

MINUTES OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 11 October 2023
(7:00 - 9:26 pm)

Present: Cllr Glenda Paddle (Chair), Cllr Dorothy Akwaboah (Deputy Chair), Cllr Ingrid Robinson, Cllr Paul Robinson, Cllr Muazzam Sandhu, Cllr Phil Waker and Cllr Mukhtar Yusuf;

Apologies: Cllr Andrew Achilleos, Cllr Donna Lumsden, Cllr Fatuma Nalule, Glenda Spencer, Sarfraz Akram, Sajjad Ali and Richard Hopkins

18. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

19. Minutes - To confirm as correct the minutes of the meeting held on 13th September 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2023 were confirmed as correct.

20. Working with Faith Communities in Barking and Dagenham - Action Plan and reporting template

The Head of Participation and Engagement presented a report on Working with Faith Communities in Barking and Dagenham.

The Committee were advised that Barking and Dagenham was one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse communities in London with a rich diversity of faiths and beliefs. Over 75% of residents had identified as having a faith in the 2021 census. Faith organisations were regularly and increasingly working outside of their “traditional” functions, to become a hub for community activity, social action, and to deliver essential services to the most vulnerable people in our communities. Working with faith communities was a core part of the Councils community and engagement aims.

A multiphase action plan was built to directly link the principles and themes that were explored in the Faith Builds Community Policy and to strengthen the progress made so far. As part of the action plan, the Closed Collective otherwise known as the Faith Leaders Network was established under BD Collective. The Faith Leaders Network was publicised on BD Collective website.

In response to a question on who the current 18 members of the Faith Leaders Network were, the Director of Community Participation and Prevention advised the committee that an open invite was circulated to all faith groups across the Borough. There were 18 faith groups who chose to come together to form the Faith Leaders Network. The membership of the Faith Leaders Network included Barking Churches Unite, Powerhouse International, Al Madina Mosque, St Chad's Church and, Lifeline Faith Action. Lifeline Faith Action worked as a facilitator for the network, which had funding to do so.

The report suggested that there were ten areas within the Borough in which residents with no religion had been the second highest group. A question was asked if residents with no religion were represented within the faith groups. The Faith Network was open to all including Atheists and Agnostics. There had been work undertaken on the locality of the organisations for residents to know where they can go for support. There were networks such as BD Collective which brought together voluntary and community organisations across the borough that can service both the broader community and individual communities.

One suggestion from the report was to invite faith groups to give awareness training to LBBD staff to help promote inclusion. The Council could invite faith organisations to take up the training opportunity to staff, and in response to a question advised that this would also be extended to Councillors.

In response to a question regarding youth faith communities and schools, the Participation Manager (Partnerships) responded that there was not currently a focus on the youth faith communities within the action plan. However, there was a wide range of faith organisations that had provisions for youth services. It was proposed for the Director of Community Participation and Prevention to hold a discussion with members of the Youth Forum regarding the engagement of youth faith communities.

The Borough had many faith organisations, a concern was raised on whether the Council was working only with the Faith Leaders Network, or if it maintained a good working relationship with all faith organisations. The Committee were advised that there was a broad range of work that included other faith organisations with contact to faith leaders daily. The 18 members within the faith leaders' network were those that wanted to join the network. There was a desire to increase the membership of the faith leaders' network to 30 members through the health funding.

A question was raised on whether there was a criteria that faith organisations needed to meet to join the faith leaders' network. The Committee were advised that there was no set criteria, constitution or governing documents needed for a faith organisation to join the network. It was an open invitation to all faith organisations to join the Faith Leaders Network. There were procedures in place to monitor the participation of Faith Leaders within the network.

There was no exact definition of faith only definitions of faith. In terms of charity law, there was a definition of religious benefits and religious beliefs. In a wider dialog, faith forums and SACRE had a wider representation from many different faith groups.

In response to a question regarding the guidance on tackling health and inequalities given to faith organisations, the Head of Participation and Engagement advised the committee that working closing with faith leaders allowed better communication and engagement of messages from the council to being within the faith organisations. The main function of the health and inequalities fund was to address health and inequalities within the borough and to deepen the understanding of health and inequalities.

The Council offered a wide range of support around managing tensions. There was an urgent communications WhatsApp group that involved the faith leaders across the borough. There was also a tension reporting tool available on the Council's website in which faith leaders were encouraged to use if there are tensions arising within the faith communities. SACRE actively engaged with schools across the borough and offers advice on how to deal with tensions between faith communities.

The Engagement Champions Program was a program in which senior Council officers were working with officers across the Council to improve better engagement with residents and faith organisations. There was around 79 members of staff that were a part of the engagement champions program.

Training was already in place to encourage a working relationship between children's safeguarding services and faith communities. In terms of foster care, the children's safeguarding services would attempt to match the child with carers of the same faith. For instances in which the foster carer would not share the same faith as the child, the safeguarding service would facilitate a wider network of carer connections that would match with the child's faith.

The report referred to £40,000 from ringfenced council funding given to the Faith Leaders Network. A question was asked if the fund was discretionary and what the implications would be if the fund was to be removed. In response to the question, the Participation Manager (Partnerships) advised the committee that removing the fund would lead to underfunding of work undertaken for health and inequalities including the loss of the network and social value.

The Faith Leaders Network was formed to improve coordination between faith groups. A question was raised on the metrics that the Council would use to determine if the new vehicle succeeded in its aim. Qualitative data, narratives and connections that had been formed between faith organisations would be reviewed in due course.

The Chair requested for a meeting to be arranged for the Committee to meet with the Faith Leaders Network

The Committee noted the report.

