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MINUTES OF THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE Monday 13 April 2026 at 5.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Grahl (Chair), Kennelly, Dixon, L. Smith and Maurice (substituting for the Conservative Group)

1. Exclusion of the Press and Public

RESOLVED: that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the duration of the meeting, on the grounds that the attendance of representatives from the council's Children in Care council, necessitated the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 2, Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, of the Act, namely: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.

2. Apologies for absence and clarification of alternate members

None.

3. Declarations of interests

None.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the last meeting, held on 2 February 2026, be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

5. Matters arising (if any)

None.

6. Update from Brent Care Journeys 2.0 (BCJ 2.0) Representatives

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

SA and N presented the recent launch of the Empire Care Leavers Group, showcasing photos and videos from the launch event and the logo, which everyone had contributed to. J took the Committee through the resourcing involved in the project and the various consultation and design stages, which had all been undertaken by young people and voted on by young people. The launch event had taken place in The Base and had been open for both staff and guests with good attendance. The next steps for the project would be to acquire a safe space, undertake further recruitment to Empire, and launch the Trusted Buddies project. The Group was also planning for the Summer Fun Day.

N updated the Committee on the recent World Social Work Day event that she and other care leavers had been part of, where they had led a resilience activity which she presented videos and photos from.

In relation to Trusted Buddies, S was looking to set up a leadership programme to enhance the leadership skills of Empire Care Leavers which would align with the Trusted Buddies project and also enhance public speaking skills, hosting and team bonding. A survey had now been disseminated to garner interest in the projects.

SA informed the Committee that Empire would be visiting semi-independent providers to recruit more young people and would be raising awareness of Empire through social workers and personal advisors to encourage more young people to get involved.

S presented to the Committee regarding the Family Justice Young People Board, of which she was a member. She advised that the focus of the Board was to give a voice to others, and the priorities of the Board for 2025-2028 were; improving young people's participation in proceedings; helping professionals understand how Domestic Abuse affected children and ensuring all types of abuse and harmful parenting was considered; ensuring children knew their rights and there was a focus on children growing up safe and happy; and reducing delays in family courts to give children certainty and safe final decisions. The Board would be hosting their annual conference called Voice of the Child over the coming months. S had been involved in planning the conference, including agreeing the theme (children's rights), ensuring the conference reflected what was important to young people currently, agreeing roles for the day including interview panel members, theme leads and bringing in experts with the biggest impact, agreeing content and creating a physical resource to bring the conference to life. The previous year saw over 1,000 attendees, with Dr Jahnine Davis (National Kinship Care Ambassador), representatives from the Ministry of Justice, representatives from the DfE, and Justice Harris from the family courts participating in interviews. S invited Committee members to attend this year's conference and would share the relevant information with the Committee. Kelli Eboji added that there was a need to do some targeted advertising of the conference to ensure that social workers in the family court space attended.

The Chair congratulated Brent Care Journeys on the productive term, and commended the work being done to build the group and gain participation.

As no further issues were raised, the Chair thanked Empire Care Leavers for their updates and closed the item.

7. The Brent Pledge to Children in Care

Alice Weavers (Participation and Engagement Manager, Brent Council) introduced the report, which set out the revised Brent Pledge to children and young people in care. She advised that the Pledge set out what the Council wanted to achieve for children in care to ensure all young people received the same service and knew their rights. Empire 11-17 had looked at the existing pledge and provided feedback on what commitments should change, the design of the pledge, and asked for contact details to be included. As a result, every child's social worker would now sign the pledge and provide their contact details to each child in care. The documentation would also include information about Empire.

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

The Committee commended the document, pleased that the language of the Pledge helped to give young people the words to advocate for themselves if they were not receiving what was set out in the Pledge. They felt the document was clear and concise and it was clear that children and young people had been involved in the revised Pledge and that the voice of the child was being reflected in what the Council did.

Noting that every social worker would be asked to sign the Pledge, the Committee asked how the service would ensure that, when new hires were appointed, they would understand the importance of the Pledge and sign the document. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) advised that the Pledge and companion documents would be shared with new starters. Joint learning was captured in staff forums throughout the year where staff were kept refreshed on the Pledge and their obligations, and this would be a standing item in all staff forums.

In response to whether there was a way to monitor compliance with the signing of the Pledge and what questions young people were raising in relation to the Pledge, Kelli Eboji advised that there was no standard way of measuring that as it would form more qualitative data. The service would need to consider how some of that information could be captured as part of supervision and management oversight of cases, and ensure that managers were checking in with practitioners to understand that information. Palvinder Kudhail (Director of Early Help and Social Care, Brent Council) added that the service had a comprehensive audit programme and did themed audits periodically, such as educational outcomes and placement stability, all of which linked with the promises made to young people. There were also surveys and feedback forums, therefore she felt there were a number of ways to triangulate information to ensure the Pledge was being adhered to and taken seriously. Children in care also had annual meetings with their Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) where the IRO checked the young person had received all of the information they needed.

