

Report of the Children's Services Select Committee: Child Protection Practices and Policies in Schools Review 2010-11

Response by the Director of Children's Services, Helen Jenner

Safeguarding children is a key priority for the Children's Services Directorate and we are constantly looking for ways of strengthening our systems and processes in order to ensure that every child is safe and achieves the five outcomes: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; economic well being; make a positive contribution.

I am pleased that members of the Children's Services Select Committee recognise the improvements that have been made in our schools in relation to child protection. I am also pleased that the Select Committee has recognised that the newly formed Multi-Agency Locality Teams (MALTs), based on secondary school sites, are working effectively: these are a key part of our strategy for early identification and intervention and illustrate our commitment to universal and targeted services. We welcome the emphasis on early identification and prevention and will continue to work with schools and other key partners to intervene at the earliest possible opportunity.

Improvements in our social care systems were recognised by the recent unannounced inspection of our social care services. We welcome the work of scrutiny to enable us to further improve our safeguarding practices. This is why we have also commissioned a peer review of our work.

The Select Committee report has focused on seven key issues,

A detailed response to each recommendation is given in the following pages, but in summary my response is:

1. **Contacting Children's Services** - The new Divisional Director for Children's Complex Needs and Social Care has already ensured that head teachers have up to date contact details for the service and has reinforced the message that he can always be contacted if there are any concerns.

All head teachers are able to contact me, or any of my divisional directors directly if they have not been able to resolve any concerns.

2. **Implementing the Common Assessment Framework (CAF)** – The Borough is seen as an example of best practice in its use of the CAF and our early intervention work in Multi-Agency Locality Teams (MALTs) has been nationally recognised.

The MALTs are there to provide advice, support and guidance to any practitioner working with children where there are significant concerns about their health, well being and achievement, that cannot be met within

the services available in our schools. By working closely with school staff they can support the assessment process and ensure children, young people and their families receive the help they need quickly and effectively.

3. **Effective information sharing** – Our Public Protection Desk is well-established, and ensures that information is exchanged effectively at the point of police referral to social care. We are using the Safeguarding Board and the current peer review to drive forward consistent high quality standards across all partners we work with in this system.
4. **Thresholds for intervention** – Our thresholds have remained the same, and this has been recognised by OFSTED. We review these regularly with Child Protection Co-ordinators to ensure they are fully understood.
5. **Support to Child Protection Co-ordinators** – We actively encourage Child Protection Co-ordinators to raise any concerns they may have through regular meetings. No serious concerns have been raised through this route.

There is also a comprehensive programme of specific support for school Child Protection Co-ordinators. I will ensure that schools are made fully aware of these extensive training and support opportunities by resending the details of the website to all schools and re-circulating to governors. Further reminders will be sent through my regular updates to head teachers.

6. **Physical safety of children and young people** – We take the physical safety of children and young people, at or on the way to and from school, extremely seriously. All our secondary schools have a community police officer based on site.

Regular meetings take place between the Borough Commander or his nominee, and secondary head teachers to ensure a consistent and strategic approach to serious issues such as carrying of knives and membership of gangs. The issue of knife arches was recently debated at one of these meetings and the associated technology demonstrated. The decision as to their use is a matter for individual school governing bodies.

7. **School attendance** – The Children's Trust and our schools have identified this as a key priority. As a result, attendance levels are the highest they have ever been in the Borough, and are at the national average in secondary schools. There has also been a fall of 2.3% in persistent absences.

We are continuing to work proactively on this important area, and we are recognised as one of the national leaders in using Parent Support Advisors to increase school attendance levels.

The Children's Services Directorate will address the recommendations made by the Select Committee and the findings of the peer review through an update to their existing Project SAFE action plan. This will be monitored through the performance board of the Barking and Dagenham Children's Safeguarding Board. Both this Board and the Select Committee will receive an update on progress against the recommendations in October 2011.

The Children's Services Directorate has a strong working relationship with councillors, school governors and head teachers based on a mutual concern to ensure the safety, health and well being of every child. We will continue to collaborate with schools, and all other associated agencies, to ensure the safety and best possible outcomes for all our children.

