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MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Monday 14 July 2025 at 5.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Grahl (Chair), Dixon, Gbajumo Hirani 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**

Apologies were received from Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children, Young People and Community Development, Brent Council).

3. **Declarations of interests**

None.

4. **Deputations (if any)**

None.

5. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the last meeting, held on 23 April 2025, be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

6. **Matters arising (if any)**

None.

7. **Update from Brent Care Journeys 2.0 (BCJ 2.0) Representatives**

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

J advised that he had been involved in interview panels for roles at the new residential children's care home in Brent, including for the Deputy Manager and Senior Residential Support Worker. He had enjoyed working with other professionals he had not yet met and coming together as a panel to make decisions.

N advised that a 'link-up' session was held during May half term where new people and new staff had attended. She advised this had allowed attendees to bond and also share information and advice with each other. These sessions were being held in a dedicated

space in the Civic Centre where young people had quick access to staff, including personal advisors and managers.

S provided feedback on the Create Arts music project she had been involved in, where young people were supported to create their own music and lyrics. She had created a music video with 7 other care leavers which used many different languages including Hindi, Arabic and English. The BCJ 2.0 group were also working on implementing actions following the findings of the Bright Spots Survey, which had shown that care experienced young people wanted friendship and trust. From that, a project called Trusted Buddies had been created, where young people aged 18-25 years old buddied with children aged 11-19 years old and supported them with the aim of maintaining a lifelong friendship. That project was in its research phase and further updates could be provided at the next Committee meeting.

The Chair thanked BCJ 2.0 representatives for their updates and invited comments and questions from the Committee, with the following points raised:

In response to whether BCJ 2.0 had received support in their Trusted Buddies project, S explained that she had presented the idea to The Participation Team and the project was being done in collaboration with Cafcass.

The Committee requested to see the music video that had been created which would be circulated.

In relation to the new residential children's care home, BCJ 2.0 had visited the home and had been pleased with the way it had been designed and decorated.

The Committee asked how BCJ 2.0 had been able to engage new young people in the 'link-up' session. N advised that this was through the group chat and advertisements in the hub, and current BCJ 2.0 members had spoken about the experience they had and the connections they had made. A further incentive was receiving food. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) provided thanks to Appia Douglas (Participation and Engagement Officer, Brent Council) who had done a lot of work on this.

In response to what BCJ 2.0 had planned for the summer, J advised that a fun day was planned for August as well as a residential trip for care leavers and children in care which everyone was looking forward to.

8. Annual Corporate Parenting Report 2024-2025

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the annual Corporate Parenting Report, covering the activity for the period 2024-25 and the priorities moving forward into 2025-26.

In presenting the report she highlighted the following key points:

- In relation to staffing and recruitment priorities, as of the end of 2024-25, staffing in the service was almost fully permanent with agency staff recruitment reserved solely for sick leave or maternity cover.
- The improved staffing, alongside the service redesign, was hoped to create a strong foundation to develop quality and consistent practice.
- The service continued to work with health colleagues to improve health services, children and young people's emotional wellbeing and implement interventions.
- The service continued to work with Brent Children's Trust with an action plan in place for that.

- Brent Care Journeys with Barnardo's had now transitioned to Brent Care Journeys 2.0 (BCJ 2.0), taking on the learning of the last 4-5 years with Barnardo's and embedding new ways of providing participation for young people.
- The service was working on developing accommodation pathways and independence skills for young people, detailed in section 18 of the report.
- An action plan following the findings of the most recent Bright Spots Survey had been established and would be implemented over the summer.
- There was increased focus on developing and improving practice on life story work with multiple bespoke life story work training offers for staff and a life story work pilot with frontline teams to improve the way that work was started when children were newly in care. This included a life story work online platform that the service was looking to introduce in the coming year.
- Work had been undertaken on the Corporate Parenting Committee structure and the way it worked in Brent, and she thanked the young people for their commitment through that journey and the improved format where young people were much more involved in meetings and discussions.
- Some priorities from 2024-25 would remain the same for the incoming year, particularly around embedding the redesign of children's services and the government's new Families First priorities as they related to children in care and care leavers.
- A continued focus would remain on kinship care as the first option for children unable to live with parents and reunification with birth families where possible and appropriate.
- There would also be continued focus on the voice and engagement of children and young people in day-to-day practice through co-design and co-production approaches.