As no further issues were raised, the Committee **RESOLVED:**

- i) To approve the proposed plan for changes to the Brent Pledge.
- ii) To approve the plan to co-produce an additional companion guide.
- iii) For all councillors, as corporate parents, to receive the Pledge to understand the Council's commitments to children in care.

8. Annual Report form Brent Virtual School for Children in Care 2024-25

Michaela Richards (Headteacher, Brent Virtual School) introduced the report, which outlined the activity and impact of the Brent Virtual School (BVS) during the academic year 2024-25 in monitoring and supporting looked after children to achieve the best possible educational outcomes. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- There had been a positive increase in the number of young people achieving grades 4 – 9 in English and Maths plus 3 other subjects, at an almost 10% increase for the whole cohort.
- 28% of the Statistical First Release (SFR) cohort (young people who at the time of the report were in care for at least a year from 1 March 2025) had achieved grades 4 – 9 in English and Maths plus three other subjects, which was a substantial improvement on previous years.

- Post-16 education, employment and training (EET) rates were between 77-83%, with 83% being a significant increase on previous years.
- There had been no Permanent Exclusions, in line with the historical trend. There had been a slight increase in Fixed Term Exclusions (FTE) on the previous year, but this was still lower than it had been for the past 3-4 years.
- 105 children had attended enrichment, which was well above 50% of the statutory cohort of 4-16 year olds, as it was recognised that enrichment was equally as important as academic attainment. The activities had a focus on wellbeing, enjoyment and ensuring cultural capital was being provided to children in care.
- Whilst the role of BVS was expanded in September 2024 to include extended duties for all children with a social worker, Michaela Richards advised that Brent had already been doing some of that work since 2021, including direct work, which was not a national requirement but it was recognised that the earlier BVS could intervene the more preventative they could be in terms of children coming into care. This also ensured a relationship was already in place if the young person did enter care.
- In March 2025, BVS employed a SEND Advisory Officer linked directly to the BVS due to the number of children with EHCPs and SEND support needs, and particularly the difficulties in ensuring appropriate educational placements for children with EHCPs not living in Brent. The proposal had been taken through the appropriate senior channels and approved on a trial basis, but there was now agreement for that to be a permanent role due to the impact it had.

The Chair thanked Michaela Richards for the report and then invited comments and questions from Committee members with the following raised:

The Committee commended the results, pleased to see children in care doing well academically despite the barriers they faced.

The Committee highlighted that school attendance had gone down and asked if there was any insight into why that was. Michaela Richards advised that one of the key challenges was the time at which some young people entered care, with some behaviours around non-attendance already embedded. She worked closely with the school attendance team, foster carers and social workers where it was recognised that attendance was a barrier to see what was needed to improve that. Whilst attendance may have dropped, there would be other interventions taking place to ensure that the child received academic support, such as through additional tutoring support provided in the home and ensuring pupil premium funding was put towards additional tutoring where it was clear the child would be out of school for a period of time. In terms of the decrease in school attendance figures, Michaela Richards explained that, due to the small cohort size, the attendance decrease could relate to 2-3 children with long-term attendance issues which would impact the overall figure. The national picture also showed that attendance had decreased on the whole, meaning that some of the factors may not be linked to looked after children but all young people. She assured Committee members that the current academic year had seen attendance improve again.

Brent Care Journeys asked what support was provided to ensure young people did attend education and understood how important and valuable receiving an education was. Michaela Richards expressed that young people did care about their education, but at times where there was a lot of change in their life education may not be a priority at the forefront of their minds. BVS worked to put small steps in place, working with the school, young person and foster carer to ensure that education was minimally disrupted. For example, BVS may negotiate a part-time or reduced timetable for a while. There was also

an element of enrichment BVS would look to get the young person involved in, seeing what worked best for the young person and what could be done differently. She confirmed that BVS staff got to know their cohorts very well and had positive, longstanding relationships with young people, which helped those staff support young people to sustain their education.

Brent Care Journeys asked how BVS advocated on behalf of children in care to individual schools, such as for those who had entered care just before their exam period. Michaela Richards advised that BVS did have experience of young people entering care in the lead up to their exam period, and in those situations would write a letter of support to the school outlining that the young person may not be able to sit their exams and the reasons. Sometimes mock papers could be used for the basis of that young person's results. She added that there were times where BVS had put an argument forward and the school or college may not be supportive in the same way, for example, in accepting a college placement where a young person did not have the required grade, but BVS would use the levers they had to advocate as much as possible. It was more challenging for those post-16, which was past statutory age, meaning there were fewer levers to influence.

