Present: Cllr John White (Chair), Cllr Melanie Bartlett (Deputy Chair), Cllr Edna Fergus, Cllr Irma Freeborn, Cllr Elizabeth Kangethe, Cllr Moin Quadri and Cllr Danielle Smith, Mrs I Robinson and Rao Khan

Apologies: Cllr Simon Bremner and Toluwalope Elizabeth Dahunsi

11. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

12. Minutes - 20 July 2015 and 30 September 2015

The Children’s Services Select Committee (CSSC) confirmed that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 July 2015 were correct and noted the summaries of the issues discussed at the inquorate meeting on 22 September 2015.

13. School Performance and Results 2015

The Head of School Improvement (HIS) delivered a presentation, “School Performance and Results 2015” which provided data on the following:

- Early Years Foundation Stage Profile 2015
- Key Stage 1 (age 7)
- Key Stage 2 (age 11)
- Key Stage 4 GCSE
- Post 16

The Corporate Director, Children’s Services (CDCS) stated that this year’s GCSE Maths results were a key concern. Leadership for Maths did not appear to be as strong as it was for English and the Council’s school improvement team would be working closely with secondary schools to look at this. The HIS stated that there was also a national issue around Maths teachers leaving schools to work for other schools which were offering more financial incentive. Furthermore, Maths examinations had been more challenging this year due to the raising of standards in the specification, and there had also been a shift in the grade boundary, which meant many pupils who would have previously achieved a ‘C’ grade, achieved a ‘D’ grade. In response to questions the HIS stated that mock tests indicated overall, that the Maths results would generally be at similar level last year’s results.

In response to questions the HIS stated that GCSE science results had remained relatively positive despite problems in recruitment and that whilst a lot of work was being undertaken on getting spoken language strong, too many children were not using these skills in writing.

Members commended schools and the school improvement team for their
contributions to the very positive outcomes at the Early Years Foundation Stage. However, they expressed concern at a disappointing set of GCSE results and emphasised the importance of focussing on what could be done to improve results next year, particularly, the retainment of good maths teachers. The HIS stated that it was common for teachers across subjects to leave London in their late twenties to start families in locations where accommodation was much cheaper. He added that the Council had developed a strategy to support teachers with accommodation, which would hopefully prevent some teachers from leaving the borough’s schools to work elsewhere.

14. Corporate Parenting Scrutiny

The Lead Member of the Committee, Councillor White, explained that the CSSC wished to obtain an understanding of the Council’s performance as a “Corporate Parent” at today’s meeting and at a later date, the Committee would consider what could be put in place to support all members of the Council be more familiarised with the Council’s corporate parenting function.

The Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Social Care (CMCSSC) stated that given there were currently 417 looked after children in the Council’s care, he welcomed the opportunity for the CSSC to consider ways to embed corporate parenting into the mindset of all council members. He added that Corporate Parenting must be considered against the backdrop of a very difficult financial situation within Children’s Services, child poverty levels and welfare reforms, which made current times particularly challenging for many families in the borough as well as the Council.

The CDCS provided context and background to the governance of Corporate Parenting in the Local Authority and the various services and arrangements in place to monitor the progress and development of looked after children in different aspects of their lives, including health and education. She also explained the arrangements in place to listen to and where possible, give effect to the voice of looked after children.

In response to a question, the CDCS stated that a breakdown of how many children were placed within the borough and how many were placed outside of borough could be provided to members at a later date. The Group Manager for Looked after Children, Adoption & Prevention Services (GMLACS) stated that whilst the Council wished to place all looked after children within the borough, it inevitably had to place some children out of the borough. The average size of homes in the borough was significantly smaller than homes in neighbouring boroughs, which meant that many people, who were interested in fostering, could not foster because they did not have the space to accommodate an additional child. Furthermore, the borough had a relatively high number of sibling groups which exacerbated that problem. It was important to keep siblings together as far as possible so often siblings were placed in neighbouring boroughs within one family with foster carers who had larger homes. Nonetheless, the Council still worked hard to maintain a good level of foster carers within the borough to maximise opportunities for looked after children to be placed in the borough. Many children who were placed in neighbouring boroughs, still went to schools within Barking and Dagenham. It was hoped that as the Council built more homes as part of its growth initiatives, more children would be placed in the borough, in future.
Members asked whether the Council could offer financial help to potential foster carers for extending their homes to create more space to take on looked after children. The GMLACS stated that financial help for creating more space in homes was offered in a limited range of circumstances, for example, if the looked after child in question was disabled. Financial help for extensions was not offered more widely because the process could become very complicated and expensive. The Divisional Director for Children's Complex Needs and Social Care (DDCSC) stated that the Council would have to exercise caution in offering such help because it did not want to attract people to becoming foster carers merely for the financial incentives. She cited an example she had come across were extension works funded by a local authority to accommodate a looked after child had lead to an increase in value of approximately £30,000 to a person’s house.

The GMLACS stated that the borough was part of a fostering consortium in London and was the highest performer within the consortium for recruiting foster carers. The turnover of foster carers in the borough was very low due to the good quality training and excellent support that was available. Furthermore, the Council’s pay to foster carers was the same as agency rates so there was more incentive for people to become “internal” foster carers, rather than agency ones.

In response to questions, the CDCS stated that the turnover in social workers for looked after children used to be very high which would not have had a positive impact on looked after children. The turnover was currently relatively high but more stable than previously. The Council still used agency social workers; however, these staff had worked for the Council for a number of years so could offer continuity to the looked after children they worked with. She added that there was more instability in the teams that provided early support when compared with the Leaving Care team, for example.