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

The Committee noted the improved permanency in the workforce and asked what was being done to sustain the almost 100% permanent workforce. Kelli Eboji advised that there was a good Learning and Development offer for social workers and personal advisors. Around two years previously the biggest challenges in turnover occurred in the LAC teams, which had been addressed and retention maintained. Since Palvinder Kudhail (Director Early Help and Social Care, Brent Council) had started at the Council there had also been improved focus on converting agency workers to permanent staff to help retention, and it was hoped that her redesign of the department would create systems where staff felt clearer about their roles, remits and the systems they were required to use. The new model had been implemented on 2 June 2025 and there had been a training session every day since then to ensure staff understood the new structures and requirements through a 12-week intensive programme. This programme had been designed following a consultation phase of all staff, including early help practitioners, to understand their skills readiness and what they needed going forward.

In relation to the numbers of children in care across the last few years, it was noted that the rate of children coming into care was going down, and the Committee asked why that was. Kelli Eboji explained that Brent had historically maintained a relatively low population of children in care which was likely due to the demographics of the movable and transient population where people entered and left the borough. She also felt that Brent had higher thresholds compared to other places for taking children into care as there was a focus on early intervention and keeping children with their families wherever possible.

Noting that the children in care population in Brent was predominantly adolescent ages, the Committee asked if that was consistent nationally or specific to Brent. Kelli Eboji advised that it varied between local areas, but Brent typically had higher percentages of adolescents in care.

The Committee highlighted the statistics in the report that 17% of children at any one point were missing which was an increase from the previous year. They asked how the service planned to address that going forward whilst recognising the work being done to minimise children going missing through the Exploitation, Violence and Vulnerability Panel (EVVP). Kelli Eboji confirmed that the service had been reflecting on what the causes of the increase could be. There was some consensus that it could be related to an increase in awareness and reporting as the figures also included absenteeism. She felt that there was work the service needed to do with placement providers around what they were reporting and when. In terms of addressing children going missing going forward, there was a new Targeted Prevention Hub which pulled together all contextual safeguarding resources for better consistency to support practitioners. The LAC teams would also continue embedding protocols around decriminalisation.

The Committee asked for assurance that the service knew who the young people going missing were and for how long. It was confirmed that the service received data from the police every week so knew exactly who was missing and for how long, and when Strategy meetings took place it was clear what police actions were. In terms of whether police treated reports of missing incidents seriously and treated young people equally, Kelli Eboji highlighted that it was difficult to generalise the response as many young people were placed out of borough, meaning the police response would depend on the local area and the police resources allocated. From the Council's point of view, getting the right police around the table for strategy discussions was crucial, and if that happened then good work came from that. Sabine Kadhaya (Service Manager – Safeguarding and Reviewing, Brent Council) added that police attended the EVVP where missing children were discussed and issues addressed straight away. The Committee were reassured that, where there were issues with the response from police, this could be escalated to the relevant Detective Chief Inspector.

Brent Care Journeys 2.0 (BCJ 2.0) provided a perspective on some of the reasons young people might go missing, which included disliking the area they were living in, not feeling safe, not liking the home environment they were in or the people they lived with. Sometimes it was about not feeling heard. The importance of getting the placement right was emphasised. BCJ 2.0 also highlighted the importance of young people being comfortable with their social worker so that they felt able to share their feelings with them about their placement, and that there should be a mechanism for young people to feed back about their social worker.

BCJ 2.0 asked how soon after care leavers have bid for accommodation should a direct offer be expected, highlighting that many care leavers wait for years. Kelli Eboji highlighted the challenges in giving specific timeframes for that, emphasising the pressures on the housing stock in Brent which had directly impacted how quickly care leavers were receiving direct offers. The service was looking to address that, as the time it now took for care leavers to receive an offer was increasing. The service was trialling the Shared House and were setting up auto-bidding for some care leavers. Work was being done with colleagues in Housing to identify specific properties for care leavers as well as the Housing Companies in Brent to broaden out the options available. Afzal Ahmed (Service Manager – LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) added that care leavers were on Band 2 priority, compared to homeless people on Band 1. Whilst the service was trying to be creative in supporting young people into housing, officers were also being realistic about the low housing stock

across London and the pressures in the Council's budget that access to housing was causing.

In considering the response, BCJ 2.0 asked how much encouragement was given to staying put arrangements, feeling that was a good option where young people could stay with people they knew, transition easier into adulthood and become independent. Kelli Eboji responded that there was emphasis on encouraging staying put arrangements, but there was a balance needed because foster placements were also needed. BCJ 2.0 highlighted the importance of good placement matching for this, explaining that their staying put arrangements had worked when they stayed with a family of the same cultural background and heritage which had been a key factor. It was agreed that training could be considered for foster carers who entered into staying put arrangements to support them with that transitional time to adulthood where the young person might be looking for more independence.

