8. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

9. Minutes - To confirm as correct the minutes of the meeting held on 18 July 2016

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

Councillor Bartlett referred to minute 3 of this meeting which related to the Committee’s selection of a number of recommendations from a wider pool of recommendations made by the Growth Commission designed to help the borough grow. Councillor Bartlett asked how the Committee would know whether the Cabinet had agreed to take forward the Committee’s selected recommendations. The Democratic Services Officer stated that a report was currently being drafted to inform the Cabinet of the recommendations selected by this Committee as well as those selected by the Living and Working and Public Accounts and Audit Select Committees and this report would include the detail around the timeline for feeding back to the Select Committees and which of the selected recommendations would be taken forward and why.

10. Update on Corporate Parenting Recommendations and Performance Measures

The Chair opened the item by stating that in January this year, the Children’s Services Select Committee (CSSC) held a workshop to consider how the Council could further raise awareness of its corporate parenting function across the Council membership. One of the recommendations was that all the select committees should receive a report on looked after children, at least once a year, as this area was relevant to all the select committees in some way and also, this would raise the profile of corporate parenting amongst councillors. To give effect to this recommendation, all the chairs of the other select committees had been invited to today’s meeting. The Chair welcomed Councillor Alexander, Chair of the Safer and Stronger Community Select Committee, who was in attendance for this purpose.

The Operational Director for Children’s Care and Support (ODCCS) presented the report which updated the CSSC on the implementation of the other
recommendations made during the workshop in January 2016 and provided detail on the Council’s performance in relation to looked after children in the following areas:

- Numbers of Children in Care
- Where Children in Care are Placed
- Placement Stability
- Data on Gender, Ethnicity and Age
- Health of Children in Care
- Education Attainment
- Education, Employment and Training for Young People, and
- Suitable Accommodation.

(Councillor Phil Waker, Chair of the Living and Working Select Committee, joined the meeting during the above presentation).

In response to questions the ODCCS stated that:
- Members could be provided with the statistics on the number of looked after children who were placed in neighbouring boroughs and the (anonymised) details of which universities the 22 care leavers, referred to in the report, were attending in 2015-16; and
- The Council did not produce guides for children and their families going through the social care process in different languages due to the cost this would entail.

Councillor Bartlett recalled a previous report to the CSSC which stated that there was an issue involving a looked after child who was asked to attend their health check during school time, which the child felt uncomfortable with, as they did not wish for their peers to identify them as a looked after child. She asked whether social workers were now informed of the need to avoid health checks during school time. The ODCCS stated that this issue had been resolved for this young person and there had been no further health checks scheduled during school time.

In response to questions the ODCCS stated that:
- Once a child is made the subject of a special guardianship order, he or she is no longer considered a child looked after by the local authority;
- When it is in the child’s best interest, the Council will try to ensure that each looked after child is with a foster carer for as long as possible to provide placement stability; and
- The children who were the subject of the report were Barking and Dagenham children, some of whom were placed within the borough, and some in neighbouring boroughs.

In response to a question the Group Manager for Looked after Children, Adoption and Prevention Services (GMLAPS) stated that the Council recruits its own foster carers and performs relatively well in this regard. Some of these foster carers live in the neighbouring boroughs of Redbridge and Havering, which often worked to the children’s advantage as the homes in these boroughs are generally larger than homes in Barking and Dagenham, which means that sibling groups can often remain together.
The Deputy Chair of the BAD Youth Forum (BADYF) asked what the factors are that affect looked after children’s educational attainment, whether the Council offers additional support to looked after children to help them succeed in school, and whether officers envisage the gap between looked after children and other children closing soon. The ODCCS stated that the factors affecting looked after children’s attainment are often multiple and complex, ranging from childhood abuse, neglect and genetic factors such as learning difficulties. She stated that all looked after children have a ‘Personal Education Plan’ which is reviewed regularly and that there is a ‘Virtual School Head’ who is responsible for promoting the educational achievement of all the children looked after by the Council. The Commissioning Director, Education (CDE) stated that the Council employs two advisory teachers who support schools with the education of looked after children. Furthermore, all schools must have at least one designated teacher for looked after children and some funding can be targeted towards supporting looked after children’s attainment. She added that generally, looked after children do better if they come into the Council’s care at a younger age and attend local schools; however, despite the interventions mentioned, it is difficult to say whether the gap would close soon as this is a very challenging area for local authorities and schools, at a time of very limited resources.

In response to a question officers stated that the children referred to in the report who were not in what was deemed to be ‘suitable accommodation’ were in, for example, custody, and that in each case the Council was satisfied that the youth court was right to sentence the young person to custody, due to the serious nature of the offence committed by the young person, which indicated that he or she was a danger to themselves and/or other people.

Members alluded to the high rates of offending in the looked after children population nationally and asked what the Council was doing to ensure a partnership approach to reducing re-offending rates in this group. Officers stated that there is a multi-agency team who focus on reducing re-offending which is comprised of staff who work in the Police, the NHS and the Council. The multi-agency team work closely with the young people who are still classed as looked after when they are released from custody on programmes designed to prevent them re-offending.

