

Corporate Parent Committee

Thursday 22nd March 2018 at 7:00pm

Horizons Centre, Hanwell

PRESENT: Councillors: Bell (Chair), Dhami, Gulaid, Rai, Sharma and Walker.

ALSO PRESENT: Marcella Phelan (Assistant Director, Planning, Commissioning and Partnerships), Carol Yates (Operations Manager, Leaving Care and Looked After Children), Judith Finlay (Executive Director, Children, Adults and Public Health), Carolyn Fair (Director, Children and Families), Bridie McDonagh (Virtual School Head Teacher), Gary Odle (Project Manager, Horizons Centre), Jude Fraser (Children and Families, Senior Management Team (SMT), Horizons Centre), Rhiannon Evans (Lawyer), Sian Hender (Early Years Teacher/Caseworker, Children & Families SMT), Cornelia Harding (Democratic Services Officer), Foster Carers and Young Persons Representatives.

**Please note attendance is based on those that have signed the attendance sheet.

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received in advance of the meeting from Debbie Gabriel (Head of Childrens' Placements and Support), Councillor Millican and Councillor Midha.

2. Urgent Matters

There were none.

3. Matters to be Considered in Private

There were none.

4. Declarations of Interest

There were none.

5. Minutes of the Meeting held on 14th December 2017

RESOLVED: That, the minutes of the meeting held on 14th December 2017 be agreed as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

6. Update from Junior Council (Verbal Update)

Six young children aged from 6 to 11 years of age from the Junior Council took turns in delivering an update to the Committee on the Letterbox parcels which they said were characteristically received with excitement by young children in care. The children said the colour of the envelope of the parcel indicated the age of the child it was intended for. The Children reported that they, as Junior Council, had invited staff from Letter Box Club to visit the Horizon Centre and observe how they and their foster carers interacted with the Letter Box parcels.

In February 2018 Gemma and Claire from Letter Box Club had visited the Horizons Centre. The foster carers had been asked to participate during this visit and had been involved with the contents of the parcels. The children reported that some foster carers knew about the books as they had seen the children reading them. Gemma and Claire showed the children in Junior Council and their foster carers how to play the Maths games.

SUBMISSIONS FROM JUNIOR COUNCIL: The Children wanted -

- foster carers and teachers to be introduced to the games; and
- the games to be made more accessible, yet still exciting, going forward so that more children and adults would know how to play them.

The Children reported that this year was the 59th year anniversary of the Letterbox Club and that they had been invited to take part in a video to demonstrate how to use the books, games and stationery. K, a previous Looked After Child who was no longer in Ealing, had been asked to participate in an interview for the video.

The Committee was pleased that the children were so excited by the contents of the Letterbox Club parcels. Councillor Bell asked when the video will be ready. Sian Hender responded that that was not yet clear and that it would probably be available online when ready.

7. Feedback from the Horizons ShoutOut Forum (Verbal Update)

Three Young People Representatives, spoke to the Committee about the financial hardships faced by many young people leaving care, particularly the risk of getting into debt and how this acts as a disincentive to unskilled young people leaving care to get into full time work. Since the last meeting, they had continued with their research in relation to the issue of care leavers and Council Tax exemption schemes, including the range of exemption schemes operated by other local authorities.

They explained that financial difficulties were faced by care leavers as they transitioned into adulthood, and moved to independent living and they advocated for the proposed Council Tax exemption to apply to care leavers up to the age of 25. They said this was necessary and would be more meaningful as between the ages of 18 -21, care leavers in fulltime education, those on some part-time courses and those on some types of apprenticeships already benefited from an exemption. Those aged 18 – 21 living in supported or temporary housing also already benefited as did those on housing benefits generally, within this age group.

The young People said that they would be attending meetings in City Hall on this topic as part of the Children in Care Council. The next such meeting is scheduled for 11th April 2018.

At this point, Cheryl Campbell, Deputy Manager at Horizons, mentioned that the Horizons ShoutOut Children in Care Council (HSCC) is also advising young people to get registered to vote as an important means of influencing local and national policies including those of support for care leavers.

Councillor Bell thanked the Young People Representatives for their excellent work.

Following the presentation by the Horizons ShoutOut Forum, Carol Yates gave her presentation on Council Tax Exemption (Item 12) as it was on the same topic.

12. Council Tax Exemption Presentation

Carol Yates gave the background to her report saying that at the last meeting, the Children in Care (CIC) Council had requested that members consider how they may provide additional support to Care Leavers by paying the costs of those eligible to pay council tax. At that meeting, the CIC Council had highlighted the pressure of those on low incomes and the difficulties and long term implications of getting into debt as a care leaver. Some of these points were reiterated at this meeting (as referred to under Item 7 above).

