



**EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Thursday, 8 December 2011 at 7.00 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor Gladbaum (Chair), Councillors Aden, Mr A Frederick, Mrs L Gouldbourne, Brent Youth Parliament representatives, Ashraf, Hirani and RS Patel

Also Present: Councillors Arnold (Lead Member for Children and Families)

Apologies were received from: Councillors Matthews, Mitchell Murray, HM Patel, Ms E Points, Mrs H Imame, Ms J Cooper and Ms C Jolinon

7 Results of Ofsted Safeguarding and Looked After children Services Inspection

Graham Genoni (Assistant Director, Social Care Division) delivered a presentation to the committee on the outcome of the Safeguarding and Looked After Children (LAC) Inspection which took place between 3 and 14 October 2011. The full Ofsted inspection report had been circulated to the committee with the agenda.

Graham Genoni advised that there was a national inspection regime for children's social care. The last inspection for Brent's children's services was a Joint Area Review in 2006. Officers were aware that since this time significant improvement had been made to service provision. This was recognised in the outcome of the inspection which noted that service provision had improved from a low base. Graham Genoni further explained that the inspection resulted in two separate judgements; one for Safeguarding and one for LAC. The possible judgements which could be awarded to the local authority ranged from Outstanding to Inadequate and Brent had received an adequate rating for both elements. Drawing on the most recent Ofsted report on "local authority children's service inspections and outcomes", Graham Genoni noted that 46% of Local Authorities achieved this result for Safeguarding and 53% for Looked After Children.

Graham Genoni advised that the key positive messages arising from the inspection had included that Brent's thresholds for child protection intervention were appropriate. It had also been recognised that there had been improvements in recruitment and retention of staff since the time of the previous inspection in 2006. At this time, approximately 30% of the staff within the child protection teams had been permanent. In contrast levels of permanent staff now stood between 85 and 90%. The inspector had been particularly impressed with the Advanced Practitioner Role employed at Brent. This role was carried out by very experienced social workers and was in place to support social workers in developing their professional skills. Graham Genoni noted that it had been disappointing that the positive partnership with schools had not been commented upon by the inspectors.

Turning to the subject of the observations included within the inspection outcome, Graham Genoni advised that the number of Common Assessment Framework

(CAF) assessments had been deemed to be low and there was limited engagement by Health professionals with these. This comment related principally to other professional agencies with which the authority worked in partnership. The inspectors had also raised a query regarding the level of resources being directed towards early intervention services, of which CAF assessments formed a key part. A further question had been raised regarding the way in which service cuts had been made, and it had been noted that cuts to youth services had not been co-ordinated with other partner agencies which had resulted in similar areas of service provision being affected.

Graham Genoni then drew the committee's attention to some of the areas which had been highlighted for improvement. Many of the issues highlighted had been already known to the authority and had actively been raised by officers during the inspection. An action plan was being developed to meet the recommendations set out within the inspection outcome and this would be embedded within the department's overall improvement plan. Depending on the urgency of the issue, some actions would be carried out immediately. A need had been identified for greater links to be established between strategies, plans and performance management. Graham Genoni explained that a restructure of the department in recent years had removed the strategic division and that the issues raised by the inspectors may have stemmed from this loss. Several areas of improvement had also been identified in relation to the assessments conducted by social workers. It had been found that the assessments varied in quality and did not take appropriate account of family history nor were action plans appropriately focussed or targeted using SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed) objectives. It was further commented that Pathway Plans, plans for young adults aged 18 to 21 years old for whom the local authority had an enduring responsibility, also needed to be of a higher quality. In relation to an issue raised within the inspection outcome regarding safe recruitment, Graham Genoni explained that this concern had arisen with regard to two incidents which had occurred in the recent past where issues relating to the recruitment of two members of staff had been appropriately addressed but had not been recorded as required.