In relation to section 14.3, which detailed the aim of the service for care leavers to be introduced to a personal advisor by 17.5 years old, the Committee raised concerns that this was quite late. Kelli Eboji advised that the service would prefer to begin that introduction process at 16, but highlighted this target was what the service could currently achieve with the resources available. This area was a particular pressure point that the service wanted to improve, but it was challenging without additional resources. In relation to the causes of the pressures to achieve this target, Afzal Ahmed advised that Covid had impacted the service, as had the increase of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and referrals from the 4 hotels in the borough for age assessments. The legislation had also changed, meaning young people were staying in the service longer, and so the service was trying to keep caseloads to a manageable level.

It was confirmed that the Sufficiency Strategy detailed in the report related to having a plan in place to ensure Brent had as many foster carers as possible.

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

9. Annual Looked After Children (LAC) Health Report

Kim Lewis (Head of Clinical Services – Brent Children, CLCH) introduced the report, which provided information relating to the health needs of Brent Looked After Children and the services provided in 2024-25. In providing some context, she highlighted that, nationally, Looked After Children entered care with a worse level of health than their peers and often needed support above and beyond their peers. She then provided the following information:

- In Brent, the LAC Health Team had a caseload of 328 as of 31 March 2025, compared to 268 the previous year. The caseload fluctuated throughout the year.
- The LAC Health Team was currently fully and correctly staffed in accordance with the intercollegiate guidelines for ratios, and was made up of a Named Nurse, 3 Children Looked After Nurses, 2 Consultant Paediatricians conducting Initial Health Assessments (IHAs), one of which was the Named Doctor for Looked After Children, and a cohort of Junior Doctors on a 6-month rotation. There were also some medical advisors in place for adoption and fostering.
- The report included an analysis of monthly performance on timely completion of IHAs and Review Health Assessments (RHAs), including explanations for breaches.
- The Integrated Care Board (ICB) had recently flagged concerns with IHA performance across all 8 NWL boroughs and was undertaking a programme to address that, which health and social care teams were involved in. The most

common causes of breaches were where children were placed out of borough and waiting for assessment in the borough they were placed in, ongoing challenges with referrals, and children and young people who were not brought to their appointment or chose not to attend. The Brent Health and Social Care Teams and Designates from the ICB were exploring the referral challenges and how they could be addressed.

- The team had worked to streamline referral forms to make the process quicker and easier which had received positive feedback.
- She highlighted the need for centralised solutions to improve the breaches to statutory timeframes for children placed out of borough, where Brent's health and social care team had limited control.
- A new NWL ICB core offer specification to standardise the commissioning of children looked after across all 8 boroughs was expected, which would change how systems operated to ensure all 8 NWL boroughs were providing the same service to children regardless of where they lived.
- In 2023-24 there had been an improvement in the number of children whose immunisations were up to date, who were registered with a GP and who had received a recent dental check. The data for 2024-25 was not yet available.
- The number of children who had seen an optician for their RHA had improved.
- Data had not yet been received for mental health support and substance misuse, and the previous year there had been large gaps in the number who reported issues and those actually receiving support, highlighting the large number of young people waiting for support in those areas.
- The Central London Community Healthcare health team had established a Quality Council Project with young people in care to develop an animation discussing the experience of being in care and how they would like health professionals to speak to them. The animation included myth busting about children looked after and was due to launch soon, and had been shortlisted for 2 awards.

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

Cecilia Gabriel (Service Manager – LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) offered thanks for the work done to improve the RHA process and new form which she advised had made a big difference for social workers in Brent.

The Committee highlighted the difficulties people faced in asking for interventions for mental health and asked what support was available to allow young people to disclose that information and receive support. Kim Lewis highlighted the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires which examined a child's mental wellbeing along four broad categories to plan therapeutic support referrals, which was a national tool used by health visiting staff and social workers. There was a national requirement to complete an SDQ every 12 months. She advised that the key to these was ensuring the team had built good relationships with young people so they felt comfortable asking for that support, as well as consistency of staff. In terms of the emotional wellbeing support available to young people, Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) highlighted a number of other providers outside of CAMHS known as tier 2 support such as WEST, Elev8 and VIA New Beginnings. There was also a new wellbeing service being launched specifically for former UASCs.

The Committee asked whether the figure in 5.9 of the report, stating that 90% of looked after children were reported with substance misuse, was correct. Officers agreed to check

that figure but believed it to be correct, highlighting that alcohol, smoking and vaping would be included in that figure as well as cannabis use. In checking that figure, the Committee asked to be provided with the national average for adults.

