some of the Key Stage 2 figures. It was added that the cohort was small which could skew the figures, as seen in the Key Stage 4 figures where a few children with poorer results affected the overall attainment percentage. The Statistical First Release (SFR) cohort, which BVS reported on where they had been in care for at least one year, was 30% larger than the previous year, and when looking at the number of young people achieving at least 5 good passes this was a lot higher than it had been in the previous 4 years. In terms of enrichment, some of the activities involved ice skating, bowling, and visiting the Chessington Safari. Some Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASCs) were taking part in a cooking course called My Little Chef. She advised the Committee that the BVS continued to diversify and expand the activities on offer and worked closely with the John Lyon's Charity with 3 other local authorities to do that.

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

The Committee asked how long looked after children should expect to wait for an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). They heard that there was now a SEND Advisory Officer role within the BVS as the issue was not around the length of time to get an EHCP, but where Brent had young people with an EHCP not living in Brent, as there could be challenges getting those into an appropriate school. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director

Children, Young People and Schools, Brent Council) added that there was different national legislation governing responsibility for children in care and responsibility for children with SEND. The responsibility for looked after children was with their home authority, so regardless of where a Brent child was placed the Council retained responsibility, but when a child was placed with SEND then they became the responsibility of the local authority in which they were placed, which caused issues with co-operation. This had been flagged nationally with the DfE who had announced there would be some guidance coming on this, and lobbying activity focused on campaigning for the same process for SEND children as for looked after children.

In response to what support a young person received to know whether they needed an EHCP and to provide evidence of that need, Michaela Richards explained that the child's social worker, foster carer and BVS SEND Advisory Officer would work together to do that and schools were supportive of that process. An Educational Psychologist working specifically with looked after children meant EHCP assessments could be fast-tracked.

Noting the decrease in the number of 5 passes including in English and Maths, the Committee asked whether achievement had worsened specifically in those subjects. Michaela Richards advised that when she had reviewed those figures she had found there were only 1-2 differences who achieved the pass grade the previous year and not the reporting year, and when that happened within a cohort of only 10-20 children that could drastically affect the figures. She did not believe there was a specific issue with those subjects and that the figures depended on the cohort. There were some cohorts where children had recently come into care and had behavioural challenges they were prone to and attendance issues and it was best to see how they were doing a few years down the line. She added that some of those figures may also reflect the individual school's attainment, and underperforming pupils were always given the option to resit.

In relation to the positive attendance record, the Committee commended the Council and schools on achieving this. Michaela Richards attributed the positive work to the good relationship the BVS had with schools, particularly within Brent, which enabled the BVS to capture when those children's attendance may be about to drop by looking at those in the 90-95% attendance range to combat poor attendance early.

Noting the aim to get more young people into education, employment and training, the Committee asked what plans were in place to increase those figures. Michaela Richards responded that the BVS was working closely with the LAC and Permanency Team around the opportunities available for young people. She highlighted the importance of having a diverse offer for Brent's young people. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) added that there was a fine balance needed, and the Council worked with partners such as John Lewis, the NHS, and other apprenticeship schemes to offer that. She acknowledged that there was a need to be communicating those offers well to young people to ensure they had equal access to that knowledge and opportunity. There was also thought to be a generational shift in the way young people viewed work and what they wanted to achieve through work, so there was a need to be flexible. It was felt that with Community Development moving into the Children and Young People Department this would also help join things up to increase possible routes to jobs and skills working with community partners.

The Committee asked how Pupil Premium Plus differed from Pupil Premium. They were advised that Pupil Premium was available for any person, whether looked after or not, if they were eligible for Free School Meals. Pupil Premium Plus was for looked after children and previously looked after children specifically. For a looked after child that came to the local authority, the Council could send a certain amount of money to the school to support with activities in school or something the child needed academically, and if the school needed more the Council could provide that. The Council had sent more than £3k where

there was evidence the school was using it appropriately and could show how it was supporting the child. For example, it could be used for extra tuition, enrichment activities or residential trips, and schools could be creative in what they used that for, although it must link to the young person's education. The child's Personal Education Plan was then reviewed yearly to check whether the Pupil Premium Plus was being spent in a beneficial way. The child, teacher, social worker, carer and BVS created those PEPs, and young people were invited to attend those reviews where they could ask what the Pupil Premium was being spent on. Where BVS could see that the school had not been spending the money on the young person then the money would not be sent. Remaining funding that was not distributed was then used to fund additional BVS activities.

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

9. Brent Adoption Report - Annual Report 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

Debbie Gabriel (Head of Service, Adopt London West) introduced the report, which provided the adoption performance data for the reporting period. In presenting the report, she outlined the following key points:

- Adopt London West had placed 10 children in the last year which was much higher than the agency had placed since creation. 6 of those 10 children had been placed with Adopt London West adopters which was an improvement in performance.
- As there was a small cohort size, variance in performance could appear to be significant.
- It was highlighted that the working relationship between Brent and Adopt London West was very strong and agency practice aligned closely with practice in Brent.
- There had been an increased effort to reconnect children with siblings working with Brent staff.
- Following the publication of the report, the government had announced changes to the Guardianship Support Fund which Adopt London West could apply to on behalf of a family. Until 2 weeks prior, Adopt London West could bid for up to £5k, enabling the agency to apply for therapeutic services for children up to £5k. There had also been a separate fund of up to £2k for assessments of those with complex behaviour and needs and a match fund if support needs cost more than £5k. Following the government announcement, the Guardianship Support Fund had reduced to £3k and there would no longer be an assessment fund of £2k or match funding. She highlighted that these were significant changes that would have an impact on the child and family, as, for many families, that reliance on the therapeutic support available through the funding could make a difference in them continuing to function.

