**Title:** The work of our Children in Care Council (Skittlz)

**Report of the Corporate Director**

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**Accountable Divisional Director:** Christine Pryor, Divisional Director: Targeted Support

**Accountable Director:** Helen Jenner, Corporate Director of Children Services

**Summary:**

This report is to inform Children Services Select Committee of the work of our Children in Care Council (CICC) Skittlz.

The CICC is a group of young people who are in Care and who meet fortnightly. They talk with professionals within and beyond Social Care as well as Members, who are there to find out what the young people need and how services for Looked After Children can be improved. The young people inform the Local Authority as a corporate parent how they can make being in care better for them and other young people and children. The CICC is a mechanism for young people to get their ideas across to those who are responsible for their care in Barking and Dagenham. The CICC also makes representations nationally, and inputs into national consultations. The Local Authority has a statutory requirement to have a CICC.

The report’s content details the work of the CICC to date and highlights a number of their achievements since its inception.

**Recommendation(s)**

The Select Committee is asked to note the report and:

(i) endorse the contents of this report and support the work of the Children in Care Council and

(ii) make suggestions on how the Children in Care Council can better inform Barking and Dagenham’s role as a corporate parent.

**Reason(s)**

As well as being a statutory function, an active Children in Care Council strongly supports a number of objectives within the Council's Children and Young People's plan, principally to:
1. Introduction and Background

1.1 A child's wishes and feelings should be ascertained before making decisions affecting them and their care, and a written record of their wishes and feelings should be maintained - as stipulated in section 22 of the 1989 Children's Act. The Care Matters agenda and the Children and Young People’s Bill 2007 highlighted the need for the right structure to be in place to enable children and young people to receive high quality care and support. It also highlighted that those entering the care system should be able to share the same aspirations as those in supportive family homes. The White Paper had set out that every local authority must set up a "children in care council", where looked-after children can give their views and influence service provision.

1.2 In order for young people’s views to be heard and for a direct dialogue to occur with Corporate Parents, Barking and Dagenham established their Children in Care Council in 2007. A number of planning sessions occurred with the young persons’ representatives who decided that Barking and Dagenham’s Children in Care Council should be named ‘Skittlz’. The name was chosen by young people to demonstrate that, as Children in Care, they have the resilience to get back up whenever they’re knocked down in life. The group is supported by a lead worker and has access to a budget, as well as making decisions that have financial implications as well as implications around social work practice.

1.3 The group currently has ten members, ranging in age from 9-21. Children in Care are recruited to Skittlz via the Children’s Rights and Participation Team within Integrated Youth Services. The Participation Officer, the lead worker for the group, regularly visits social care teams, and attends foster carer conferences. It is promoted quarterly in ‘Home and Away’, the borough’s newsletter for LAC, as well as on Careweb.tv, Barking and Dagenham’s website for LAC. The Participation Officer is additionally scheduled to spend a morning, and an afternoon a week with Care Management to further promote the work of the group and to better integrate its work with that of social care.
1.4 The Children in Care Council encourage views and participation from non-members in a number of different ways. They produce an annual questionnaire which is posted out to all CiC, with their responses shaping the work of the CICC (see appendix 1). In addition, the Children’s Rights and Participation Team have recently reintroduced out of borough ‘have your say’ days entitled ‘Out of sight, In mind’ across four locations regionally. All Looked After Children are encouraged to submit any issues for discussion at Skittlz via the quarterly ‘Home and Away’ newsletter as well as through careweb.tv. Links between Skittlz and our 7-11 and 12-16 youth groups for Children in Care are strong, with members sitting on both and using them to conduct wider consultation.

2. Proposal and Issues

2.1 Key achievements

Skittlz have been involved in a number of local and national developments and consultations, which have helped to improve the quality of their care and inform the Council’s role as a Corporate Parent. These are outlined here.

2.1.1 Ofsted’s inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children Services in Barking and Dagenham in 2012 gave the recommendation that the Children in Care Council should review and revise the Council’s Looked After Children Pledge. A period of thorough consultation followed, involving the Children in Care Council and Corporate Parenting Group, resulting in the recent publication of the new Barking and Dagenham Children in Care Pledge or ‘Promises’ (see appendix 2). A graphic designer is now working with the CICC to produce a young person-friendly version.