Whilst recognising the improvement in Key Stage 4 attainment, the Committee highlighted that there was still a number of children looked after not achieving grades 4-9 at Key Stage 4 and asked what their options were for the future. Michaela Richards advised that the government had now invested in funding for post-16 education for children in care, and even when the Council did not have funding it had always supported a young person once they were ready to go into further education if they wanted. For example, a 21-year-old care leaver may come forward to do a course, which the Council would always support, and the Council now had the financial support to do that. In response to how those individuals were followed up, Kelli Eboji advised that there were Personal Education Plans (PEPs) for all care experienced young people, with professionals working with the young person to understand their next steps and ensure they were on track. The Committee asked that future reports expanded on this particular cohort in terms of their journeys and opportunities and included case studies.

In learning that the Council provided support to care experienced young people looking to go into education post-16, Empire Care Leavers asked how that was communicated to ensure young people were aware of that. Michaela Richards advised that this would be done in a bespoke way through the young person's personal advisor depending on what that young person needed. Kelli Eboji advised care leavers to approach their personal advisors about this who would liaise with the BVS about what could be offered.

The Committee highlighted that the target for children and young people in education, employment and training was not included in the report and asked what that was and how the Council looked to achieve that. Michaela Richards advised that Brent's target for the last few years was 80%, which the Council would ideally want to be higher than that. The report showed that, during the reporting year, 83% were in education, employment and training, which was beyond the target. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children, Young People and Community Development, Brent Council) added that there was no national target for this metric, but the Council did report to the DfE and could access benchmarking data on that, which showed that Brent performed relatively well compared to other boroughs. Some of those comparisons could be included in future reports.

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

9. Fostering Service 6-monthly / End of Year Update Report

Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) introduced the report, which provided both a 6-monthly update of the fostering service and an annual end-of-year report. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- Section 4 outlined the fostering service priorities across the reporting year.
- One of the priorities was around recruitment of foster carers, which she highlighted as challenging. The service had not met the target of recruiting 10 carers, with 3 carers approved, 5 assessments in progress at the time of writing the report, 1 resignation and 2 de-registrations due to safeguarding concerns in the reporting year. She added that the offer continued to be competitive and well received by Brent foster carers, and no carers had transferred to any other local authorities or independent agencies.
- The first mockingbird constellation had been implemented during the reporting period, with the foster carers involved enjoying that additional support and building their communities.
- Whilst there had not been an increase in fostering capacity in terms of numbers of carers, placement stability performance was good, and vacancies with in-house foster carers were being fully utilised where the foster carer was free and appropriate risk assessment and matching had taken place.
- An area for continued improvement and development was the training and development of foster carers, and there was work being done to ensure carers took up that offer and completed their mandatory training.
- Other developments were taking place in fostering, including the West London Fostering Hub and regionalisation.
- The fostering front door was being developed to include assessment of foster carers.

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

Noting that a key development in fostering currently was the transition to regional fostering arrangements, which the Committee recognised as one of the biggest reforms to fostering in many years, members asked how the Council was working towards that and what the challenges would be to comply with the changes. Nigel Chapman (Corporate Director Children, Young People and Community Development, Brent Council) advised that Josh McAllister (Children's Minister) was working to change how fostering worked and was keen to bring local authorities closer together to have the 8 local authorities in West London working together to provide one service, which was thought would improve the number of foster carers recruited. He highlighted that the main challenge for Brent, and many London boroughs, in finding foster carers was finding applicants with a spare room. As such, his view was that the regionalisation of the fostering service would not necessarily resolve that. However, merging into one service would enable officers to respond more quickly to enquiries, complete assessments quicker, and offer more to carers to encourage them to stay. Some of the challenges of delivering the regional service would be the timescales in which to implement the changes, as staff and funding needed to be considered, and he highlighted the need to do that at a pace that ensured this was done in the most appropriate way. It was likely that the changes would need to be brought to a future Cabinet meeting. Kelli Eboji added that there were opportunities in working across local authorities to learn from them and see what services could be implemented quickly, as well as the opportunity of more funding from DfE, which would be reliant on working together.

Kelli Eboji further added that workshops would be taking place throughout the week to consider the different aspects of the reforms, with the additional challenge being the

localised picture, as the aim of the fostering hub was to keep children close to home and near their networks, meaning there was a need to ensure knowledge of local factors and a localised response was retained. As such, the fostering service was being as creative as possible with the marketing of the fostering offer and maintaining that internally so that it could be tested as the service moved through the reforms.

The Committee highlighted the importance of maintaining relationships amongst social workers, children, and foster families where possible, whilst also recognising that the Council's definition of 'local' may differ from residents', as there were many different boundaries and borders across Brent. Empire Care Leavers also emphasised the need to be less rigid in relation to Brent being the young person's local area, highlighting that the matching process was more effective when children were placed with someone of a similar culture and background. Kelli Eboji confirmed that the biggest goal of the service was to match well, which was also one of the biggest challenges due to the placement sufficiency pressures.

