Present: Councillor G Letchford (Chair), Councillor L Rice (Deputy Chair), Councillor R Douglas, Councillor A S Jamu, Councillor B Poulton and Councillor A Salam; Mrs Ghadeer Al-Salem Youssef and Mrs I Robinson

Apologies: Councillor L Butt, Councillor E Kangethe, Councillor T Perry, Mrs G Spencer and Paul Cox

8. Declaration of Members' Interests

None.

9. Minutes - To confirm as correct the minutes of the meeting held on 12 June 2013

Agreed.

The Chair stated that a matter arising under minute four was a query members had on whether the Report on the 'The impact of the Saturation Point Policy on the take up of school meals' covered the impact of retailers, other than fast-food takeaways, such as supermarkets, and the impact of parents providing packed lunches.

The Scrutiny Officer stated that the Report would not have involved an investigation around the impact of other types of retailers or packed lunches as the Saturation Point Policy, which aimed to limit the number of fast-food takeaways around schools, would not cover other types of retailers and nor would it cover packed lunches, as this was something influenced by parents, which was outside the Council's remit and therefore would not be covered by any policy.

Members reiterated previous concerns that there was anecdotal evidence that some children were given 'junk' food in their packed lunches and the impact this was possibly having, was not being picked up. The Corporate Director, Children Services (CDCS) reiterated that it would not be appropriate or possible to do an investigation around packed lunches as this was down to parents; however, members, if they wished, could ask to see the level and type of guidance provided to parents on packed lunches. The Lead Member stated that the Committee's draft Work Programme 2013/14, which would be presented for agreement at today's meeting, meant that it would be more appropriate to suggest that such guidance be reviewed by the Committee of 2014/15.

10. Safeguarding Children: Harmful Cultural Practices

The Safeguarding in Education Lead (SEL) delivered a presentation on 'Harmful Cultural Practices'. Below is a list of the aspects raised in the presentation:
• Background
  o Change in demographics of Barking and Dagenham
  o Challenges around cultural practices some of which are perceived as harmful
• Introduction
  o Becoming a culturally competent authority
  o Taking a proactive approach to sufficiently skill up professionals
  o Children Services represented at National Working Group
  o Highlight of key cases
• National and Local Agenda
  o National Action Plan - Child Abuse Linked to Faith and Beliefs
  o Child Protection Procedures 4th Edition (Children in Specific Circumstances CISC)
  o Domestic and Sexual Violence Strategy 2012 – 15
  o BDSCB Faith and Culture Committee
  o LSCB Training events
  o Thematic training for Education professionals.
• Current Progress
  o National Action Plan (NAP)
  o Cross Borough Learning Review
• London Child Protection Procedures - supplementary guidance
• Domestic and Sexual Violence Strategy 2012 - 15
• Learning and development in progress and Strategy
• Forward Planning
• Developments

Members queried how staff training was being funded and whether it was aimed at a specific statutory function. The Group Manager for Safeguarding, Quality and Review (GMSQR) stated there was a general statutory requirement to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and, a duty to protect children at risk of suffering significant harm, which would cover protecting them from harmful cultural practices. In terms of the costs of training, this was met by the Council and its partners such as the Police, Health, Education, Probation and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS). Cost was always negotiated with trainers to get the best value for money.

The CDCS added that a cost of a serious case review was approximately £150,000. Therefore not only was the cost towards training staff to safeguard children worth it in terms of saving lives and protecting children, it was also cost effective in terms of lowering the likelihood of a serious case review. She cited examples of cases that had occurred in other boroughs which had to conduct costly serious case reviews as a result of children dying as a result of actions taken due to accusations of witchcraft against them. Furthermore, Barking and Dagenham was predicted to see the largest increase in the Black African community. The change in the demographics of the borough coupled with the change in diversity means it is crucial for the Council and its partners to ensure that the workforce has ‘cultural competence’ to address the changing needs, emphasising further the importance of training in this area.

The GMSQR stated that the Council had so far been proactive in its approach and was well ahead of other boroughs in terms of its knowledge and drive on this issue. It was the first borough to be working so collaboratively with its partners and
was proud of this.

Members strongly felt that the authorities should respond proportionately to cases depending on their seriousness, referring particularly to cases involving the smacking of children. The CDCS stated that this was a very important point; whilst smacking was an issue that had to be dealt with, there had been an increase in protection orders for children who had been smacked, which had had traumatic consequences on the family and could be said to be a disproportionate response. However, as a result of work being done with the Police, more cases were being dealt with proportionately now.

The GMSQR stated that whilst cases involving smacking were often not more serious, some cases, upon further investigation, did involve matters of a more serious nature, such as trafficking. This is where awareness and training played a crucial role; training staff on how to recognise the differentiating factors between cases.

Members commented that faith leaders had a crucial role to play in educating communities about harmful cultural practices in the context of their faith. The GMSQR stated that the vision of the National Action Plan included working with faith leaders; however, this presented a significant challenge for many local authorities. Tower Hamlets and this borough seemed to be boroughs where this aspect was a strength. Barking and Dagenham had an established policy with Barking Mosque, for example.

Members were interested to know whether there was data on the prevalence of harmful cultural practices. The GMSQR stated that whilst the number of referrals was rising, it was not possible to give precise data around percentage increase or decrease as there was no previous data to compare current levels to, possibly due to the underreporting of cases due to lack of awareness.