The Chair thanked Debbie Gabriel for her introduction and invited comments and questions from those present, with the following issues raised:

Noting the change in government funding for therapeutic support, the Committee raised concerns that this might affect a family's desire to adopt. Debbie Gabriel acknowledged the concerns, highlighting that whilst there was an ideological debate on how reliant some families were on the support, there was a need for it. The announcement of the changes had been made late and received a lot of publicity with the adoption community being active and vocal advocates for their children in response to the changes. Adopt London West had prepared applications in advance as they had previously received confirmation that the funding would continue, so all those applications made in draft now needed to be redone with recalculated costs. This meant families were delayed in receiving therapy. The

Chair of the Committee committed to writing on behalf of Brent's Corporate Parenting Committee to Minister Daby to request they make representations to the Treasury to reconsider the decision or propose alternative funding.

The Committee asked for further details about the Community Champions pilot. They were advised that the pilot had been scoped but more funding was required to start that. Adoption England had been given more funding meaning Adopt London West could continue with its Black Adoption Project and use other pots of money for other work. Committee members had previously attended a workshop on the Black Adoption Project which had led to the project as it was now, which had an active stakeholder group and was built on the principles of full coproduction. The Steering Committee had decided the priorities for the project and parents were active members of that. Focus groups with young people had also taken place in shaping the project and key themes from those focus groups were around friendship, connection and being with young people with the same experiences as them. They also fed back that they would like work to focus on their Black identity and heritage.

Noting the underrepresentation of Black adopters, the Committee asked how representative the adopter cohort was. Debbie Gabriel responded that there were some disparities, and the work of the project aimed to narrow that gap, but research showed that Black children were 12 times more likely to have their care plan changed away from adoption as the service could not identify adopters. Where children had mixed heritage the service looked to place them with families who closely resembled them as much as possible, but it was difficult due to the complexity of children's profiles. Where it was not possible to match heritage but an adopter fulfilled the remainder of criteria for that child then a match would be made, but for some children it was right to wait.

In relation to the performance data on the average time taken for a child entering care to be placed for adoption, the Committee asked if there was any insight into that. Officers advised that performance variance was due to the small cohort of children and could be the result of significant delays due to extended complex care proceedings, the individual needs of the child impacting the availability of suitable adopters and the change in adoption proceedings giving parents more abilities to challenge an adoption process in the court. When a parent relinquished a child, there were children's rights for them to be placed in their families, so there was a need to explore all options available before coming to a final decision. As such the adoption process was extremely heavily regulated and procedural within law and guidance. It was added that Brent accommodated relinquished babies and had a signed agreement with the parent to place the child with foster carers. Some adopters also got approved as temporary foster carers, so, where possible, the child could be placed with potential adopters.

10. **Brent Fostering Service - 6 Monthly Update Report and End of Year Monitoring Report: 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025**

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which provided progress on the priorities over the previous 12 months. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- In the reporting year, Brent had approved 6 new mainstream foster carers against a target of 10.
- 5 resignations had been made in the same period, resulting in a net increase of 1 foster carer. This compared favourably to the net increase of -4 the previous year, showing some progress.

- A new fostering offer had been introduced the previous year which had been well received and included a fostering uplift. The next uplift would take place in April 2025.
- The service had gone live with the first mockingbird constellation which would help to retain foster carers in the service via a hub and spoke model. There was evidence nationally that this model helped create more stability for looked after children and improved outcomes through retention of carers and better support for carers.
- The foster carer training offer had been expanded and the following year would focus on increasing the uptake of that, with promotion going out during Fostering Fortnight.
- The fostering hub went live in May 2024 with proactive marketing of that, and Brent was seeing an increase in the number of enquiries as a result of that. It was not yet possible to evaluate whether that was proving cost effective and the impact was under evaluation.
- The service was becoming more proactive in getting feedback and engaging with foster carers in different ways including through a foster carer survey, 'Coffee with Kelli' informal drop-ins for carers and the regular monthly support groups.

The Chair thanked Kelli Eboji for her introduction and invited comments and questions from those present with the following points raised:

The Committee asked how the new national strategy on kinship care would align with what was happening in Brent with kinship care. Kelli Eboji advised members that the service was ready to launch its kinship local offer, which had been extensively consulted on with carers. The focus was on having an easy to engage with offer that showed the headlines, and the policies would then sit behind that. The offer would be published in an easily accessible format. Tom Donovan (Service Manager, Looked After Children and Permanency, Brent Council) added that Brent was learning from other boroughs on their kinship offers, highlighting the difficulty in a single offer covering so many different types of fostering arrangements. The service aimed to do extensive promotion of the offer once published through events and awareness raising and it would be shared with the Committee.

The Committee were advised that additional corporate investment to recruit more foster carers through targeted advertising had been agreed, and officers would provide an update on the impact of that at the next meeting.

11. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 7:30pm
COUNCILLOR GWEN GRAHL
Chair

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