Noting that there were recruitment barriers in terms of housing, with the fostering service reliant on applicants with a spare room, the Committee asked whether the recruitment drive targeted particular demographics or areas where individuals were more likely to have a spare room. Nigel Chapman confirmed that the service did general advertising across Brent and targeted specific groups through social media algorithms, such as those within a particular age range or those in homes with additional space. The Committee also highlighted particular community events as good places for outreach to different communities, and asked for a future report to outline how successful the different engagement and outreach activities were at leading to enquiries and subsequently converting those to applications.

In response to a query from Empire Care Leavers as to whether foster carers who had been with the service for a long time were reviewed, Kelli Eboji confirmed that foster carers were reviewed annually by an independent person. If there were any concerns raised, a serious concern or standards of care review would be undertaken to review their suitability. Nigel Chapman added that where there were concerns these would always be listened to, whilst ensuring that the service was helping foster carers grow and learn from their mistakes. He added that there were some foster carers had reached a point where ending their approval in a mutually agreed way was appropriate, and those conversations regarding retirement would take place with supervising social workers.

Councillor Dixon provided further details about the reviewing process, as she had previously been a Panel Member of the Fostering Panel. She confirmed that the Panel consisted of 7-8 members with lived experience or social work experience, who were required to undertake training in order to assess cases. The Panel received papers about the foster carers and read them thoroughly, which included many details about the foster carer, their early life and current circumstances, and then made a recommendation based on the papers they had received and the information they had heard directly from the social work team and foster carers themselves. She confirmed that it was a very intricate discussion amongst professionals and very responsible, and there were times when the Panel would have to refuse someone if they did not have what was necessary to be a foster carer. Where a case of concern or standards of care issue was raised, these would come back to Panel for review. Kelli Eboji further added that where a young person made a complaint, depending on the severity of the complaint, there were safeguarding procedures that would be followed and there would be actions coming out of those which may not be shared with the young person, such as training and development for the foster carer. Where concerns were serious, the foster carer would be put on hold whilst an investigation was carried out. The Committee highlighted the need to consider how the young person could be kept informed on the complaints they made, emphasising that whilst there were

robust processes taking place, the young person might not know that, and it was important they received feedback on what they had shared.

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

10. **Six-Monthly Adoption Report from Adopt London West**

Debbie Gabriel (Head of Service, Adopt London West) introduced the report, which provided a briefing on adoption performance data for the reporting period, progress and activity of Adopt London West (ALW) and outcomes being achieved for children. In introducing the report, she highlighted the following key points:

- 34 children had been placed by ALW within the year, which was the highest number of placements made since the establishment of ALW.
- 7 Brent children had been placed for adoption in the reporting year, making the overall placement numbers for Brent 12.
- Performance remained strong in relation to the timescales children were placed in, but often the care proceedings took a long time and did lead to some delays.
- 23 adopters had been approved in the reporting year, making it more likely that children could be placed with in-house adopters.
- The report detailed the support offer for families within ALW, including a new friendship group for children, a transition to adulthood group for 18-24 year olds, and a parent and child toddler group. The aim was to have spaces for children right across their age range to ensure there were opportunities for them to be with peers that may have had similar experiences to them.
- ALW had secured additional grant funding for a youth worker to develop those young person spaces, and additional funding to develop the multi-disciplinary team to ensure a clinical team was in place to support social workers.
- A new table had been included in the report which provided a comparison of ALW Brent's performance against England and statistical neighbours.

The Chair thanked Debbie Gabriel for her introduction and invited contributions from those present, with the following points raised:

The Committee asked whether there were any reflections on the advantages and challenges of moving to a regional model now that ALW was established. Debbie Gabriel advised that the opportunities were around being able to do more across the partnership with additional funding, meaning more services could be developed than previous. The challenges were around connection with local expertise and communities, but she felt that ALW's relationship with Brent was strong from the outset which had helped with that. Many individuals from Brent's adoption service had transferred to ALW, retaining that knowledge and those relationships, and ALW staff were always invited to the Brent staff forums to maintain that connection.

Noting the performance on length of time to place a child for adoption, the Committee asked whether there was any way to improve those times even more. Kelli Eboji (Head of LAC and Permanency, Brent Council) advised that the time taken to place a child was case by case, with some placements made more quickly, but others taking time where family members needed assessments, or there were international elements, with the courts less willing to make a decision for adoption where there were other alternatives. The complexity of the case and the child's particular needs may also impact the length of time to in order to undertake appropriate family finding.

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

11. **Any other urgent business**

None.

The meeting closed at 7:20 pm

COUNCILLOR GWEN GRAHL
Chair

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