The CIC Council had highlighted other boroughs who have implemented this offer to care leavers. However, the calculations that had been put forward by the Children in Care Council covered only those who live in the borough of Ealing. Members had asked officers to consider the request and to take into account those placed out of borough in their considerations.

In addition to the exemptions mentioned under item 7 above, Carol stated that Ealing Council already pays the council tax for young people who fall into the category of Apprenticeships that are not exempt from Council Tax and for those care leavers with no recourse to public funds.

Carol said that as a result of the advocacy and arguments put forward by the CIC Council, Care leavers are now classed as vulnerable in the Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme and so would be entitled to 100% reduction from 1st April 2018 if they are on benefits.

If Care Leavers in this category are having difficulties this year i.e. 2017/18, as they would not yet be receiving the maximum reduction, they may be eligible to receive a payment from the hardship fund which may be able to pay off any outstanding debt. Carol also said that the CTS Service will also arrange for identified care leavers to be assisted by local welfare officers.

Carol said that the LAC team and the Leaving Care Team will be meeting with colleagues from Ealing's Council Tax Support Service on the 29th March to finalise those care Leavers that will meet the criteria for Council Tax

exemption. Gary and Jude from the Horizons Centre will also be attending that meeting.

From the current standpoint (care leavers aged between 18 and 21 years), it appears that those who would fall outside of the exemption will be those who have no recourse to public funds and those who are in employment.

In her report, Carol said that her team are recommending that council tax payment for those who are required to pay should be paid by the Council until young people's 21st birthday as part of the Ealing Leaving Care Offer. She confirmed costs will be circulated to members with a final recommendation following a meeting on 29th March.

In response to this, the young people from the Horizons ShoutOut Forum were emphatic that it would more meaningful for the exemption to apply up to the age of 25. They said Ealing Council had the authority to do this under section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

Carol Yates said she was open to discussion on increasing the age of the exemption up to age 25 however, Ealing Council had to think carefully about the cost involved. She said the funding gap for the exemption up to age 21 had been calculated to be between £30,000 and £40,000. Carol said if the proposed exemption to age 25 was implemented there would be 250 care leavers who would be brought into the scheme, in addition to the current 264 care leavers and the future 250 care leavers by year 4 of the new Act, which would be significant.

Carolyn Fair, Director, Children and Families and Judith Finlay, Executive Director, Children, Adults and Public Health expressed the view that some care leavers in the 21 – 25 age bracket were doing well, were in work and could afford to pay. They noted however, that it would be unfair to penalise those who could not. Carol Yates also pointed out that care leavers aged between 21 and 25 in full time education were exempt anyway.

At this point, one of the young people (C) mentioned that some 18 to 21 year olds were faced with a choice of getting a low-paid job and getting into debt or receiving benefits. He said this acted as a disincentive for them to find work.

Councillor Gulaid mentioned that some care leavers in education did not benefit from the council tax exemption because of the subjects they chose to study. This in turn was a fetter on the young people's freedom of choice in their subject area of study.

Carol Yates responded by saying that the exemption was not applied in some cases depending on the number of hours of study involved and not on the subjects. She said young people still had a free choice of subjects in studying.

Young person C said that the debt issue was also discouraging young people from getting work experience. They were already faced with fewer opportunities for work experience and apprenticeships. Councillor Gulaid said

he would always encourage young people to get at least a week's work experience.

Judith said Ealing Council wanted to be even-handed between people in work and those out of work and that they did not want to penalise care leavers. She encouraged Gary and Jude to work with the wider Connexions Service to help young people get work experience.

Councillor Binda Rai said the young people had done really well in advocating for something that would benefit all young people leaving care. This sentiment was echoed around the room. Carol Yates said they had also influenced partnership working in the Ealing Council namely: Children in Care Services, Council Tax and Employment Support.

Summing up Councillor Bell said that at the moment, the Committee would be aiming to secure an exemption up to the age of 21. He said he wanted to look at the details for both proposals (age 21 and age 25) and also comparative data on what other boroughs are doing. He said it was no doubt beneficial to the care leavers to have an exemption up to age 25, however as Carol and others had stated, some care leavers were doing well and could afford to pay and the costs of the proposal to the Council need to be finalised before a decision can be made.

Marcella Phelan, Assistant Director, Planning, Commissioning and Partnerships, made the point that if the exemption was implemented it would form part of Ealing Council's local offer to its care leavers which it is required to publish under new legislation, The Children and Social Work Act 2017. Under this legislation, Ealing Council was obliged to begin a consultation process with young people by 1st April 2018. She said they were on course to do this. Under the new legislation, Ealing Council is obliged to publish its Local Offer by December 2018. The responsibility for formulating and implementing the Local Offer would lie with the whole council.