Members asked what ‘other placements’ were in relation to information in the report which described the types of placements there were for looked after children and the number of looked after children in each category. The GMLACS stated that this category referred to children who were looked after by a connected person such as a relative or family friend and that these people were encouraged to apply for a special guardianship order, which offered a certain level of legal security.

Members asked what the arrangements were for supporting looked after children with their education. The CDCS stated that most looked after children went to mainstream schools so their lower performance in school (in comparison to other children) was generally, not down to the quality of teaching but rather, as a result of going through trauma and having to catch-up. A ‘Virtual’ School and Headteacher were in place to monitor and track the attainment, progression, attendance, exclusion of looked after children and put in place support where needed. Schools also received money in the form of the Pupil Premium Plus allowance which they should use to prevent looked after children from falling behind their peers in their education, or helping them to catch-up if they had already fallen behind. The Virtual School’s Head Teacher had responsibility and is accountable for ensuring that there were effective arrangements in place for allocating Pupil Premium Plus funding. Every looked after child should also have a Personal Education Plan (PEP), a plan for addressing their needs and to improve their attainment. The PEP is an individualised document with different individuals inputting into it, such as the young person’s social worker, teacher, foster carer
and sometimes the young person themselves and is subject to scrutiny by the Virtual Headteacher. In response to a question, the CDCS stated that PEPs should be reviewed every six months. Currently, this was not happening in a timely manner for every looked after child and this was being regularly monitored by management.

Members asked how children from ethnic minority or mixed race backgrounds were placed. The CMCSSC stated that the message behind the Government’s reforms around adoption was that ethnicity should not be a bar to adoption. However, many people still felt that there should be a ‘match’ between the adopters’ and child’s ethnicity. The GMLACS stated that in practice, most people wanted a child who reflected themselves and there was some research to show that transracial placements did not always work well. Before placing children from ethnic minority backgrounds, including children who were mixed race, the Service would consider a range of factors including, who the child loved with previously, for example. Therefore, whilst the ethnicity of prospective adopters was a very important factor in placing a child, each case would be decided based on the child’s best interest, and would not necessarily always be determined by ethnicity. There was now a national Adoption Register, which enabled local authorities to search across the country for people who were approved to adopt.

In response to a question, the GMLACS stated that the achievements of looked after children were celebrated and acknowledged in various forums, for example, through the Leaving Care Awards.

Councillor Bartlett suggested that councillors who were local authority school governor representatives could be encouraged to take corporate parenting issues to their school’s governing body meetings every so often. The CDCS said she would take this suggestion away for further consideration outside of the meeting.

Councillor White brought discussions to a close due to time constraints and members asked whether there would be an opportunity to receive answers to the further questions members had hoped to ask regarding the Council’s performance as a Corporate Parent. The CDCS replied that any pending questions would be answered in written form and supplied to the Committee at a future meeting.

Councillor White thanked officers and the CMCSSC for attending the meeting, answering the CSSC’s questions, and taking part in discussions.

15. **Anti-bullying workshops designed by the BAD Youth Forum**

The CSSC noted that at the last meeting, which was inquorate, members of the Barking and Dagenham (BAD) Youth Forum presented a report and delivered a presentation in relation to two anti-bullying workshops the Forum wished to be delivered in the borough’s secondary schools and youth groups. Members who were present at the meeting praised and supported the concept and delivery of the workshops.

Rao Khan, the Chair of the BAD Youth Forum, provided an update on the delivery of the workshops since the meeting to date, which had resulted in positive feedback from the schools and young people who had taken part.

Councillor White stated that the report made a number of recommendations and
as the last meeting was inquorate, it was important for the Committee to formally decide whether it supported the recommendations. The recommendations were as follows:

(i) “To raise awareness of the work of the Forum;
(ii) “Encourage schools across the borough to actively participate and ask them to nominate appropriate students to participate in each of the workshops;
(iii) “To contact schools to monitor their progress and gage how successfully they have integrated the workshop into their school, and if they are continuing to deliver it to students and;
(iv) “That the Corporate Director of Children’s Services, Helen Jenner, is to include the workshop in her regular update to Head Teachers, encouraging them to nominate a member of staff to liaise with the BAD Youth Forum.”

The Committee agreed that Councillor White should write to Councillor Carpenter, the Cabinet Member for Schools and Education recommending that she progress recommendations one and two. The Committee agreed that officers in Children’s Services should progress with recommendation three and report back to the CSSC in the next municipal year on progress.

The CDCS agreed to progress recommendation four. Furthermore the CDCS and Rao Khan agreed to write a joint letter to schools to raise awareness of the workshop and encourage its take-up.

16. Verbal Feedback from the Governor’s Conference

Councillor White and Ingrid Robinson provided verbal feedback to the Committee from their workshop at the Governors’ Conference on 19 September 2015 which focussed on the observations arising from three school visits CSSC members carried out between March and April 2015. Overall, governors who took part in the workshop were positive about what came out of the visits and said that they would take the observations back to their governing bodies for further discussions.

Ms Robinson asked whether the pack containing the notes from the visits could be used somehow for training governors. The CDCS stated that she would take this away for consideration with colleagues in the school improvement team.

17. Work Programme

Members noted the latest version of the Work Programme and following discussions, agreed to make the following amendments:

- Answers to questions relating to Corporate Parenting, which could not be asked at today’s meeting due to limitations on time, should be provided to the 18 January 2015 meeting for noting.
- The Health Visiting report scheduled for the 18 January meeting should be for noting only.
- An item on the Safe Programme, which would focus upon delivering the Council’s duties and priorities for children and young people, in the context of a very challenging financial situation, should be presented at the 14 March 2016 CSSC meeting.