

# Report of the Children's Services Select Committee

## Scrutiny Review 2012/13



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# Children's Services Select Committee's Scrutiny Review 2012/13



## Supporting and Strengthening the Student Voice through School Councils in Barking and Dagenham

### Lead Member's Foreword



The Children's Services Select Committee is made up of local councillors and co-opted members who want to improve outcomes for the Borough's children and young people by working with the Council and its partners to improve services. As a scrutiny committee, every year it can choose to do a Review into an area of its choice. In the year 2012/13 the Committee agreed to do an in-depth review into the effectiveness of school councils in the Borough, which was prompted by Paul Cox, a young person and a co-opted member of the Committee, asking the Committee to consider the potential school councils had to strengthen student voice and thereby improve school life.

The Committee went about carrying its investigation using a number of methods including commissioning a report to get an individual snapshot of schools in the Borough, talking to experts, and looking at best practice. As a result of this Review the Committee made 21 recommendations which seek to strengthen the student voice in schools via their school councils.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank, particularly, Paul Cox for his initial raising of this issue on behalf of the Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum. I thank the Corporate Director of Children's Services, Helen Jenner, for guiding the Committee throughout the Review and for her expertise. I also thank the Scrutiny Officers, Masuma Ahmed and Chris Owens, who facilitated this Review and collated the evidence and members' views at each session, which were used to draft the recommendations and produce this Report. Finally, this Review would not have been possible without those who provided the evidence which underpin this Report.

Scrutiny's role is to act as a 'critical friend' to help the Council and local agencies to improve; in this instance it was to review schools' practices and policies around school councils. Our Review found that generally, schools in the Borough have established school councils, with many positive activities taking place. However, we identified that there was an issue of consistency in relation to the different aspects of school councils and there was a clear need to address communication gaps between students and staff and governors.

The Committee will review the progress of the recommendations in this Report six months after it has been circulated to all the Borough's schools to evaluate the impact of this Review. The Council's Children's Services Department will support schools to implement the recommendations wherever possible. Whilst we acknowledge the independence of schools, we hope the recommendations we have made are recognised as evidence based and endorsed by all schools as well as the Council. I commend this Report to all our schools' governing bodies and head teachers and hope that they will dedicate time to discuss it and put in place checks to ensure the recommendations we have made are implemented so that student voice in all schools is strengthened, leading to better outcomes for the whole school community.

**Councillor Graham Letchford**

Lead Member, Children's Services Select Committee 2012- 2014

# 1. Membership

1.1. The Children's Services Select Committee members who contributed to this Review were as follows:



**Councillor G Letchford** (Lead Member)



**Councillor T Perry** (Deputy Lead Member until April 2013)



**Councillor P Burgon** (Member, May 2012 - April 2013)



**Councillor L Butt** (Member)



**Councillor R Douglas** (Member)



**Councillor A S Jamu** (Member)



**Councillor E Kangethe** (Member)



**Councillor B Poulton** (Member)



**Councillor A Salam** (Member)



**Councillor L Rice** (Deputy Lead Member from June 2013)

## 1.2 Co-opted Members:



**Paul Cox**

Chair of Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum (*initiated this Review*)

And:

**Reverend Roger Gayler**

Church of England (May 2009 - April 2013)

**Ms Ingrid Robinson**

Church of England (appointed in July 2013)

**Ms G Spencer**

Roman Catholic Church

**Ms G Al-Salem Youssef**

Primary Schools

**Mr Ishmael Ncube**

Secondary Schools

## 2. Officer Support

2.1 The Scrutiny Champion for this Select Committee was:

**Helen Jenner** (Corporate Director of Children's Services)

2.2 Managing the Committee and supporting this Review were:

**Masuma Ahmed** (Democratic Services & Scrutiny Officer)

**Christopher Owens** (Scrutiny Officer)

## 3. Recommendations arising from the Review

3.1 For ease of reference all the recommendations arising from the Review are listed in the table below.

### Extending the Voice of School Councils

The Committee recommends that all schools:

1. Create clear and active links between their governing body and school council to ensure students are routinely consulted and involved in decisions about school policy and given an opportunity to report to governors on the impact of student voice on wider aspects of the curriculum, for example, by ensuring the governing body's agendas have a regular item about consultation with the school council and, allowing the opportunity for the school council to put forward items for the governing body's consideration.

2. Allocate a slot for school council representatives to address staff during staff meetings or on staff training days, where this is likely to add momentum to a school council initiative or improve communication between the school council and staff.
3. Dedicate at least one school assembly every year to receiving a talk or presentation from their school council on a matter that is important to students.

