MINUTES OF
CHILDREN'S SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE

Monday, 14 March 2016
(6:33 - 8:35 pm)

Present: Cllr John White (Chair), Cllr Simon Bremner, Cllr Edna Fergus, Cllr Elizabeth Kangethe and Cllr Moin Quadri, Mrs I Robinson and Tracy MacDonald

Also Present: Daniel Agyei and Elizabeth Lewis

Apologies: Cllr Melanie Bartlett, Cllr Danielle Smith and Suriyaa Gnanapandithan

22. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

23. Co-optees on the Children’s Services Select Committee

The Lead Member, Councillor White, stated that since the circulation of the agenda pack for tonight’s meeting, Mrs Toluwalope Elizabeth Dahunsi had resigned from her position as a parent governor of Village Infants’ Primary School, which automatically vacated her from the position of Co-optee (representing primary school parent governors) on the Children’s Services Select Committee (CSSC). Officers would seek nominations for the vacant position and if necessary, conduct an election to fill it in the coming months.

The Lead Member also stated that the new Youth Representative Co-optee on the CSSC was now Suriyaa Gnanapandithan, who was elected as the Chair of the Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum in February 2016. The Group Manager for Integrated Youth Services, 14-19 Participation and Engagement, gave apologies for Mr Gnanapadithan as he was not able to attend the meeting, and introduced Daniel Agyei and Elizabeth Lewis, (both Deputy Chairs of the Forum) to members. Mr Agyei and Ms Lewis would endeavour to attend CSSC meetings alongside or in place of Mr Gnanapandithan to represent the Forum’s views and support the Committee’s scrutiny function.

Members welcomed Mr Agyei and Ms Lewis and the Lead Member asked Mr Agyei and Lewis to feel free to participate in the CSSC’s discussions in meetings.

24. Minutes - To confirm as correct the minutes of the meeting held on 18 January 2016

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 January 2016 were confirmed as correct.

25. Update from Communications Team on recommendation made as a result of school visits

The Committee noted the report which provided an outline of the implementation of a recommendation made by the Children’s Services Select Committee (CSSC) in 2015 following visits to three primary schools in the borough to support
members understand best practice in school improvement.

A representative of the Council’s Marketing and Communications Team was not in attendance to present the report and the Chair asked the Democratic Services Officer to follow this up.

26. The Prevent Strategy and Duty

The Council’s Prevent Coordinator (PC) delivered a presentation on “The Prevent Duty and Strategy” which covered the following issues:

- Aims and Objectives
- What is Prevent?
- The Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 and the duty on specified authorities
- The Prevent Strategy and Steering Group
- Safeguarding
- Prevent in Schools
- Home Office funded projects
- “Second Wave”
- “Identity, Belonging and Extremism” (IBE).

A member stated that in the past it did not always come across that Prevent was about tackling all forms of extremism and not just targeted as Muslims. She asked whether teachers and other professionals would use the same process for all forms of extremism. The PC stated that Prevent does tackle all forms of extremism and there is no difference in the referral process so professionals would use the same process and had received training on this. He stated that locally we need to be just as aware of the issues around far-right extremism. The Corporate Director of Children’s Services (CDCS) stated that the material used and the examples provided to professionals in their training made it clear that extremism could take different forms.

Members expressed concern that people could be labelled an extremist for holding views which were unconventional (as opposed to extremist) and asked what guidance professionals had to help distinguish between an extremist and someone who held views that were not in conformity with the majority of people. The PC stated that the Prevent guidance was clear; in the context of the Prevent Strategy, extremism meant inciting people to violence or committing acts of violence in the name of a particular ideology, although there is a requirement to consider “non-violent” extremism and how this can create an atmosphere conducive to violent extremism.

Members asked whether people working on the Prevent agenda could identify the “root cause” of extremism. The PC stated that “specified authorities,” who had a duty to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism, did not have a responsibility to find out the root cause of extremism as this was a very complex issue with many different facets; however, people who worked on Prevent nationally did undertake research on counter extremism ideology as part of their role and would therefore also consider the root causes of terrorism. The PC added that one terrorist attack could actually fuel other forms of terrorism, for example, after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, far-right groups in Europe
saw an increase in their following.

Members asked whether those who supported the Prevent agenda in the borough ensured that young people could talk to their teachers and other professionals in an open way about issues related to extremism, without fearing repercussions. The PC stated that this was a very important part of Prevent training; schools should be a safe place for children to put across their views and ask questions about issues that they may have come across. However; if a young person made a disclosure to a teacher that was concerning, the training teachers received, ensured that the teacher would know the appropriate steps to take to safeguard the young person.