Marcella said the results of the consultation would be brought to the June Committee meeting and a draft Local Offer for approval will be brought to the September Committee meeting.

RESOLVED that officers will:

- **report back to the Committee with findings from the meeting with the council tax department on 29th March 2018;**
- **provide comparative data on what other boroughs were doing;**
- **provide data on the costs involved in applying the exemption up to age 21 and up to age 25; and**
- **provide a proposal for means testing young people's eligibility for any exemption.**

Also resolved: In the meantime, the Council Leader and Lead Member will discuss with Officers how best to progress.

8. My Education (ME) Mentors Project Update (Verbal Update)

Z, a Lead Mentor and P, a Mentor, updated the Committee on the work of the ME Mentoring Project from January to March 2018 inclusive. They had held panel meetings each month with mentees and mentors and the mentees had had the opportunity to pose various questions to the mentors.

In order to make the Panels successful, several Mentor training sessions had also been held covering topics such as, self-evaluation, safeguarding, building rapport and the Code of Conduct.

P, a university student, spoke about her aspirations for the future and her motivations for being a mentor. She shared that she herself had benefitted from having a mentor.

Z said that she had continued to carry out outreach mentoring in an Ealing School on a weekly basis after school. She did further outreach mentoring on alternative Monday evenings to young people recommended by the Virtual School Teachers. In addition, Z informed the Committee that she also provides outreach mentoring via telephone to a more vulnerable young person. Z reported that the provision of mentoring online and via video link were also being considered. She stated that overall, the mentoring programme had reached 15 young people so far, this academic year.

Z, also mentioned that some of the Project's mentees also attend study support sessions every Wednesday at The Horizons Centre.

Z, ended by expressing gratitude to Councillor Patricia Walker for her visit to the Virtual School study support session yesterday. Z informed the meeting that this would be Councillor Walker's last Corporate Parent meeting as she was stepping down at the forthcoming council elections. Z thanked Councillor Walker for attending and supporting the Project's annual Education Awards over the years and for her ongoing support to looked after children (LAC) and care leavers.

Councillor Bell asked if there were any plans in place for other mentors to do outreach work so that more young people could benefit? Z stated that, at the moment, she was the only mentor doing outreach work.

Judith Finlay, Executive Director, Children, Adults and Public Health, asked whether outreach in other schools was being considered? Z, responded that Greenford High School was currently being considered. Judith said that any mentoring provision may be influenced by the number of LAC in the school and that some schools were more proactive than others in sourcing assistance for such children. Councillor Walker said some LAC designated teachers did not have the right information so the mentors in the ME Project were doing excellent work.

The Committee felt that the outreach work in schools was an excellent initiative and that P's story was inspirational. They thanked Z and P for the update.

RESOLVED: The Corporate Parent Committee noted the update.

9. Report on the Education of Looked After Children

Bridie McDonagh (Virtual School Head Teacher), reported that there are currently 38 young people in year 11. Three were at risk of not achieving any exams. There was a focus on these and on those at risk of not achieving English and Maths.

At Key Stage 2, 69% of the young people had SEN needs. 81% had been entered for SATS.

There were currently 48 young people studying at university. This year 18% of young people were going to university, compared to the national average of just 6%

Bridie also updated the Committee on the February 2018 Half Term Enrichment Programme – activities designed for children of various ages to complement and enhance the children's learning. Activities included Macbeth at the Rose Theatre, a writing workshop, a Music Day and a performance of the Hare and Tortoise at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith.

Councillor Walker asked whether Bridie felt that children presented as SEN as a result of early trauma and lack of attachment in their early years? Bridie responded that that could be a factor, however it may be difficult to assess if a child first entered the care system in Year 10.

Councillor Gulaid asked whether language was a barrier for some children waiting to be assessed for SEN? He commented that 70% of children with SEN are from an ethnic minority background. He said the types of questions asked in assessing whether a child met the SEN criteria were Eurocentric.

Judith agreed with this view although she also said that funding for a child's Education and Health Care (EHC) Plan was given based on delayed education for a number of years, not just on teachers' assessment. She said there was a link between exclusions and SEN and exclusions and vulnerability. Judith went on to acknowledge that a child was more likely to get an EHC Plan if their parents were white and middle class and could navigate the system and that BME children were disadvantaged in this.

RESOLVED: The Corporate Parent Committee noted the report and the tabled addendum to the report.

