Present: Cllr Elizabeth Kangethe (Chair), Cllr Melanie Bartlett (Deputy Chair), Cllr Irma Freeborn, Cllr Syed Ghani, Cllr Adegboyega Oluwole and Cllr Danielle Smith; Mrs I Robinson

Apologies: Cllr Simon Bremner Mrs Glenda Spencer

18. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interests.

19. Minutes - 6 December 2016

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 December 2016 were confirmed as correct.

20. Social Care and Education Performance

Cllr Smith, Cllr Bartlett and Cllr Oluwole arrived during this item.

The Commissioning Director, Children’s Care and Support presented the report, which gave an overview of the Council’s performance for those service areas in children’s social care and education that were rated ‘Amber’ or ‘Red’, the details of which were set out in the report. The Director advised that there were two distinct periods of performance: the first covered the social care annual calendar reporting year and the second was the 2016 academic year. The performance ratings were based upon the analysis of the latest quartile benchmark position nationally, and where appropriate regionally, and the report also included the direction of travel towards improvement or decline in performance.

The Committee noted that the information in the performance reports was a tool to assist it to focus on the areas it should prioritise its future scrutiny work programme.

The Committee discussed a number of issues and attention was drawn to:

- Looked after children (LAC) with up-to-date health checks - (section 2.4 of the report)

  Achievement of 72% at end of November 2016, 77% at the end of January and the predicted 90% target end of year. Councillors requested clarification in how the Health Check results were benchmarked.

  The Committee was advised that the assessment definition applied to all Councils and that the assessments process had two stages. The first part was the health check, which generally was undertaken before a child had been in foster care for five weeks, and the second stage was when the health check report itself was quality checked. The health check could not be counted as completed until both parts had been undertaken. There was a good working
relationship with local health partners and work was ongoing with the Director of Public Health and Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to reduce any delays in the return of the paperwork. The quality checks were needed as the health visitors and school nurses were going through the learning curve which any new process brings. For LAC, the initial health checks are done by our own paediatrician. It was noted that despite encouragement some young people, especially the older ones, do refuse to go for a health check. Whilst health check refusals were recorded by the Council, the Department of Education only class them as being either done or not done.

The health checks and paperwork returns were also traditionally affected by peaks and troughs, such as the school / public holidays. Officers stressed that it did not mean that a significant number of LAC had not had their health checks, but that the paperwork follow-up was still in progress, and they did not have any concerns about the 90% target being achieved by the end of the year.

Health checks for LAC placed outside the Borough would be undertaken by the CCG where they were living.

It was noted that the health check indicators and CCG performance were being tracked and carefully monitored by the LBBD Health and Wellbeing Board.

- **Education performance**  
  (section 2.5 of the report)
  The Commissioning Director Education commented that whilst the report centred on issues of performance concern, there were many areas where overall performance had shown improvement consistently over recent years or was good.

  The Director drew attention to two key areas for improving performance; focus on reading at age 11 and mathematics at age 16.

  In response to a question the Director advised that recruitment of Mathematics and Science teachers was particularly challenging, locally and nationally. Recruiting more experienced teachers was particularly hard, as the costs of living in the London area are becoming prohibitive, especially for teachers with families.

  In response to a question about the literacy skills of parents, the Director advised that the Adult College offered some classes that could assist adults to read or build literacy skills. There were also some electronic software applications (Apps) that track a child’s reading progress and so would assist parents know how their child was progressing. The Director would circulate details of one example developed in LBBD to Councillors.

- **Average Progress 8 –**  
  (section 2.5 of the report)
  In response to a question from Councillors, it was noted that the performance was not specifically LAC but for all children.

  Officers explained how the ‘basket of 8’ subjects were made up and how it was
unclear exactly how they would be benchmarked against previous performance as the new measure were about the flight path of learning progress from the start point of each individual child and not against the average performance of their peers. The Commissioning Director, Children’s Care and Support advised that he would circulate further information to the Committee which explained this further. What was clear was that parents were having some difficulty understanding this new measure.

It was noted that many parents and employers also appear confused about the new 1 to 9 GCSE gradings, especially after many years of being converse with the A*-C etc. GCSE exam markings.

The Commissioning Director Education, reminded the Committee of the Virtual School for Looked After Children and its Virtual Head would support and challenge individual schools and would also put in additional tutoring, if required, to support young people to improve their grades.

- **GCSE National Performance Measures**
  (section 2.5 of the report)
  Councillors asked what was being done to help students understand the new grade changes.