In members' subsequent discussion, several queries were raised. The Chair requested that further clarification be provided to the committee on the different remits of the Safeguarding and LAC service areas. Graham Genoni explained that at present there was approximately 380 Looked After Children in Brent, most of who were in the care of foster carers. The local authority had a corporate parenting responsibility to these children and the inspection examined how well this responsibility was met. Turning to safeguarding, the committee was advised that this related to the work that the local authority carried out to ensure that all children were safe and protected whilst in the care of their families. The Safeguarding element of the inspection had sought to identify how safe Brent's children were and how well the council worked with other agencies to ensure that children were appropriately protected.

Councillor Ashraf requested further details regarding the frequency of inspections and queried whether any follow up action was taken by inspectors to check that the recommendations set out within the judgement were acted upon. He further queried whether any penalty was awarded against local authorities which achieve an inadequate judgement. Graham Genoni explained that a further follow up inspection would only be carried out where a local authority had performed very

poorly. Again referring to the Ofsted report, “local authority children’s service inspections and outcomes”, Graham Genoni noted that 25% of local authorities in the United Kingdom had been rated inadequate. Where this judgement was received, a team would be set up to work with that local authority to improve their service.

Councillor Hirani sought further details regarding several of the areas identified for improvement. With regard to service user engagement, councillor Hirani noted that it had been recognised that family group conferences had increased in the current year and queried whether this had resulted in improvements for the service. Graham Genoni explained that family group conferences (FGCs) were held before a child was accommodated by the local authority to try to identify what support or care the family members could provide. FGCs formed a key part of the council’s attempts to keep children out of the care system.

Councillor Hirani sought further details regarding the recruitment issues highlighted within the inspection report. Graham Genoni explained that all staff within the children’s social care department were CRB checked. The incidents which had been highlighted by the inspection related to two occasions where CRB checks conducted as part of the recruitment process had returned a positive result. The correct processes had been followed and the information had been shared with senior managers and Human Resources and risk assessments had been completed. Unfortunately, the actions taken by the council had not been recorded and the local authority had therefore been found to be at fault.

In response to a further query by Councillor Hirani, Graham Genoni advised that every looked after child was required to have a health review every 6 months if the child was under 5 or once a year if the child was over 5 years old. The inspection had identified that not every child had had their health review within these timescales. It had been identified in 2010 by the local authority that there were not enough Health staff to cope with the workload and the PCT had agreed to double the LAC nurses to a total of two; however, there remained at present a back log of approximately 30 LAC health reviews.

Councillor HM Patel queried how the local authority would respond if an allegation was made against a member of staff regarding child abuse or negligence. Graham Genoni asserted that the first priority of the council would be to ensure the safety of the child. Following that, an established process existed for dealing with allegations against a professional which would formally question the individual’s suitability to work with children. It was noted for instance that there were a number of allegations made against teachers which in turn necessitated detailed formal investigations. Ms Gouldbourne (Observer) highlighted that most allegations against teachers were determined to be unfounded.

The Chair noted the hierarchical supervision arrangements within the department and the conclusion that there was not sufficient time for adequate reflection on cases or procedures. In response, Graham Genoni confirmed that there was a need for improvement in this area and that training (via the West London Alliance) and other resources would be utilised to this purpose. The Chair further noted the judgement that there was a high degree of inexperienced staff within the department. Graham Genoni advised this was one of the issues with which the local authority did not agree. The training support provided to inexperienced staff was

strong. The council was in line with other London boroughs regarding the number of inexperienced social workers and the number of social workers qualified outside of the United Kingdom.

The chair of the committee was keen that the Executive is given an opportunity to consider the inspection report as well as the action plan that would be produced by the Department in response to the report's recommendations. For this reason, the committee agreed to recommend the Ofsted Inspection report to the Executive, so that they have "ownership" of it, as well as the action plan. The committee also agreed to consider the action plan, once it becomes available,

RESOLVED: -

- i. That the action plan be presented to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration and discussion once it is available.
- ii. That the Ofsted report, presentation and action plan be submitted to a meeting of the Executive for their consideration and to ensure they "own" the council's response to the Inspection.

