



**Children and Families  
Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
25 March 2010**

**Report from the Director of  
Policy and Regeneration**

For Action

Wards Affected: ALL

**Review of the work of the Children and Families  
Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**1.0 Summary**

- 1.1 This report sets out a review of the work of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny committee from 2006-2010.

**2.0 Recommendations**

- 2.1 Committee members are also asked to make suggestions for future work programmes

**3.0 Detail**

- 3.1 This report sets out a review the work of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee from November 2006 until February 2010. Members are invited to consider the extent to which this committee has contributed to improved services for children and young people and as the current administration draws to a close, provide suggestions for the committees' future work programme.

**4.0 Overview and Scrutiny remit and purpose of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

- 4.1 The Overview and Scrutiny process is independent of the council's decision-making Executive and was established in the Local Government Act 2000. It allows councillors to review existing policy, develop new options for improving services, hold the council's Executive and partner agencies to account and check the delivery and performance of council services. Overview and scrutiny in Brent is carried out by committees that can also commission smaller task groups to carry out in-depth pieces of work.

4.2 The Centre for Public Scrutiny outlines four principles of good scrutiny these are;

- Provides 'critical friend' challenge to executive policy-makers and decision- makers
- Enables the voice and concerns of the public and its communities
- Is carried out by 'independent minded governors' who lead and own the scrutiny process
- Drives improvement in public services

4.3 The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee was set up following a review of Brent's Overview and Scrutiny structure in 2006. Rather than a sub committee, it sits alongside the main Overview and Scrutiny committee within the council structure. Its purpose is to provide a clear focus on children and young people's issues. This committee is also unique in that it has a statutory requirement to include co-opted members to provide expertise on education issues.

## **5.0 Key Success factors of the committee**

5.1 The legislation set out the basic requirements for overview and scrutiny which gives local authorities the scope to develop the service in accordance with its own local circumstances. At Brent, overview and scrutiny is seen as an important way to hold the executive to account and for frontline councillors to carry out a meaningful investigative role. This committee has adopted a number of working practices which have contributed to successful scrutiny which are outlined below;

5.2 In a number of areas reports have been commissioned which provide an overview of a particular service and then, following discussion in committee, more specific, focused reports have followed where the committee feels attention is needed. Certain items have been visited more than once to maintain a firm eye on areas that are undergoing change (for example 14-19 curriculum; anti-homophobic bullying policy; looked after children) and the issue of School Places has been a standing item with an update required at every meeting. The progress of the application for Building Schools for the Future funding, and consequent delivery of the projects is also now a standing item requiring at least a verbal update for members.

- 5.3 This committee has forged a strong relationship with Brent Youth Parliament (BYP). BYP regularly attend the committee and have official observer status. A BYP member sat on a task group on 'healthy relationships - how to involve parents and faith groups in talking to young people about sex and relationships. The committee also receives regular reports and feedback on the work of the parliament. Most recently, a quarterly meeting was set up between the chair of this committee and the BYP executive to discuss issues of mutual concern.
- 5.4 The committee has engaged a broad number of witnesses who have provided crucial evidence on their unique perspective on the issue under discussion. Witnesses have ranged from council officers, young people, health officials, the police, academics and experts in the field such as Barnardos and Stonewall.
- 5.5 The committee commissioned four task groups. Task Groups provide members with the opportunity to look at an issue in-depth and engage with local people who may not feel comfortable to share their views in a formal committee setting or attend evening meetings. Specific groups that task groups engaged with include; a Somali woman's organisation, Wembley High school council and parents whose teenagers have had children. The task groups covered the following topics:
- Improving outcomes for Black African and African Caribbean pupils
  - Healthy relationships; how to involve parents and faith groups in talking to young people about sex and relationships
  - Pupil safety on the journey to and from school
  - Youth offending
- 5.6 The evaluation of the work of the task groups is set out section 7.4 below. Task groups have also helped to raise the profile of the committee and several articles have appeared in the local press.
- 5.7 The Chair of an Overview and Scrutiny committee can play an important role in raising the profile of the committee and gaining a good understanding of local issues to inform the work programme. The chair of this committee has visited local services such as the Pupil Referral Unit, various Youth Service projects, the Brent Youth Forum, the Brent Duke of Edinburgh Scheme sessions at the Roundwood Centre, the Brent Youth Parliament workshop sessions and recently contributed to an article on homophobic bullying which appeared in the local press.
- 5.8 The committee benefitted from the commitment of its co-optees and observers many of whom regularly attended the meetings, There was particularly proactive input from the teachers representatives who challenged council policy, suggested items for review and provided the teachers perspective. The attendance of the Executive Member for Children and

Families to answer questions and provide the executive perspective has been significant in the success of the committee.

## **6.0 Challenges**

- 6.1 Encouraging members of the public to attend the committee, suggest agenda or task group topics remains a challenge which is a problem for overview and scrutiny nationally. This raises wider concerns about the profile of the committee locally and the extent to which the public are aware of its role.
- 6.2 The Committee recently held a meeting at Alperton Community School as an opportunity to take the scrutiny work out of the town hall and it is hoped that this will be repeated with further attempts to involve members of the public in meetings.