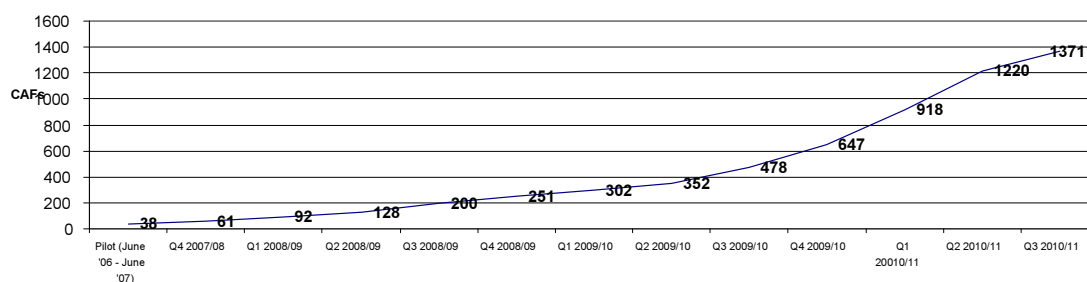
Corporate Director, Children's Services: Response to Select Committee Recommendations

The review's recommendations are set out here as a list. For ease of reference, *the Corporate Director's response is inserted below each in italics.*

Recommendation 1:

The Select Committee recommends greater implementation of Common Assessment Framework (CAF) by all schools in the borough.

There has been a significant increase in the use of the CAF form across agencies, including schools:



Benchmarking data is not produced but data from other London Boroughs suggests we are in line with, or above, our neighbours for CAFs completed.

We will continue to encourage schools to complete CAFs and our assessment team and Multi-Agency Locality Teams (MALTs) are able to give tailored advice as well as offering a range of courses. We have been pleased with the significant increase in the uptake of courses, and additional courses are timetabled for the Summer Term to meet the increased demand.

Recommendation 2:

The Select Committee recommends that schools should evidence understanding and appropriate use of CAF forms in their school child protection policies.

The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspections of schools currently check that appropriate safeguarding arrangements are in place.

Most governing bodies would expect to see that this item is covered in the safeguarding sections of the Headteacher's Report. Additional guidance will be included in next term's Director's report to governors.

Recommendation 3:

The Select Committee recommends that the central system for monitoring input of forms and subsequent outcomes must be robust. Awareness of the system might need to be raised.

Input of CAF forms is logged and data analysed. Forms are then linked to the Multi-Agency Locality Teams who monitor outputs and outcomes. Children's Services will review whether this could be further analysed in future and report back to the Select Committee.

Recommendation 4:

The Select Committee recommends that more training should be provided by the Local Authority for school staff who fill in CAF forms or MARFs.

A strong programme of Child Protection training, including CAF and MARF completion is provided through the multi-agency Safeguarding Board, and take-up of it was very high when it was first introduced. We will review the latest position with the Safeguarding Board's Training Sub-Group to see if a refresh is needed and how to target it effectively.

Recommendation 5:

The Select Committee recommends that all schools should have an identified member of staff who is thoroughly trained in filling in CAF forms, and that this should be regularly updated. Their responsibilities would include collating and coordinating information from school staff about pupils' needs.

This is the Local Authority's expectation, and a central list of trained personnel is maintained. Governors will be asked to consider whether an annual update from the identified member of staff would be useful to include in the Headteacher's Report on Safeguarding.

Recommendation 6:

The Select Committee recommends that all schools in the borough ensure that their child protection policies make clear how staff will be aware of procedures with regard to information sharing, spotting signs of possible abuse, etc.

All schools already submit a form which shows how they comply with child protection policies. In the last year, all schools submitted the form to Children's Services and received advice as appropriate where improvements were identified as necessary.

Recommendation 7:

The Select Committee recommends that a school member of staff who listens to a disclosure must write this down themselves, date it, sign it and pass this on immediately to the school's identified Child Protection Coordinator.

The processes a school decides to follow are for the school governing body to decide. However, the Local Authority agrees this would be good practice and will suggest to school governors in the next Director's report that they consider adopting it, if it is not in place already in their school.

Recommendation 8:

The Select Committee recommends that school staff, including the Child Protection Coordinator, should not directly approach parents/carers to investigate possible cases of child abuse.

It is already Council policy to recommend to schools not to directly approach parents/carers in such cases. There may be particular instances when a different approach is taken but this should always be agreed by social work staff and the school. Social workers will be reminded to make this clear when responding to schools raising concerns.

Recommendation 9:

The Select Committee recommends that all school child protection policies should be easily accessible to parents and carers, e.g. available on the internet.

It is already Council policy to recommend to schools that their Child Protection Policy should be accessible for parents. It is a matter for the governing body to decide how this is achieved, but many schools already have their policies online. The Local Authority will continue to encourage governors to consider this approach.