The Committee asked where the complexities in meeting statutory obligations for health assessments arose. Kim Lewis explained that social workers completed the set referral form to request a health assessment. If the child was placed out of borough, the team made the referral to that local borough, however, it was noted that other boroughs tended to prioritise their own children which caused delays. For those in NWL, the CLCH team then dealt with the referral. Once the assessment was complete, they would write a report which was quality assessed by the LAC Health Team. Where children were placed out of borough, the quality of those reports were not always the required standard, and this resulted in back and forth with the other borough to get the report into an acceptable standard. She highlighted that this was happening across the whole country and felt it needed national focus.

Noting the table in the report providing monthly performance of IHAs, the Committee highlighted a drop in July and October, and asked if there had been any reflection and insight into why that was. Officers explained that the numbers did fluctuate depending on where young people were placed. In October, 3 children were in borough and 9 were out of borough, where there were more delays. There had also recently been some young people in hospital where those assessments could not be carried out. She assured the Committee that the reasons for exceptions were provided in the report to the ICB and highlighted that the small caseloads did affect the figures.

The Committee noted that section 5.4 of the report described the number of HPV immunisations delivered for girls only and highlighted that the policy in schools was now to immunise both girls and boys. Kelli Eboji confirmed that the immunisation was offered to both boys and girls, and agreed that there was further work needed in the coming year regarding vaccinations. There was a need to work with public health and health teams to improve vaccination rates and increase the messaging around eligibility.

It was noted that, whilst the report noted a slight increase of 5% in immunisations, since the report had been published the finalised figures showed a decrease in immunisation rates between the reporting year and the previous year. Cecilia Gabriel suggested that could be due to the smaller cohort of children being supported to be placed long-term, larger sibling groups where parents had not consented to immunisations, and UASCs who arrived with no immunisations or evidence of immunisation status. Officers felt that messaging and education was needed in that area, and a UASC project with public health had begun to develop some of that educational messaging, including using foster carer platforms such as newsletters and training.

The Committee asked how the service was ensuring that young people leaving care fully understood how to access their health histories. Kelli Eboji advised that the report detailed the positive work on health histories and summaries. She emphasised that the health team worked hard to ensure every young person leaving care had a health summary. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) brought that information to their reviews as part of the care leaver pathway plan, and social workers were now prompted to make sure a young person had received their health history, and check they had any questions or needed any support.

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

10. Annual Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Report 2024-2025

Sabine Kadhaya (Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing, Brent Council) introduced the report, which provided the annual report detailing the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to the quality assuring and improvement of services for Looked After Children. In terms of priorities for 2024-25, the service had successfully appointed 3 in-house IROs, and she highlighted that having Brent Care Journeys 2.0 (BCJ 2.0) representatives on the panel had been very beneficial. The new IRO contract was now commissioned with 2 permanent IROs. The priority to improve the timeliness of LAC reviews had seen an improved focus and that would continue going forward. The fourth priority to engage children and young people in more creative ways continued.

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

The Chair acknowledged the unique role of the IRO and asked for examples of where an IRO might intervene to improve the experience of children and young people. They heard that an IRO might intervene if there had been a delay or deviation from a child's agreed care plan or if a young person reached out to the IRO. The IRO would liaise with the guardian of the child if they were in care proceedings to agree what was best for the child, and provided scrutiny of the care plan for the child. The IRO was a statutory duty defined in the Children's Act 1989.

The Committee was pleased to see the percentage of reviews happening within statutory timeframes had improved, and asked whether it was possible to improve that moving forward. Sabine Kadhaya advised that there was a priority in place to increase that to 90 by the following year, and there was now an IRO manager in post who had not been previously, providing additional focus to enable that improvement to happen.

The Committee asked what BCJ 2.0's experience of their IROs had been. J advised that he had the same IRO for his entire time in care, and had a good bond with her and they understood each other well. She had prepared him well for his reviews and helped him complete the forms required for each meeting and ensured his voice was heard. S also had a positive relationship with her IRO. She added that she sat on the Family Justice Young People's Board who wrote a letter to the children when they left, and suggested that a goodbye letter from IROs would be useful for care leavers, as well as their personal advisors and care leavers. Sabine Kadhaya thanked BCJ 2.0 for their feedback, and added that IROs were asked to take the young person out to say goodbye after their final review, allowing a therapeutic process to saying goodbye. The Committee asked that an IRO was invited to the meeting when this was next discussed.

11. Any other urgent business

Brent Care Journeys 2.0 asked whether there was anything the Council could do to offer discounts on driving lessons to help care leavers learn to drive, as they were now very expensive. It was agreed officers would look into this.

The meeting closed at 7:20 pm

Councillor Gwen Grahl
Chair