  The Commissioning Director Education, advised that schools were trying to explain and inform children and parents of the changes. The Director also explained the impact of the grade changes, including how it appeared because the new Grade 5 is harder to get than the current Grade C this could result in a potential 20% drop in overall achievement on the headline performance under the new system. This is speculation though as there is still some uncertainty on how this new system would work.

- **The percentage of 16 to 18 year olds who are not in education employment or training (NEETS)**
  (section 2.6 of the report)
  Councillors asked officers to explain what was being done in this area to ensure we achieve national average performance and our target as a Council.

  The Commissioning Director Education, advised that the NEETs target was still a challenge, but stressed that progress over recent years had been significant and reminded the Committee that in Nov – Jan 2013 the NEET and Unknown average had been poor at 13.7%. The current performance at the end of Quarter 3 was of 8.2% but if performance continued to improve at its current pace achievement should be in line or close to the national average when the January 2017 figures are published. A workshop had been held with schools and officers to robustly look at what more could be done to target and reduce the number of potential NEETs. This had included consideration of what the Council could do to encourage participation in training or work. The Committee noted that Councillors were now asking in other arenas what the Council could do with regards to putting resources behind positive change, and Officers were now investigating a number of potential options.

  Councillors were advised that the Council was looking at how they can use the Apprenticeship Levy. The details on how the levy would operate in practice
was still being clarified. However, it was hoped that some apprenticeships could be held for LAC / care leavers.

- **The percentage of care leavers in suitable accommodation**  
  (section 2.3 of report)  
  Councillors asked what support was given to care leavers moving into their own accommodation and if the accommodation was affordable and in which area it was provided.

  The Director of Operations, Children’s Care and Support advised that young people advisors were in place to offer continued support to care leavers. One of the things the Director was keen to develop in the future was the provision of a training flat where the young person could live for up to three weeks before leaving their placement. The Director indicated that she believed this would help acclimatise the care leaver to independence and the issues of being in a home of their own, including practical things like energy meters and bill payments. When the care leavers are given a tenancy, it could be short-term but the Council do tend to provide longer-term tenancies. The Group Manager, Looked After Children, Adoption, Fostering and Prevention reminded the Committee that the Council had responsibility for LAC until they are 21 years of age, therefore, the Council tries to make connections with good landlords that can offer a secure longer-term tenancy. This was because the upheaval of moving every six to 12 months would be particularly difficult for LAC who need as much stability as possible as they step forward into independent adulthood. In some instances, any shortfall between benefits and market rents could be met until the LAC was ready and able to sustain a social tenancy.

  It was noted that work was being undertaken, in conjunction with Officers in Growth and Homes, to identify and stimulate the local housing market for social tenancies for people with learning difficulties and LAC.

  The Committee was advised that the majority of the accommodation would be in the Borough or in the immediate surrounding area. However, if a LAC had been fostered out of the Borough they may ask to be accommodated where they have friends or other ties, rather than return to the Borough, and this would be accommodated wherever possible.

- **Feedback from LAC about special treatment**  
  Cllrs asked if there was any feedback from LAC as to whether they were happy to be targeted and taken out of class / lessons for extra support or health checks etc.

  The Director of Operations, Children’s Care and Support, explained the work being undertaken with social workers and independent review officers to reduce the children feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed in front of their peers. Whilst LAC clearly need support, the children themselves were indicating that they wanted to be treated the same as their class mates / peers and that they did not want to be pulled out of class differently. It seems that while children are not taken out of class for LAC reviews, they are being taken out for other purposes and example being for careers advice and support arranged by schools. The Director stressed that any incidents of this nature that are drawn to her attention would be investigated further in order to prevent
further incidents where possible.

The Committee asked for feedback on the work that was being done in this area in due course.

21. **Children’s Services Finance Update**

The Group Manager – Services Finance, presented the report which provided an update on the financial position of Children’s Services and the successful action taken this year to address long-standing pressures on funding, further details of which were set out in the report.

The Group Manager explained the risks and issues being faced in Children’s Services, including continued demand and demographic pressure. The Committee’s attention was also drawn to the risks and issues relating to schools and Education funding, including funding formula changes and academisation. The Group Manager advised that further savings had still to be delivered, and the effect of locality models and commissioning were still to be realised, however, overall the financial position was significantly improved.

The Department of Education had now recognised that the Borough had been underfunded in early years’ provision, which should result in additional money being provided for the Early Years services. However, schools in the Borough were likely to lose funding under the new funding formula and this had been recognised as a risk area.

