Present: Cllr Elizabeth Kangethe (Chair), Cllr Melanie Bartlett (Deputy Chair), Cllr Syed Ahammad, Cllr Simon Bremner, Cllr Irma Freeborn, Cllr Syed Ghani, Cllr Adegboyega Oluwole and Cllr Danielle Smith; Mrs Glenda Spencer, Mrs I Robinson, Ellen Grant and Johanna Finch

Also Present: Cllr Maureen Worby, Camran Ditta and Georgia Harley

Apologies: Cllr Josephine Channer

1. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Minutes - To confirm as correct the minutes of the meeting held on 20 March 2017

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 March 2017 were confirmed as correct, subject to the following caveats:

- The word ‘item’ had been misspelt as ‘iem’ in paragraph four, and the word ‘worship’, mistyped as ‘workshop’, in paragraph 16, of minute number 26.

3. Corporate Parenting - Annual Report

The Council’s Director of Operations for Children’s Care and Support (DOCCS) presented the Corporate Parenting Annual Report, which related to the work of the Corporate Parenting Group (CPG) of elected members and partner agencies from April 2016 to March 2017.

The report detailed the progress made in relation to the CPG and Corporate Parenting Strategy, the trends in relation to the children in care in 2016-17, the challenges in this area of work, the priorities for 2017-18, and the appendix to the report detailed the work undertaken in 2016 -17 to deliver the following five promises to children in care to:

- Make sure you get the best care;
- Look after you and treat you well;
- Help you be healthy;
- Get the best education; and
- Be successful in life.

Councillor Bartlett who was the current Chair of the CPG stated that she wished to take the opportunity to thank all staff who worked very hard to ensure looked after children were receiving the best care, and that she felt that corporate parenting was heading in a good direction due to their efforts.
A member asked the DOCCS why there had been a significant increase in special guardianship orders (SGO) over the years. The DOCCS stated that SGOS were introduced in 2004 in recognition of the fact that some people wanted to care for children on a long-term basis but would not consider adoption, which included individuals from communities who wanted a child to be in their care, but felt that an adoption order was not right for them. There had been many examples of adoption orders being challenged by family members who wanted to be granted parental responsibility for the child via an SGO. The courts were making SGO decisions in more cases even when adoption is proposed by social workers and this was a national pattern.

Councillor Worby, the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care Integration, thanked Councillor Bartlett and Councillor Channer (the previous Chair of the CPG) for their efforts in strengthening the Council's corporate parenting function. She stated that she wished to use the opportunity to remind members of this Committee that corporate parenting was the responsibility of every single member of the Council.

In response to a question, the DOCCS stated that there were two residential homes for looked after children within the borough; however, the Council did not own them.

**4. Improving the Council's Adoption Scorecard Performance - Proposed Final Scrutiny Report**

The Chair presented the proposed final version of the Committee’s scrutiny report on ‘Improving the Council’s Adoption Scorecard Performance’. Members noted that at the start of 2016-17 the Committee agreed to undertake a scrutiny review on the Council’s Adoption Service’s performance as the Service was not meeting the Department for Education’s Scorecard targets, which focussed on the process of placing children in adoptive families within certain timelines. As part of the review, members scrutinised performance data, talked to some professionals involved in adoption practice and met with an adopter and adoptee. The Committee noted that the scrutiny report made nine recommendations to Councillor Worby as the Cabinet Member for this area. In response to a question from the Chair, the Committee agreed to accept the report as the final version of the scrutiny report.

The Chair asked Councillor Worby whether she accepted the report and the recommendations and whether in six months’ time, she would report back to the Committee on the progress made on the recommendations. Councillor Worby thanked the Committee for the scrutiny review and stated that since she had taken on the children and young people portfolio as a Cabinet Member, the issue of the Council’s Adoption Scorecard Performance had been a significant concern. This concern was not directed at staff, whom she knew were extremely dedicated and hard-working; however, she felt that the Adoption Service needed to take on different approaches to improve its timeliness performance. She was not arguing for a change in the factors that make some children ‘harder to place’ than others but felt that the Council and the Adoption Service must recognise, for example, that whilst nationally, children from black or ethnic minority (BME) backgrounds were considered harder to place, half of the borough’s population was BME, and therefore, the notion that BME children needing an adoptive family were hard to...
place, did not feel correct to her. Furthermore, some of the factors behind the delay in finding adoptive families for harder to place children, referred to within the report, were common across local authorities across the country, and therefore, did not go far enough in explaining why the Council’s performance in particular was poor. It would be important to build on the CSSC’s scrutiny work and analyse further the reasons for poor performance to ensure that more children were being placed within DfE timescales, in order to have the best life outcomes. She accepted all the recommendations and would be pleased to report back to the CSSC in six months’ time on the progress made.

A member stated that the evidence showed that BME children and young people were harder to place and therefore the CSSC had made recommendations around recruiting more people to adopt such children. She asked whether the Council would continue to focus on the importance of finding families for BME and other harder to place children. Councillor Worby clarified that she accepted that BME children were harder to place; however, given that London, including this borough, had a high BME population, local authorities must make a greater effort in understanding the barriers preventing BME communities from adopting children and helping them to overcome them. The Strategic Director for Service Development and Integration (SDSDI) stated that many years ago, when the population of London was 90 percent White, it may have been an acceptable position to say that BME children were harder to place; however, this was no longer the case and whilst there was no obvious answer, the Council had to find a way forward for the sake of the children looking for adoptive families.