10. IRO Annual Report for LAC for year 2016/2017

Carol Yates drew the attention of the Committee to the fact that the Ofsted Inspection Report of 2016 had been positive about the IROs role and work in Ealing. In a small number of cases, the department had been asked to improve performance on the Life Story Work for the children. Ealing Council had taken measures to address this such as a conference on LSW organised for social workers, foster carers and Independent Reviewing Officers.

Carol stated that overall the views of the IROs on the service LAC received in Ealing were more positive compared to a few years ago and the majority of disputes that were received were dealt with at team level. Only one dispute was escalated to Director level.

Carol indicated to the Committee that the safeguarding team will be writing the annual report in future for this Committee to reflect an arms-length independence and to provide a quality assurance role.

RESOLVED: The Corporate Parent Committee noted the report.

11. Corporate Parenting Principles; Local Offer; Extending Personal Adviser Support to all care leavers to age 25

The Assistant Director Children's Services, Planning, Commissioning and Partnerships, Marcella Phelan, introduced her report that informed the Committee of changes in corporate parenting principles, including a requirement to publish a local offer to care leavers, and new responsibilities to extend support from local authority personal advisers to all care leavers up to the age of 25. In addition, there was a new requirement to expand the role of both designated teachers and Virtual School Heads, to include the provision of information and advice to certain previously looked after children and their families. She said her report was a useful summary of what the Corporate Parenting Role was about and would be useful for new councillors.

Marcella said from her recent meeting with the DfE, the objective of the new legislation was to focus attention in a difficult area by extending support to care leavers up to age 25, up from 21 years of age. She said that the responsibility of finding employment, accommodation and paying bills was too much at a young age for many care leavers without support. The most vulnerable young people aged 21 to 25 who were not in education and those struggling would now have a firmer legal basis to come to the Council for support. All young people up to age 25 would be informed that they can access that support.

The support would be offered from the Horizon Centre, overseen by Gary Odle. This would be an extension to the post age 20 support currently being offered.

There followed a discussion that there was limited finance available from central government to facilitate the Local Offer. However, there would be a

slightly increased offer after four years. Marcella said it was anticipated that a higher percentage of those young people that were not in employment, education or training (NEET) would be the ones to request this assistance (up to age 25).

Marcella said it was important for the Council to plan exactly what the Local Offer will be and how it will be publicised. Gary Odle and Carol Yates would lead the consultations with the Horizons ShoutOut Children in Care Council (HSCC). Different aspects of the Council's services would be involved in determining what would be in the Local Offer. For example, sports and leisure – colleagues would be consulted on the Leisure Pass. Additional personnel such as the Virtual School Head Teacher, Bridie McDonagh, would also be included.

Marcella said she anticipated that the Local Offer would be approved at the September meeting and published no later than December 2018 as required.

Resolved, that the Corporate Parent Committee:

1.1 note changes in corporate parenting responsibilities as set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

1.2 note the requirement to publish a local offer and extend personal adviser support to all care leavers aged up to 25 (currently ceases at age 21).

1.3 note revised responsibilities in relation to the role of the Virtual School head and the designated teachers.

1.4 ask Officers to consult with the Children in Care Councils and bring back further reports in June 2018 updating progress on the local offer and implementing the new requirements.

12. Council Tax Exemption Presentation

This has been minuted together with item 7 above.

13. Social Services Complaints Report on Looked After Children (September 2017 to December 2017)

Judith Finlay Executive Director, Adult and Children's Services introduced her report. A total of three (3) complaints had been received in the relevant period. They had all been dealt with at Stage 1, (informally) and none of them were upheld.

Resolved: The Corporate Parent Committee noted the report.

14. Management Information Summary – Children Looked After

Carolyn Fair introduced the report, which provided a Review of Performance Indicators for Children’s Services, under the Children & Families Performance Assessment Framework 2017/18, specifically the period April 2017 – February 2018.

RESOLVED: The Corporate Parent Committee noted the report.

In bringing the meeting to a close, the Chair thanked Councillor Patricia Walker for all her hard work for this Committee and noted that World Social Work Day on 20th March 2018 had been a success.

Judith Finlay informed the meeting also that Marcella Phelan had been awarded an MBE for services to young people in Ealing in the 2018 New Years Honours. This reflected both her local and national work in improving outcomes for care leavers. The meeting Congratulated Marcella on this impressive achievement.

15. Date of the Next Meeting

A date for the next meeting was not arranged, pending the outcome of the Council Elections on 3rd May 2018.

Chair..... (Councillor Julian Bell)

The meeting ended at 8:15 p m.