## **7.0 Topics covered by the committee**

- 7.1 A well planned work programme is a key component to successful scrutiny. A programme of carefully selected topics can help engage the public and Councillors. Work plans should connect with the council's priorities and community concerns.
- 7.2 The committee has covered a broad range of topics over the four year period. Subjects for consideration have been generated by;
- Discussions during committee
  - Suggestions from individual committee members
  - Youth parliament
  - Local/national current issues
  - Public concern
- 7.3 The work programme for this committee has been guided by the outcomes set out in the Every Child Matters Agenda. These are also the central themes within Brent's children's Plan. They are:
- Be healthy
  - Stay safe
  - Enjoy and achieve
  - Make a positive contribution
  - Achieve economic well being
- 7.4 This paper will set out the topics covered by the committee within the Every Child Matters themes and demonstrate the extent to which they achieved real outcomes.

Areas reviewed by the committee 2006-2010	Outcomes
<p><b>Be Healthy</b>            Teenage pregnancy and sexual health</p> <p>Impact of Primary Care Trust (PCT) savings proposals on children and families in Brent.</p> <p>Child adolescent mental health service</p> <p>Sports provision available to young people</p> <p>Reducing childhood obesity</p> <p>School nursing</p> <p>Swimming opportunities in Brent</p>	<p>The committee commissioned a task group on 'Involving parents and faith groups in talking to young people about sex and relationships'. All of the task group recommendations were accepted by the Executive and are now being implemented by the Children and Families Department.</p> <p>The committee took a proactive role when Brent PCT faced a financial crisis and were forced to implement wide scale cuts in frontline services. The committee was concerned about how this would impact upon services for children and families. Senior representatives from the PCT were invited to attend the committee to answer questions. The chair of the committee wrote to the PCT to express concerns about their proposals.</p>
<p><b>Stay Safe</b>            Tackling homophobic bullying</p> <p>Youth services petition</p> <p>Child protection arrangements in Brent</p> <p>Youth offending</p>	<p>The committee helped to raise the profile of tackling homophobic bullying in Brent. The committee received a report on the issue, specifically asking for a survey to be done on the number of schools who included homophobic bullying within their anti-bullying policy. A number of witnesses were invited to the committee to talk about their experiences and the work that they had been doing. As a result of sustained interest from the committee, the Children and Families department have directed more staff resources into encouraging schools to tackle this issue and have worked on a pilot project with Stonewall which is producing good results.</p> <p>The committee reviewed child protection arrangements following the tragic death of Baby Peter. The committee recommended that a cross party panel be established to review child protection in Brent. This was agreed and this group has now been formed.</p> <p>The committee supported local residents in seeking further youth provision. This was as a result of a petition brought to the committee from residents in Kilburn regarding lack of youth services in the area. The committee requested that the youth service work with the residents to develop a partnership approach to identifying resources.</p>

	<p>The committee commissioned a task group to look at concerns around pupil safety on the journey to and from school. All the task groups' recommendations were accepted by the Children and Families Department and Transport for London.</p>
<p><b>Enjoy and Achieve</b>  Looked after children in Brent  Special educational needs  Youth service update  Annual education standards report 2005/6  Annual education standards 2006/7  Children's centres in Brent  Kingsbury and Stonebridge integrated services programmes  Extended services update  Primary and secondary school places  Languages in schools  Kingsbury and Stonebridge integrated services programme  Equalities impact of school places provision in the south of the borough  Trends in teacher recruitment and retention  Review of the impact and outcomes of special projects for school age children newly arrived in Brent  Building schools for the Future  Support for Somali parents</p>	<p>The committee regularly held officers to account regarding provision for pupils without a school place; this was a standing item on every agenda. The committee challenged officers about how the shortages would be met.</p> <p>The chair, on behalf of the committee wrote to all teachers in Brent in 2008 and 2009 congratulating them for the excellent academic results achieved.</p> <p>The committee did not shy away from scrutinising controversial issues. A report was presented regarding concerns by the teachers that a particular racial group was unfairly discriminated against because they were more likely to live in the south of the borough and had travel further for a school place. Having considered evidence from teachers, the council and the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, the committee were satisfied that pupils were not facing discrimination.</p> <p>The committee held a special session looking at the balance between residential and social care and if this provides the best outcomes for children. A number of witnesses were invited to provide evidence to the committee. The committee recommended that the Children and Families Department consider a hybrid model between residential and foster care. The department agreed to look at this as part of the council's major review of children's social care.</p> <p>A task group looking at improving outcomes for African and African Caribbean pupils highlighted that extra language support was needed for some Somali pupils, for whom English was a second language. The parents also needed language support to help their children with their homework and communicate with the school. The committee were aware of an impending review of the school funding formula and recommended that more resource is directed to this group. This was accepted. Following an update on the progress of support to this group, the committee recommended that it should be increased to include a larger number of schools.</p>

<p><b>Make a positive contribution</b></p> <p>Review of children and young peoples plan</p> <p>Brent Youth Parliament – Annual Report</p> <p>Improving outcomes for African Caribbean and African pupils</p>	<p>A task group was set up to review work by the Children and Families department on improving outcomes for Black African and African Caribbean pupils as statistics showed that this group had below average outcomes across a number of indicators such as school exclusions, educational attainment and youth crime. Many of the recommendations put forward by the committee are now being implemented by the Children and Families Department.</p>
<p><b>Achieve economic wellbeing</b></p> <p>14-19 development report</p>	

Additional areas that the committee considered that fall within its wider remit include:

- Local Area Agreement
- The schools budget and review of school funding formula 2008/09 to 2010/11
- Annual Performance Assessment of Services for Children and Young People in Brent
- Local Government and the Public Involvement in Health Act 2007
- Children and Families Complaints Annual Report

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