The Chair thanked all those who contributed to the scrutiny review including the officers who supported the Committee. She asked officers to note that a monitoring report on the progress of the recommendations was on the Committee’s 2017-18 Work Programme.

5. **Work Programme 2017-18**

The Committee noted a report on its proposed Work Programme for 2017-18, including three options for undertaking a small-scale scrutiny review and a recommendation that the Committee agree upon one area to review.

The Commissioning Director for Education (CDE) presented Option 1, ‘The Local Offer’, which would involve scrutinising the Council’s offer to children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities and their families, in terms of its ease of use and accessibility.

The Group Manager for Integrated Youth Services, 14-19 Participation & Engagement (GMIYS) presented Option 2, ‘How well is the Council playing its part in reducing the numbers of young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training and what more might it do?’

The Head of Universal Services (HUS) presented Option 3, ‘How well are libraries supporting children’s reading inclusively, and what more can they do?’

In response to a member’s question, the CDE stated that the above options were chosen by directors in children’s services, based on their knowledge and experience of where scrutiny may add value, which indirectly included outcomes of
various consultations with children and young people. The member stated that according to her recollection, in previous years, the Committee involved young people more directly in the process for selecting topics for scrutiny review. The Democratic Services Officer (DSO) clarified that the process used for proposing topics for scrutiny review to the Committee this year was similar to that used last year, in that officers agreed three topics to put forward for consideration, members were asked to review these options and agree upon one. The Chair stated that two young people, who represented the Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum (BADYF), were present at today’s meeting and the Committee would very much wish to hear their thoughts and opinions on which topic should be selected for scrutiny review. She also clarified that if members or the young people wished to suggest alternative areas for scrutiny review (to that proposed in the report), they were welcome to do so; however, the Committee could only take forward one area for review.

Councillor Worby stated that a number of Cabinet members had undertaken a focussed piece of work on improving NEET provision and outcomes, which had resulted in a number of very challenging targets for the Council. She urged the Committee to look carefully at this work in order to supplement it and avoid duplication, should the Committee be minded to agree upon Option 2 as the area to review.

In response to questions, the GMIYS stated that:
- The Council did offer work experience and apprenticeship opportunities to young people. This had declined over the years but is now set to increase again following an internal directive, and
- Young people who had left care were considered care-leavers up to the age 21 (25 if undertaking a degree), or 25 if disabled; and
- Attendance at drop-in sessions for young people was going up but it could be better as there were a number of ‘no-shows’. However, the borough engages with a large number of other organisations and services that come together in a provider forum, which creates a good network of potential opportunities for young people.

In response to questions from members, the HUS stated that the borough’s libraries did offer a limited range of e-books in recognition of that fact that young people’s usage of technology had increased greatly in recent times. However, the offer was very limited in terms of children’s e-books and this was down to the market, and not out of choice. Furthermore, the Service did not have the ability to measure the activities children were doing on electronic devices, for example, they could be playing games instead of reading. The Service had undertaken a project with young people called ‘insight into management’ which involved two groups of young people being challenged to come up with ideas on how to use technology to enhance young people’s reading. One of the ideas was an application whereby staff could engage with children on reading.

The Chair of the BADYF stated that in his experience, the lack of reading amongst young people was not always down to the lack of technology in libraries. He felt there was a marked difference between encouragement received in primary schools to read and secondary school. The Deputy Chair of the BADYF stated that reading was not always made enjoyable in school and the pressure of being tested and examined for several different subjects, including maths and science, meant
that reading was not always prioritised by teachers or pupils. Smartphones were now an integral part of young people’s lives so perhaps this technology could be utilised more to encourage reading. A lot of books in schools were boring or in poor condition. She felt strongly that reading should be made a priority from a young age and made more enjoyable.

Both young people felt that an alternative topic of support for young people to deal with stress at school should be considered. The SDSDI stated that whilst she recognised that this may be an important area to consider, it would involve a wide remit, and therefore it would be challenging to do it justice this year, which would see all committee work come to a halt earlier than usual, due to the local elections in May 2018. She stated that this area could be considered for scrutiny review in the 2018-19 municipal year. A co-optee suggested that if this area were to be taken forward in 2018-19, this work should also look at transition from primary to secondary school, which often involved stress for a lot of young people.

After discussions, the Committee agreed to undertake a small-scale scrutiny review on Option 2, ‘How well is the Council playing its part in reducing the numbers of young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training and what more might it do?’ The Chair asked officers to produce a scoping report for the review and share this with the Committee as soon as possible so that the work to progress the review could start soon. The GMIYS agreed to share the report arising from the work Cabinet members had undertaken with the CSSC.

With regards to the proposed Work Programme for the year, which listed one-off reports for consideration, the Chair asked the Committee to note that the report, ‘Feedback from Cabinet on progress of Growth Commission recommendations prioritised by the CSSC in 2016’ had been included in the draft Work Programme for the November CSSC meeting in error, and that should any CSSC member be interested in this report, it would be going to Cabinet in September 2017.

Members agreed the inclusion of the other proposed items on the draft Work Programme.

The Chair stated that if any member had further suggestions for the Work Programme in terms of one-off reports, they should contact the DSO and the CSE.

The Chair asked the DSO to include the Cabinet Forward Plan in all CSSC agenda papers going forward so that members could consider whether there were any items on it which fell within the Committee’s remit, that may benefit from pre-decision scrutiny.