Recommendation 10:

The Select Committee recommends that there should be greater consistency in the use of absence codes across all schools in the borough.

Attendance officers already work closely with schools to ensure that they use absence codes appropriately and accurately. The use of some codes is a matter for decision in each school.

Recommendation 11:

The Select Committee recommends more consistent use of penalty notices and parenting orders by primary and secondary schools across the borough. Local Authority officers are asked to investigate whether there are any ways to increase the rate of payment of the notices.

The use, or otherwise, of penalty notices is a school governing body decision. This was last discussed with governing bodies in the Spring Term 2010. Since then we have seen improvements in attendance. Governing bodies will be reminded that this option is available for them to use, if they wish, at the next Director's meeting for governing bodies.

Recommendation 12:

The Select Committee recommends that the Corporate Director of Children's Services enquires whether it is possible for the national absence recording system to include a separate category for persistent unauthorised absenteeism, as opposed to simply placing persistent authorised absenteeism in the same data category as persistent unauthorised absenteeism.

The Council and the Borough's schools already follow national guidance on coding absence. The Corporate Director will enquire whether a change to national guidance is possible.

Recommendation 13:

The Select Committee recommends that the Divisional Director for Social Care consider whether alternative methods could be put in place for MARFs to be received into the Assessment Team.

The systems for MARF referrals have been agreed across all agencies. A specialist team is available to receive MARFs, and each day staff review these. Links with the Public Protection Desk are well established.

Work is already underway to review how referrals are made to social care, so that the MALTs can play a greater part in this process.

Recommendation 14:

The Select Committee recommends that the identified member of staff in the Assessment Team regularly checks the fax machine for incoming MARFs and ensures the fax machine is turned on / functioning properly.

This system is already in place. It is expected that the new systems for referrals to social care will ease the pressure at initial referral point. It should be noted that the number of initial referrals increased from an average of 1,090 in 2007/8 to over 3,000 for the following 2 years.

In addition we will review whether alternative email referral systems may be possible.

Recommendation 15:

The Select Committee recommends that the Children's Social Care Teams review the new phone systems and ensure that there is always a member of staff e.g. administrator or duty worker covering incoming phone calls during working hours. Telephones calls to non-available staff should be transferred through to other staff in their absence.

Staff check the phone and fax systems at the start of every day to ensure that all systems are working effectively and cover is in place. A regular mystery shopper exercise will be conducted to continue to monitor the new system.

Head teachers are asked at half-termly consultative meetings for their views on any remaining concerns.

Recommendation 16:

The Select Committee recommends that the required time specifications in the referral process should be met by the Assessment Team, with schools making further enquiries where necessary.

Although the percentage of these taken through to initial assessment was very poor in 2008/9 (12%), this has now increased to 75%. As the number of initial assessments per year increased from 386 in 2008/9 to a projected 1,800 this year, managing the speed of completion has been a challenge.

Daily monitoring is in place, with a weekly report to the Director to improve this indicator (an improvement for completion within 7 days from 40% last year to 47% this year is expected) – but there is still much more improvement required. Additional supervision training has been provided to help managers ensure this progress.

Recommendation 17:

The Select Committee recommends that identified members of school staff responsible for child protection within schools should be informed that they can directly telephone the Corporate Director of Children's Services if they have not been able to reach other managers in the Children's Services department.

Headteachers all have the Corporate Director's office telephone number, mobile phone number and email address. As part of Child Protection Training, staff are given guidance on what they should do if they feel concerned that processes are not being followed through. A list of key managers to contact will be re-circulated via the Director's weekly update to schools.

Recommendation 18:

The Select Committee recommends that guidance on levels of thresholds for alleged abuse needs to be re-circulated to re-emphasise that thresholds to trigger an intervention remain the same, regardless of caseloads and demands placed on Children's Services.

There have been increased levels of referrals, initial and core assessments and increases in numbers of children with a Child Protection Plan (increased from 167 in 2008/9 to 255 in December 2010).

There is no evidence that thresholds have been raised, although clearly, if this is the perception, we need to address it. We always need to find a balance between taking risks sensibly and having too many children on the register at a time, meaning that real risk would not be prioritised properly.

The Director will re-circulate the threshold guidance and linked statistics in her weekly update and in the next Director's Report to Governing Bodies.

Recommendation 19:

The Select Committee recommends that there should be better communication from social workers with regard to arriving late to see children at school.