Mr Agyei asked what schools were doing to promote a shared identity and shared values as he felt that a loss of a sense of belonging could lead to people falling into extremism. The PC stated that the Government had introduced the requirement upon schools to teach “British Values” as part of the curriculum which promoted values such as democracy, tolerance and respect for the law. Some schools preferred to use other terms for these lessons such as “shared values” as the term of “British Values” was perceived by some people to be controversial. The CDCS stated that many schools in the borough had a very strong sense of a school community, which reflected wider society, and promoted a sense of belonging and identity in young people, which was very important.

Councillor Kangethe stated that as a primary school teacher she worried about how much information to share with young people, as some young people were very inquisitive and information provided to them may trigger them to carry out their own research, which in turn, could expose them to material or content that was inappropriate or dangerous. The PC stated that ultimately, adults would need to have a degree of trust in young people and show that they expected good standards of behaviour from them. The law allowed flexibility to schools with regards to how they should discharge the Prevent duty. The Council’s training programme advised schools to improve young people’s critical thinking skills which involved challenging and deconstructing an argument to see their weaknesses.

In response to a question about the specific duty imposed on schools by the Prevent Strategy, the PC stated that Prevent was a strand of the Government’s wider counter-terrorism strategy, “Contest”, which had four strands; Pursue, Prevent, Protect And Prepare. There were three objectives to the Prevent strand of this strategy, which were to:

i. Respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat from those who promote it;
ii. Prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they are given appropriate advice and support; and,
iii. Work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation that need to be addressed.

Members asked whether the scope of the duty imposed on specified authorities, but particularly in relation to schools, was correct. The CDCS stated that there were questions around whether the scope of the duty should be wider to include greater understanding of conflict and other cultures. She cited the example of three teenage girls who attended a secondary school in Tower Hamlets whom it was believed had left the UK to go to Syria after becoming radicalised. She stated
that the school in question did have measures in place to meet the duty, which demonstrated the importance of schools also putting in place broader measures to create a sense of belonging and identity, e-safety guidance and understanding of modern media.

Members asked the PC how young people potentially at risk of radicalisation who were not in school or college would be safeguarded. The PC stated that a range of local partners were deemed to be “specified authorities” which included health organisations, the Police, Social Services, as well as other council departments, which meant that there was a range of professionals who were trained to take appropriate action if they came into contact with a young person who they felt was at risk of radicalisation.

In response to comments, the PC stated that it was very important for professionals and the Prevent Strategy Steering Group to distinguish between individuals who needed information and support and those who were inciting or committing acts of violence.

In response to comments, the CDCS stated that there was a strong cohesive approach locally to meet the Prevent duty; for example, the Local Safeguarding Children Board (which comprised a range of local representatives) had recently discussed the Prevent duty and emphasised the need to use the safeguarding process to refer concerns.

Ms Lewis asked whether there were local schemes to inform parents of the risks of radicalisation as she felt this would support the Prevent agenda. The PC stated that there were no projects for parents generally, and it was down to schools to keep parents informed of the measures they were taking place to meet the Prevent duty. There were local community programmes that were targeted at certain groups but it was necessary to make them more accessible to ensure they were successful.

Mr Agyei stated that there were many different variations of the Islamic faith and asked what was being done locally to distinguish between extremist versions of Islam and Islam as a whole. The PC stated that it was very important for local organisations not to define different variations or sects in Islam as part of their processes for meeting the duty, as people should be free to practice their faith without facing stigma or prejudice. Organisations should only be concerned with any ideologies which incite violence. It was also very important to ensure that the aims of the Prevent Strategy were communicated to the local community effectively, so that it was clear that it existed to tackle extremism in all communicates, not just the Muslim community.

The PC stated that the Safer and Stronger Community Select Committee would consider the draft local prevent strategy in July 2016 and it would then be put to the Cabinet for agreement.

Members thanked the PC for his presentation.

Councillor Moin Quadri left the meeting at this point.
27. Children's Services' Social Care Ambition and Financial Efficiency (SAFE) Programme

The CDCS presented a report on the Social Care Ambition and Financial Efficiency (SAFE) Programme, which detailed the key areas and a number of work streams identified to drive down costs in Children’s Services. She stated that since the SAFE Programme was agreed by Cabinet in October 2015, the Children’s Services Department was targeted with reducing spend by £3.5 million but had managed only £2.5 million so far. It was a very challenging target for a time period of only six months. She emphasised the importance of finding the savings safely so that the Council could continue to effectively safeguard children and young people but added that the need to reduce spend was also crucial.