21. Report on the OFSTED Inspection of Children's Services and arrangements for publishing the Council's OFSTED Improvement Plan

The Operational Director Children's Care and Support and the Commissioning Director for Care and Support presented a report on the OFSTED inspection of Children's Services and arrangements for publishing the Council's OFSTED Improvement Plan.

In July 2023, the Council's was subject to a Standard Inspection under the OFSTED Inspection of Local Authority Children's Service (ILACS) framework. The inspection itself occurred over a course of three weeks with a lot of preparations made before the inspection. The inspection included heavy scrutiny from the team of inspectors as well as meeting and observing the work of frontline officers.

The overall judgement of the OFSTED inspection was that the services for children required improvement which was the same during the last inspection in 2019. The experiences and progress of care leavers however was rated as “Good” which was the first time it had been achieved in the Council.

The areas that were rated as “Requires improvement to be good” were:

- The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.
- The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection.
- The experiences and progress of children in care.
- Overall effectiveness.

OFSTED identified eight key recommendations where they felt improvement was most strongly required. These were:

- Timeliness of strategy meetings.
- The capacity, quality, consistency and impact of supervision and management oversight.
- Assessment and decision-making for children experiencing neglect.
- Timeliness of pre-proceedings pathways.
- Consistency of response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
- Oversight of children’s placements in unregistered children’s homes.
- Application of threshold in early help.
- Life-story work and permanency planning.

The context within which the findings of the inspection that must be considered such as the rapid growth of the boroughs population which had increased by 18% since the 2011 census. The borough also had high levels of deprivation and child poverty, with the COVID pandemic and the current cost-of-living crisis also added to an increase in pressure for children’s services.

In response to a question on whether the children’s mental health played a role in the OFSTED inspection, the Operational Director for Children’s Care and Support advised the Committee that OFSTED investigated the mental health of care leavers and children in care. There was a therapy team that supported the emotional wellbeing and mental health of young people and bridge the gap between children and adults’ services. There was also an emotional wellbeing care worker who focused on care leavers.

The recruitment and retention of social workers was a constant challenge to the Council. The use of agency staff within children’s services was lower compared to other boroughs. Social workers would want low caseloads, good supervision, good work-life balance and health and wellbeing support. Caseloads for social workers had been reduced however, compared to other boroughs that were rated good in OFSTED inspections, the caseloads at LBD were still high. There were specialist intervention services along with other services that work alongside social workers to ensure the social workers were not alone in dealing with caseloads.

The Committee noted that there were areas that had improved since the last OFSTED inspection. However, there are areas that still required improvement with the Council being in a similar position as the 2019 OFSTED inspection. Although the judgement from OFSTED had not changed since 2019, there had been a significant shift within children’s services.

It was suggested for future reports to include more detail on how the improvements would be implemented. A question was raised on whether the Council received an independent review on the service before the OFSTED inspection and in response the Committee were advised that an external auditor monitored the services.

Concerns were raised on whether children's services could tackle the rapid growth of the borough including increasing issues around overcrowding housing. The growth of the borough had proven difficult for the Council to find the necessary level of investment to cope with the level of growth children's services with experienced staff. Overcrowding in housing would have an impact on families as children would not have their own spaces and their ability to learn would be impeached. There was a vulnerable housing panel that would review the more worrying cases of overcrowding.

Children with disabilities often were more complex and required a multiagency response. Care packages would be more expensive which had impacted the services. There had been a significant increase within the borough with more children required to have an education health care plan, the demand had more than doubled within the past five years.

There was a good working relationship between children's services and known care homes within the borough. There was a provider quality inspection team that worked across the care sector. However, it is a limited resource, so children's foster placements had been prioritised. Once an unknown provider had been identified, the Council would attempt to work with the provider and conduct a program of announced and unannounced inspection visits. Recommendations and suspending the use of the premises would be made in instances where the quality of care was below standard. There was a recent change in legislation in which local authorities were not allowed to operate in an unregistered fashion. Local authorities must notify OFSTED if a child was placed in an unregistered placement.

A question was asked on how social workers were managed. The issue was around maintaining a stable management group. The council had embarked on a supervision program that worked with both the social workers and managers to achieve consistency throughout the services. The turnover of social workers was one of the biggest contributing factors to the quality of social work. There were issues around agency staff who had not had the same history with families as council staff and had worked with difference practices and procedures, therefore there was a need for training to be consistent with council staff. There had been recruitment from abroad such as Zimbabwe with the aim to retain staff.

The Youth Justice team worked together with community safety partners and police to help get children to exit gangs. There was a weekly ending gangs and youth violence meeting where the team strategised plans to remove children from gangs. The Council also helped families relocate to other boroughs for safety. However, parents often did not want to relocate due to the disruption of siblings which had resulted with the child in question being placed into care.

Families then had experienced homelessness would bring instability to the

children. There was a lot of movement of families with children moving into the borough due to lower costs in housing and rent. Children that had experienced homelessness tended to lose the ability to get school placements straight away therefore they would miss school. The Housing Strategy would need to have children and vulnerable people at the forefront.

There was a recurring theme from the OFSTED reports of 2014, 2019 and 2023 with the judgements such as management oversight being the same. Permanency planning for children's services was impacted by the courts. To remove a child from the family home was a decision made by the courts, who were still dealing with backlogs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Committee noted the report.

Standing Order 7.1 (Chapter 3, Part 2 of the Council Constitution) was suspended during consideration of this item to enable the meeting to continue beyond the 9pm threshold).

22. Work Programme

The committee noted the work programme.