The Director will ensure that schools are advised of the estimated arrival time of social workers, and that police and social workers will arrive together whenever possible.

Recommendation 20:

The Select Committee recommends that social care managers review all reported inefficiencies and provide a feedback report on possible causes to the Select Committee in six months.

The Director will ensure that an action plan to address issues raised (and also any issues arising from the peer review of social care currently taking place), is provided for the Select Committee during May, with a progress update in six months.

Recommendation 21:

The Select Committee recommends that the quality of team managers and social workers should be consistently high, this being facilitated through monitoring and training.

No unqualified social workers are employed in Barking and Dagenham.

All social workers attend at least 5 days training a year: this has to be recorded and submitted to the General Social Care Council for them to maintain their social worker status.

Clearly there will be strengths and weaknesses in every team and individual. Performance and development of all staff (including agency staff) are managed through supervision procedures.

Recommendation 22:

The Select Committee recommends that the improved practice in monitoring social workers' General Social Care Council registration be maintained. Associated staff should also continue to receive appropriate training for roles they are undertaking.

This recommendation refers to the improved systems between HR and Children's Services to ensure that all CRB and GSCC registrations are kept up to date and renew well before they expire. These systems will continue to be maintained.

Recommendation 23:

The Select Committee recommends that MALTs stay based within schools. Ideally, more schools can have this service based in their schools if they desire.

The Local Authority will maintain MALT teams in schools, unless the school requests that they are moved.

Recommendation 24:

The Select Committee recommends that schools report serious bullying incidents to the Local Authority through the usual child protection routes, e.g. CAF forms or Multi Agency Referral Forms (MARFs). Governing Bodies may wish to consider regular reports on all bullying incidents.

Governing bodies are responsible for deciding whether they wish to receive regular reports on bullying as part of the Headteacher's report to governors. The Local Authority recommends this as good practice.

The Corporate Director will remind schools that if bullying is sufficiently serious to be considered a child protection issue, it should be reported to the Local Authority through the usual child protection processes.

Recommendation 25:

The Select Committee recommends that school governors consider a review of their anti-bullying policies to ensure they address newer types of bullying. Also, that policies clearly state that all serious incidents of bullying should be recorded in writing, with information shared as appropriate within the school and outside agencies.

The Director will re-circulate to governing bodies the local authority guidance on anti-bullying policies, for them to use if they wish to revisit policies.

Recommendation 26:

The Select Committee recommends that all secondary schools continue their work with the police to reduce the risk of knife crime in our borough.

The Education Improvement Partnership is attended by Children's Services officers and the Metropolitan Police. This forum will continue to discuss anti-knife use and gang strategies and issues. The notes from the meeting will be circulated to the Select Committee.

Recommendation 27:

The Select Committee recommends that governing bodies publicise a zero tolerance approach to knives in schools. They may wish to consider the use of knife arches to demonstrate that their school is knife-free.

This would be a matter for school governing bodies to decide. Headteachers have been introduced to knife arches in meetings with the Metropolitan Police and whilst there is unanimous agreement to zero tolerance of knives in school, there are differing views on the efficacy and desirability of knife arches.

Recommendation 28:

The Select Committee recommends that Governing Bodies may wish to look at the reasons for and patterns of exclusions.

Decisions around what data to analyse are for governing bodies to address. The Local Authority would recommend that exclusions should be reported to governing bodies and any patterns should be analysed. The next Director's Report for governing bodies will remind governors of this.

In addition, the Council analyses exclusion patterns and these are discussed with head teachers through our Behaviour Partnership, and individually, if appropriate.

Recommendation 29:

The Select Committee recommends that governing bodies may wish to review the police-schools protocol, or to invite their schools liaison officer to attend a governing body meeting.

A revised protocol was agreed with schools, the Local Authority and the Metropolitan Police in October 2010. It will be re-circulated to all governing bodies by the Corporate Director Children's Services so that they can review it, if they wish.

Recommendation 30:

The Select Committee recommends that the Local Authority should arrange more training and meetings that allow all Child Protection Coordinators and relevant school staff in the borough to attend. This would also further allow Child Protection Coordinators to raise concerns and share ideas on good practice.

For information, over the last year 78 children's safeguarding courses/training sessions have been held with 1,140 attendees. Child Protection Co-ordinators have indicated that they find termly meetings appropriate, and are asked at the termly meeting for the date and time that they would like the next term's meeting. The Director will ensure that at each meeting they are reminded of the full range of training that is available