Discussion was held in regards to:

- **Funding Children’s Care and Support**
  The Director of Operations, Children’s Care and Support explained how some of the pressures in Children’s Services and support were being managed down and stressed that £5.1m (the full year effect of this is £7.8m) has been saved, in one year, had been a significant achievement, especially when the service demands were continuing. The creation of Community Solutions, which would provide early intervention, advice and prevention to support families at an early stage, should reduce further the demands on statutory services later, and thus keep future costs down.

  The Group Manager – Services Finance, also explained the details in Table 1 (page 21 of the agenda), in regards to placement costs, the reason and type of transport provision, legal advice and court costs, no recourse to public funds (NRTPF) and unaccompanied asylum seeking children and the support for children affected by this. It was confirmed that the Borough transport service would be used wherever suitable for the child’s needs and / if it was financially appropriate.

  Councillors asked for the agency / staffing costs to be split for future meetings.

- **Schools Funding Formulas**
  Noted the work being undertaken with other local authorities and that the Borough and its schools were applying for all funding opportunities that were available. However, schools in London were generally losers under the new
funding formulas.

- **Academisation**  
  The Government is still committed to academisation and it was expected schools would continue to be encouraged / pressurised by government agencies to become an academy during the life of this parliament. Whatever their status, the priority for the Council is to keep all schools engaged as part of the local education family. It was noted that whilst the Borough would have less direct involvement in an Academy the Director of Children’s Services still had some statutory responsibilities and other powers that would allow access to schools.

- **Funding for three / four-year old children**  
  In response to a question in relation to how local providers would be chosen, it was noted that all providers would receive a set basic amount per hour, plus an opportunity to apply for supporting sums. The Council also has a duty of quality control and a commissioning role for early years and would continue to work with Ofsted on this.

The Committee:

(i) Noted the continued demand and demographic pressures facing Children’s Care and Support Services;

(ii) Noted the impact of the action taken this year to address those pressures and the significant savings that had been achieved;

(iii) Noted the remaining risks and issues set out in the report in regards to Schools and Education funding; and

(iv) Requested that in future reports the agency / staffing costs are split.

22. **Adoption Scorecard Performance 2013-2016**

The Group Manager Looked After Children Adoption, Fostering and Prevention, presented the report which provided a summary in relation to the Adoption Scorecard and the rolling three-year performance for the period 2013 to 2016.

The report and presentation highlighted the reasons for delay in placing children for adoption and summarised the needs of 66 children. The Group manager explained the process and the actions being taken to address delays and to find families for those children in the current cohort and the difficulties in finding families for the 48 harder to place children, who often have disabilities or multiple needs, which makes matching placements harder. The Group Manager stressed that those 66 children should not be seen as simply statistics on a scorecard and finding children permanent families was an ongoing quest. Matching a family to a child / children could involve a local, London or even an across the country search.

The Director of Operations. Children’s Care and Support explained that the Council’s adoption performance position could be improved if harder to place children were removed from the adoption register and placed into long-term accommodation. However, officers felt that rather than to achieve an adoption
target, it was much more important to achieve the best outcomes for the child and wherever possible try to find a family for every child that could be adopted. The Committee indicated that it supported the officers’ stance.

Discussion was held on several issues, including:

- **Advertising**
  Councillors asked about the level of advertising for adoption, as it did not seem as pronounced as fostering advertising locally or nationally and if there was anything that they could do to help advertise the services when visiting schools, attending religious venues and their surgeries etc.

- **Buying in adopters / matching services from across the country.**
  Noted that this could be more cost effective.

- **Regional Adoption Agency**
  Noted that a scoping exercise was currently being undertaken to look at one regional adoption agency for all London councils

The Committee:

(i) Noted the performance that will be reported in the Barking and Dagenham Adoption Scorecard for 2013 to 2016;

(ii) Noted the report would form part of the evidence for the Committee’s deep dive scrutiny on adoption timeliness and any recommendations arising and that this would probably include consideration of:

   (a) Local advertising of adoption.

   (b) Children should not be removed from the adoption register and placed into long-term fostering just to improve adoption performance.

   (c) The principle that the best outcomes for the child was paramount and, wherever possible, officers should try to find a family for every child that could be adopted.

(ii) Wished to place on record its thanks to the adoption teams and the honest and open way that officers have answered questions and provided updates and reports to date.

23. **Work Programme**

The Work Programme was noted.