The CDCS stated that in some cases of harmful practice disability can be involved, for example, a child who is autistic may be believed to be possessed and told by a church or a madrasa that he or she could be 'cured'. Sometimes the parents of such children believe they are protecting their child from demons and have their best interests in mind, and therefore it was essential to work closely with faith leaders and faith groups with close ties to their communities.

In response to questions, the GMSQR stated that one of the cases that had come through involved scratch marks on the child after he had been 'exorcised' and another involving a child who had had chemicals used on his genitals.

Members queried whether there were any proposals for designating a particular officer to work with faith leaders. The CDCS stated that she would be working with the Group Manager for Policy and Performance to address how this aspect of the Service would work. The GMSQR added that there was legislation which meant that the Police could remove a child from the parents' care before the child is taken abroad, if there were grounds for this. The CDCS stated that there had been at least two cases where the child was not taken abroad due to this type of intervention; one was a case of force marriage and the other, female genital mutilation.

Members raised the point that it should not be assumed that all faith groups could
be reached through the use of one or few institutions; for example, a Somali mosque would probably not have much links with the Bengali community.

Councillor Geddes, a member of the Development Control Board (DCB) expressed concern that certain planning applicants who were refused planning permission for places of worship may start operating underground. The GMSQR stated that the emergency services had a role to play in this regard; if they suspected anything upon visiting premises, they were to inform the Council. Councillor Geddes stated that it should not be the norm that the emergency services are the first to know and wondered whether options could be given to communities to contact the Council about this; however, he acknowledged that it was a complex issue.

Members asked about the role of GPs in safeguarding children against harmful practices. The SEL stated that normally cases came to light via women's clinics. Officers stated that they were confident that should a GP suspect harmful practice, they would report it and that they had their own guidance on what to do.

The SEL concluded by stating that harmful cultural practices were not confined to particular communities, and officers ensured harmful practices across all communities were looked at.

11. Draft Scrutiny Report on Student Voice

The Lead Member presented the Committee's draft Scrutiny Report on 'Supporting and Strengthening School Councils in Barking Dagenham' for the Committee's agreement. He stated that he was extremely pleased with how the review had gone, and with the end Report, which made 21 recommendations. He informed the Committee that the Youth Representative Co-opted Member of this Committee, who was credited with initiating this Review, and could not attend today's meeting, had confirmed via email that he felt the Report was very well formed.

Members reiterated the Lead Member's comments and agreed the Report. The Committee thanked the Scrutiny Officer and CDCS for their support throughout the Review. The Lead Member stated that the Cabinet Member for Children Services had been invited to this meeting but as he had given his apologies, his views on the Report would be sought by the Scrutiny Officer before it was published.

The Scrutiny Officer outlined the next steps of the scrutiny process which were as follows:

- Obtain the Cabinet members' endorsement or comments on the Report
- Make any final, minor tweaks to the Report.
- Submit the very final version of the Report to the Committee and the Cabinet Member for Children Services.
- Upload the Report on to the Council's Scrutiny web page and share the link with Committee, those who gave evidence and other stakeholders.
- Share the Report with the Corporate Management Team.
- For actions relating to recommendations made to the Council, an Action Plan will need to be drawn up and shared with the Committee.
- Share the Report with schools in September 2013 (it will go to head teachers and governing bodies).
- Seek an initial response from schools to make sure this issue doesn't drop
off their radars.

- The Children's Rights, Participation and Engagement Manager would be coordinating an event sometime in late October or early November with the Barking and Dagenham (BAD) Youth Forum and other groups where the Report could be shared with young people. However, this would be too early to see whether young people feel that the Report has made a significant impact in schools. Therefore the BAD Youth Forum's feedback will need to be sought a few months later also.

- As per the draft Work Programme within the agenda pack the Committee will receive a monitoring report in March 2014 to see how well schools and the council have responded to the recommendations. The Lead Member suggested that this be done via a survey of all schools requiring them to provide an update on the progress of each recommendation.

The Lead Member was of the view that the report from School Improvement summarising the findings of the study of school councils they did as part of this Review, should go out to schools as a supporting document of the Scrutiny Report, as opposed to a report in its own right. The CDCS left the room to check whether or not the summary report had already been sent to schools. Upon her return she stated that whilst schools which took part in the individual visits undertaken by School Improvement had all received individual feedback, they had not been sent the summary report and as requested, it would be provided to them as a supporting document of the Scrutiny Report in September 2013.

With regards to the six month update the Committee was due to receive on the progress of the recommendations in March 2014, the CDCS stated that she was of the understanding that there would be a annual review of school councils where progress could be picked up. However, she would recheck this information. If it transpired that the annual review would not be taking place, then a survey, as suggested by the Lead Member, could be undertaken and a report of the outcomes presented to the Committee in March 2014. Furthermore, she would ensure that an Action Plan for the recommendations relating to the Council would be provided at a future meeting.

12. Draft Work Programme

The Scrutiny Officer asked members to note that the Work Programme should have listed the January and March meetings as 15 January and 5 March 2014, as opposed to 20 January and 11 March 2014.

Subject to the above, the Committee agreed the Work Programme.

13. Date of Next Meeting

Noted.