11. Scrutiny Review on Adoption: Updated Scoping Report, Presentation on Scorecard Performance and Videos

As agreed at the last CSSC meeting, the ODCCS presented a revised scope report for the Scrutiny Review on Adoption. Members agreed that the review be entitled ‘Improving the Council’s Scorecard Performance’ and that the terms of the Review should be:

1. What is adoption and why is it a good outcome for some children in care?
2. Why is the Barking and Dagenham Adoption Scorecard performance off target and are officers taking the right action to address the issues?
3. How might the views and experience of those adopted and those who adopt help improve our practice?
4. How might the views and experience of others involved in the adoption process help improve our practice?
Members also agreed the work plan within the report which would help members obtain the evidence for the Review, together with the documents listed in the report under ‘background information’, and any additional research carried out by officers and members.

The ODCCS stated that the GMLAPS would now deliver a presentation constituting the first substantive item of this Review, which would set the context to the Council’s Adoption Scorecard performance. Her presentation covered the following areas:

- What is adoption?
- The Government Agenda
- What is the Adoption Scorecard?
  - A1 Performance
  - A2 Performance
- Case examples of children adopted; and
- What are we doing to improve performance?

Members were shown a video entitled “A birth mother, an adoptee, a social worker and adoptive parents share their stories”.

In response to questions the GMLAP stated that:
- Staff in her team did work with pregnant mothers who wished for their unborn child to be adopted straight after birth. Barnardo’s charity also provided counselling to these women and some women did change their mind and wish to keep the baby.
- Recruitment of adopters in the East London Adoption Consortium had reduced recently due to the high rate of recruitment by adoption agencies. The Council undertook a lot of work with the Consortium on recruitment, including taking part in recruitment days four times a year.
- The Council’s Housing department did work with her team around the suitability of accommodation for families who had adopted and would provide advice as appropriate.
- Lottery funding would not be available for council adoption services as it would not meet the criteria; however, the Council can apply for other types of funding, such as funding for counselling.
- Her team would come to a view on whether adoption was the best plan for a child. If the child remained in foster care, this would not affect the Council’s Scorecard performance; however, the Council must prioritise the best interests of the child over the impact on the Scorecard. As the Council had a very high number of hard to place children, this was an issue for the Council. This matter had been put to the Department for Education. In this regard, as the borough’s child population rises, officers predict that the Council’s Scorecard performance will worsen, as it is expected that the cohort of hard to place children will increase.

In response to a question, the ODCCS stated that the ‘Scorecard clock’ starts ticking as soon as the child comes into the Authority’s care.

Councillor Worby, the Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health Integration, stated that she hoped this scrutiny review would support the Council gather the
evidence to challenge the Department for Education on the targets placed on the Council, which did not take into account the local context behind the Council’s scorecard performance. The CDE added that it would be important for members to establish, for these purposes, what the Council’s performance was for non-hard to place children and the ODCCS stated that this information would be provided as part of the review. The Strategic Director for Service Development and Improvement stated that at the end of the scrutiny review process, the CSSC would make recommendations around some of these issues, expressing its view on, for example, whether the Council should continue to look for an adoptive family for children in care and in what circumstances.

In response to a question the ODCCS stated that the Adoption team included a specially trained member of staff who would talk to the children about what adoption means, and whether they wish to maintain contact with their siblings (if adopted by another family), and birth parents, usually through letters.

The Chair thanked officers for the presentation.


The CDE outlined a report on the Educational Excellence Everywhere White Paper which briefed the Children’s Services Select Committee on the implications of two key elements for schools and the Council; namely, the expectation that every school will be an academy by 2022 (with the assumption that most are in multi-academy trusts) and the removal of local authority duties for school improvement and the consequent removal of the Education Support Grant.

Members expressed concern that there may be a possibility that some schools would not prepare adequately in time for these changes and asked what the consequences would be for them. The CDE stated that for any schools who did not comply with the Government’s requirements to convert to an academy trust by 2022, the Government would make the decision for them.

Members referred to the recent media attention on the issue of grammar schools and asked what the Council’s position was on this issue. The CDE stated that this Council was committed to comprehensive education as there was no overriding evidence that selection helps poorer children to achieve.

The Deputy Chair of the BADYF asked whether option three in the report, which would see the Council’s school improvement service move to a wholly Council owned traded service, was the best choice for the service, given that it was the closest to the status quo. The CDE stated that whilst she acknowledged this, the Government did not intend for councils to retain their current role and therefore, the service would need to adapt to this change and look at ways to continue its influence by becoming a schools’ led service, working in partnership with the Council.

In response to a question, the CDE stated that one school so far had formally started the process of converting to a multi-academy trust and others were looking to their partnerships for a steer on how to start their journeys.
13. **Work Programme**

The Work Programme was noted.