9. Review of policy for the provision of early years full time places

Sue Gates (Head of Integrated and Extended Services) presented a report updating the committee on the provision of full-time Early Year's Places to disadvantaged children and responding to issues raised by the committee at its meeting on 6 October 2011.

Sue Gates briefly outlined the background to the policy and explained that in February 2010, the Executive had decided that free full-time (30 hours per week) early years places should be allocated on a priority basis to disadvantaged children aged 3 to 4 years old. However, due to an anticipated growth in demand for places for children aged 2 to 3 years old, an alternative proposal was developed in early 2011. This proposal envisaged the provision of the statutory part-time (15 hours per week) places only but was subsequently rejected by the Schools Forum in June 2011. Consequently, following this, work re-commenced on the implementation of the original decision taken by the Executive in February 2010.

Sue Gates explained that an Early Years Funding sub-group had been established and a two stage admissions process was developed. This process proposed that at stage 1, schools would still apply their own local admissions criteria and those children that met the criteria would proceed to stage 2 of the process. At stage 2, children that lived in Brent and that met the free school meals criteria could be offered funded full-time places. Schools were consulted regarding this proposed process in October 2011. Responses were received from 7 of the schools with full time places and these confirmed that most schools were happy to manage the admissions process locally and merge it with normal admissions practice. Some concerns had been raised regarding the additional administration arrangements and it was felt that advice would be required on validating eligibility claims on dealing with appeals. The committee was advised that the admissions process would be in place for January 2012, for applications for September 2012. Some

schools which had been offering full time places had decided to offer only part time places from September 2012.

Turning to the subject of the provision of Early Years Places for children aged 2 to 3 years old, Sue Gates informed the committee that the government had created a statutory entitlement of 15 hours per week of free childcare integrated with early education for children deemed vulnerable. This was due to commence in 2013. It was currently proposed that eligibility for this provision would be determined by the free school meal criteria. Whilst the exact number of children who were eligible for the provision could not be provided, Sue Gates explained that based on the number of children living in the most deprived areas of Brent, it was estimated that there could be around 3,000 children who would qualify for the provision. Based on this estimation, it was evident that there would be insufficient places to meet demand and consequently several options for expanding the number of places available had been explored. The issue was further complicated by the government's proposal that only 'good' and 'outstanding' Ofsted rated providers should offer the provision for vulnerable 2 year olds. Based on this criteria it had been determined that there were approximately 1880 PVI childcare places that could be made available for disadvantaged 2 year olds. This resulted in a shortfall of places of approximately 1,020. Whilst child-minder vacancies could augment the available places to reduce the shortfall, this provision was not popular with parents and would require considerable additional training of child-minders. Actions to address this shortfall had been initiated and at the beginning of 2011 a strategy to improve the quality of Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) child care providers and child-minders had been introduced. Work was also being carried out to ensure that all relevant professionals were aware of the free entitlement for disadvantaged children so that families could be appropriately advised to apply.

During members discussion Councillor Ashraf raised a concern that with schools managing the admissions process it would result in an inconsistent and unequal system. Sue Gates advised that there were insufficient places for all disadvantaged 3 and 4 years olds and consequently the system had been unfair for many years. The new policy merely ensured that disadvantaged children were given priority. Sue Gates advised that it was important that the professionals who interacted with families in need were aware of the entitlement but that it was not intended to widely promote the scheme to other parents given the shortage of places.

The Chair of the committee noted that she had two concerns; the first of these was that there was no appeals procedure except those put in place by individual schools. The second related to hard to reach vulnerable families including recent arrivals to the country for whom language offered another significant barrier. The committee did not feel that these issues had been adequately addressed by officers. As a result, it was agreed to refer these issues to the Executive.

RESOLVED: -

The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to refer the report on the provision of full time early years places to the Executive and recommended that action be taken to address the two issues of concern to members:

(i). That a consistent appeals procedure be put in place in schools offering full time early years places for 3 and 4 year olds

(ii). That steps are taken to promote the availability of places to the most vulnerable families, including those who are new arrivals to the UK where language could be a significant barrier to accessing services.

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm

H GLADBAUM
Chair