2.1.2 The CICC reported varied experiences of CiC review meetings, and were keen to make them more meaningful and personalised. Through an extended period of consultation, the CICC designed, developed and promoted the ‘menu of choice’ (see appendix 3). This document, which is sent to all LAC prior to reviews, allows children and young people to decide how their review should take place.

2.1.3 Personal Education Plans (PEPs) are a statutory requirement for all Looked After Children. The CICC reviewed this document to ascertain its effectiveness. This led onto further discussions with Social Work teams, as the CICC discovered that reviews and PEP’s were being completed at the same time. Consultation with other Children in Care, highlighted that some children would like these completed separately. The outcome was that options would be included on the ‘menu of choice’ so children and young people who did not want to complete these meetings together are aware they have a choice between the two.

2.1.4 In 2012, The CICC met with Kat Cooper, Community Safety Coordinator from Adult and Community Services, to discuss questions they wanted to ask the Council Leader regarding Council savings. This helped ensure that the views of Looked After Children around savings were represented.

2.1.5 The CICC have reviewed our Children in Care Guide, that is given to all children and young people that come into care. In addition, they have provided consultation support for the development of our CiC website (www.careweb.tv) with regards to colour, layout and content. The new website was launched in 2012, and work is
nearly complete to allow CiC to input into reviews electronically, via the website (see appendix 4). This has come from requests from CiC and will be an exciting development.

2.1.6 In order to create an ongoing dialogue between Looked After Children, the CICC and social work professionals, the CICC support and co-facilitate our Participation Champions Meeting. Launched in 2012, this group is attended by representatives of all social work teams in Children’s Services, as well as the Divisional Director. The group acts as a sounding board for the CICC. It provides opportunities for staff and children and young people to discuss practice, social care issues and a chance for professionals and young people to work together. These meetings have also been used to look at the Munroe recommendations and how these recommendations can work in practice.

2.2 **Link with Corporate Parent Panel and governance**

The CICC reports directly to the Member’s Corporate Parenting Group, with a least one CICC member attending the meeting bi-monthly, supported by the Children’s Rights, Participation and Engagement Manager. The Member’s Corporate Parenting Group Chair regularly attends the CICC to gain an understanding of the work the young people do. In addition, the Lead Member for Children’s Services and the Corporate Director for Children’s Services have both visited the CICC on several occasions and take a keen interest in its work.

2.2.1 Outcomes of work of the CICC are additionally monitored through the Headline Engagement Report. Produced twice a year, this report summarises the work of the Council’s various engagement fora and provides implications for the Children’s Trust. It is sent to all Divisional Directors within Children’s Services, as well as key stakeholders.

2.3 **National Initiatives**

Members of our CICC have been proactive in a number of national initiatives. These include:

- previously active Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) National Youth Advisory Panel members; supporting the organisation with their tendering process;

- ‘Don’t Write Us Off’ campaign, in partnership with the Who Care’s Trust;

- Children in Care Council national meetings with then Children’s Minister Tim Loughton, to discuss what funding CiCC receive and the vision that the Minister had for the future;

- consultation with Ofsted on how can we make Children’s Services better through inspections and the inspections process;

- consultation event with the Children’s Rights Director of England and the Children’s Commissioner regarding the future of children’s rights;
• Open Space Event in Birmingham attended by two CICC members, leading discussion groups covering a whole wealth of areas including preparing for independence, reviews, education, foster care, children in care councils;

• CICC members were invited to attend and present three Awards at the Children and Young People Now Awards;

• One member of the CICC was chosen to be a torch bearer for the 2012 Olympic Games;

• A number of CICC members are a part of the Young People’s Panel for the Children’s Rights Director of England, allowing them to feed in directly regarding issues effecting them and their care;

• CICC members were also part of the Legacy Youth Panel to support decisions regarding what happens to the Olympic site following the games.