The CDCS provided a detailed explanation and update of each work stream, including:

- Numbers of children in social care – the aim of this work stream was to reduce the numbers of children in social care with a view to reducing the number of social workers. The saving target had not been achieved but social workers’ caseloads were now more manageable and closer to the target caseload per staff ratio of one to 20.

- Agency staff to permanent; there had been a big reduction in May 2015 in the number of agency social workers used but there was still a shortfall in achieving the target. A project with PENNA aimed at recruiting more permanent social workers had not been successful; although the number of people applying for permanent posts had increased as a result of the project, the people applying were not of the right calibre.

- Commissioning – there had been reductions in residential costs but this had been very challenging to achieve partly due to the risk of child sexual exploitation; some looked after girls were in inappropriate relationships with older men and could not understand, despite intervention, why they could not continue to be in the relationship and therefore, residential placements were the only way to safeguard them. The Service was way off target for this work stream as there had been an increase in the number of looked after children which lead to approximately 40 external foster carers being recruited to meet demand.

- LAC 18+ accommodation and subsistence - this work stream had been relatively successful; however, the availability of accommodation was fast shrinking and there were serious concerns that it would be extremely challenging to meet the target for this next year.

- Reduction in referrals - the aim for this work stream was not to make direct savings but to reduce the number of referrals to social care made by the Police. Police referrals to Tier 2 services had been reduced by 20% which had had a positive impact on the Assessment teams.

- Service restructure and other staff - the Department was significantly behind in achieving this target; when it reduced staff in the Assessment Team, it saw a rise in referrals, making it very difficult to achieve the target.

- SEN transport savings - a review of the criteria used to determine eligibility for the service, consultation with the Just Say Parents’ Forum and better contracts with taxi providers ensured that this work stream had been successful.

- Reduction of families with no recourse to public funds - a saving higher than
the target had been achieved as a result of reducing costs and using a fraud investigator.

- Legal and CSC integrated working – this saving had not yet been achieved; however, the business case for recruiting two in-house Counsel had been approved and recruitment was underway which would help achieve it.
- Move “Assessed and Supported Year in Employment” (AYSE) social workers into social work teams – this target had been achieved by moving newly qualified social workers to substantive roles.
- Reframe Pitstop – this target was achieved. Pitstop was reconfigured earlier than planned.

Members asked why agency staff, generally, did not wish to become permanent Council employees. The CDCS stated that this was because they would earn less and also because, in the event that something went seriously wrong with any of the cases they were working on, they would find it relatively easier to move on and carry on working by joining another agency. The Council had introduced measures to attract more permanent staff, such as introducing a housing scheme for “key workers”. It would also consider offering more competitive salaries for independent reviewing officers, with a view to saving money in the long term by using less agency staff, should the move be successful in attracting more permanent social workers.

Co-optee, Ingrid Robinson, asked whether foster carers could be utilised differently and treated like professionals, for example, they could undertake joint training with social workers. The CDCS stated that the Council had an excellent relationship with its foster carers with a range of training courses available to meet their different needs. Other members commented that ultimately, the foster carer’s role was to care for the children and young people in their care and that they may not have the scope to take on wider responsibilities.

The CDCS stated that the Children’s Services Department would struggle immensely to find the savings identified for 2016/17. Members of the Council would have to make some extremely difficult decisions with the Council needing to make £70 million worth of savings overall between now and 2020. The SAFE report would be presented to the Public Accounts and Audit Select Committee for further scrutiny in about a week’s time.

Councillor Simon Bremner left the meeting at this point.

28. Recommendations arising from workshop on Corporate Parenting

The Chair introduced a report listing a number of recommendations aimed at raising further awareness and strengthening all Council members’ knowledge of the Council’s corporate parenting functions, which arose from a workshop with CSSC members in January 2016. Members agreed the 10 recommendations appended to the report. Councillor White agreed to oversee the recommendations which members would need to implement and asked the CDCS to oversee the implementation of recommendations which officers would need to make.

29. Answers to questions on Corporate Parenting

The CDCS presented a report providing answers to a list of questions posed by the CSSC at a meeting on 16 November 2015 in relation to the Council’s
performance on looked after children (LAC).

In response to comments the CDCS stated that White British children were over-represented in the LAC, Troubled Families and under-achieving children cohorts. Furthermore, the borough’s children’s centres overall, found it harder to engage with White British families and, White British people were over-represented in statistics relating to domestic violence and alcohol related crime. A discussion took place on the possible reasons for this, which included historical reasons such as previous local industries requiring low skilled workers which lead to a paucity of ambition, the breaking-up of families and the related lack of support, low literacy rates and social class.