2.4 Comparison with the National Picture

2.4.1 According to the organisation A National Voice, out of the 152 Local Authorities, 147 have fully functioning Children in Care Council, with 76% reporting regularly to their Corporate Parenting Board.

2.4.2 Of the participating Local Authorities which took part in a scoping report led by A National Voice, 30% were not clear whether they had a dedicated budget assigned to their CICC. It is therefore positive that the Barking and Dagenham CICC has a budget. This budget is to promote the work of the CICC and influence service improvement. The CICC have also had a say in various developments that have financial implications, for example the development of Careweb.

2.4.3 Nationally, 35% of CICC reported that they had difficulty in getting their Lead Member or Director to attend CICC meetings. It is a strength in Barking and Dagenham that they both regularly attend and contribute to the CICC meetings which, in turn, has helped young people form relationships and gain an understanding of their role.

2.4.4 The vast majority of the CICCs were chaired predominantly by a young person. Therefore, to fully empower young people, Barking and Dagenham CICC will be supporting a young person chair to take on this role over the coming year. In addition, the Child’s Right Director for England recommends that a Children in Care Council should comprise 12 young people. Skittlz falls just short of this recruitment target and we must make a concerted effort to meet this recommendation and exceed it.

2.4.5 Some common challenges nationally included ensuring that the CICC reached out of borough looked after children, measuring success and impact of the work undertaken and ensuring clear messages were fed back to Social Care. Barking and Dagenham’s CICC has encountered some similar difficulties. The ‘Out of Sight, In mind’ and ‘Home and Away’ newsletter are effective ways in reaching young people in out of authority placements but we need to be pro actively encouraging
young people to contribute to the CICC and this will be an area for development over the next six months.

It is important that social care take the messages back to front line practitioners so that practice can be improved. The Participation Champions Meetings has a dedicated Social Care Divisional Director in attendance at the Steering Group Meetings and a Senior Practitioner for Children in Care. IROs are crucial to the success of the CICC as they have daily contact with Looked After Children. The Senior Practitioner role is to ensure messages are fed back to IRO’s and social care practitioners.

2.5 Future development

2.5.1 In addition the challenges and priorities set out above, the CICC has number of other areas for future development:

- further meetings/consultations with the Children’s Minister;
- further partnership working with the BAD Youth Forum;
- consultation and creation of the ‘Health Passport’ for CIC and Care Leavers;
- direct involvement and development of a support group to assist CIC through court processes;
- developing confidence and skills in challenging decision making. This will be further enhanced by the development of a young person chair to lead on the key areas and encourage participation from the other members.

2.5.2 Whilst there are a number of ways in which non-CICC members can input into the work of the group, it is recognised that Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) are not used enough to channel issues in. We plan to put systems in place to ensure that IRO's promote the work of Skittlz at the Review stage, and see if there are any young people interested in becoming members or wanting to feed in their ideas.

2.6 Conclusion

The CICC has matured since its inception in 2007 and is now actively influencing practice and service development at both strategic and operational levels. This is both locally and nationally. The CICC share the same aspirations as Barking Dagenham as a Corporate Parent, i.e. to improve outcomes for CIC and work to improve educational outcomes and quality of care. A strong focus on outcomes and measuring impact remain the key priorities. The all-new Pledge is a key safeguarding mechanism to ensure CIC are championed and can speak directly on the issues affecting their life chances.

3. Options Appraisal

None

4. Other Implications
4.1 Safeguarding Children

The work of the Children in Care Council undoubtedly plays a vital role in helping to safeguard our most vulnerable children and young people. In addition to undertaking single pieces of consultation, most important of all is facilitating an open and ongoing dialogue between Looked After Children and Barking and Dagenham Council as a corporate parent.

Background Papers Used in the Preparation of the Report:

Inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children Services – London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (Ofsted, 2012).

Children in Care Mapping Project 2010-2011 (A National Voice, 2011)

List of appendices:

Appendix 1 – Skittlz 2012-2013 consultation.
Appendix 2 – Barking and Dagenham Children in Care Promises.
Appendix 3 – Barking and Dagenham Menu of Choice.
Appendix 4 – Screenshot from www.careweb.tv.