## **Mechanisms for Providing Meaningful Feedback**

The Committee recommends that:

4. All schools ensure that school councillors are able to provide good feedback to their class by supporting them to hold regular meetings which are held during school time, in a recognised venue, and with sufficient time to discuss matters on the school council's agenda.
5. All schools ensure a member of the Senior Management Team attends a school council meeting on a termly basis to provide meaningful feedback to the school council on decisions affecting students and to create an opportunity for a two way dialogue to take place.
6. All secondary schools support their school council to establish good links with the Barking & Dagenham Youth Forum (BADYF) and ensure mechanisms are in place to feedback and share information, for example, by including BADYT matters as a standing item on the school council's agendas, and recommending items from the school council's minutes to go forward to be discussed at the BADYF.
7. All primary schools seek to share and disseminate good practice and engage with wider Borough issues through the 5-12 Children's Forum, which is organised by Integrated Youth Services and held three times a year.
8. The BADYF put in place a system for the Borough's UK Youth Parliament representatives to feedback relevant matters to all school councils.
9. All schools ensure their school council is aware of its right to call representatives of organisations that impact on children's policy to attend its meetings to consult on issues on the school council's agenda, for example, by prescribing this right in the school council's constitution.

## **Supporting School Councils to be More Dynamic and Raising their Profiles**

The Committee recommends that:

10. All schools arrange training to ensure teachers are clearer on how opportunities to include debate and discussion on the diverse range of issues affecting schools, and spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects of the curriculum, in their school council's activities, impact upon attainment and behaviour.
11. All secondary schools support their school councils to take part in an organised annual School Councils' Summit whereby students from schools across the Borough can get together to share ideas and network.

12. All secondary schools fully participate in and publicise annual democratic elections to the BADYF across all key stages.
13. All schools raise the profile of their school council by promoting its activities and celebrating its successes through authorised social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter, the school handbook or prospectus, the school website, notice boards in prominent areas and, official school publications that are shared with parents.
14. All secondary schools seek to embed police input and presence into school council meetings via the Safer School Officers and ensure the work of the Borough's Young People's Safety Group (YPSG) is regularly discussed at school council level to ensure there is a link between school and borough-wide issues of safety, and utilise the opportunity to forward any arising issues to the YPSG.
15. All schools ask their governing body to consider whether it would be appropriate to allocate an amount of funding to their school council.

## **Recommendations for the Local Authority to Help Support Student Voice**

The Committee recommends that:

16. Integrated Youth Services explore practical ways to link the work of the BADYF to the 5 – 12 Children's Forum.
17. Ward councillors ensure that each school council in their ward receives an offer from them annually to attend a school council meeting in the academic year along with information about their surgery times and an invitation to raise any items it would like with them.
18. Children Services liaise with colleagues in Democratic Services to review the options available to continue, in appropriate settings, local democracy presentations for children and young people to help students understand how local democracy works and how they can use these principles to strengthen student voice.
19. Children's Services regularly produce a list of upcoming student voice activities which is published on the 'Youth 4 Us' website.
20. Children's Services ensure this Report and its recommendations are disseminated to schools in the Borough and seek an initial formal response to it from each so that the Committee can estimate the potential impact of this Review.
21. Children Services monitor the progress of the recommendations and feed this back to the Committee approximately six months after the Report has been disseminated to schools, and at the same time, seek feedback from the BADYF on their perceptions of how schools have responded to this Report, and provide this information to the Committee.



## 4. Background

- 4.1 The [Children's Services Select Committee](#) (CSSC, "the Committee") is proud that one its co-opted members is the Chair of the [Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum](#) (BADYF). One of Scrutiny's key aims is to "address issues of local concern". At the beginning of the municipal year, the Committee therefore asked the BADYF to highlight any issues it felt warranted an investigation by the Committee. The Chair, Paul Cox, informed the Committee that an investigation into "student voice" would be a worthwhile endeavour. It was noted in the minutes:

*"The representatives of the Barking and Dagenham Youth Forum raised a concern regarding how school management respond to the Student Voice groups within the schools, noting that they are often told their concerns are being "considered" and then never acted upon. They enquired whether the Local Authority could do more to support Student Voice groups, and use its position to encourage a consistent approach across the borough's schools" (CSSC, 29 May 2013).*



- 4.2 The reasons for the Review, as expressed by Paul Cox, were:

*"...Student Voice bodies do a lot of worthwhile work. However, the B&D Youth Forum feels this work is often over looked by school management teams. Furthermore, Student Voice receives no support from the Council and no checks are undertaken. The success of Student Voice, it is felt, is very dependent on whether the school has the benefit of a teacher passionate about progressing it and supporting it, therefore there is a lack of consistency across the borough. Overall, the B&D Youth Forum would like to see all Student Voice bodies better respected by senior management teams, and for their concerns and comments to be considered during decision making affecting the school and its students" (CSSC, 18 July 2012).*

This Report is the outcome of the review the Committee agreed to undertake to address the concerns the BADYF raised around strengthening student voice.

## 5. Introduction

- 5.1 What is "student voice" and why is it important?

"Student voice is the individual and collective perspective and actions of young people within the context of learning and education. This can include, but isn't limited to, active or passive participation, knowledge, voting, wisdom, activism, beliefs, service, opinions, leadership, and ideas. Student Voice reflects identity, and comes from a person's experiences, ideals, and knowledge" (*SoundOut*).

- 5.2 These concepts also apply to the wider concept of citizenship and democracy. The Committee looked at some theories presented by the Corporate Director of Children's Services around levels of citizenship participation and the benefits



these bring, which could be applied to the student voice concept within schools (CSSC, 6 February 2013).

5.3 The most relevant of these to this Review was Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation (Hart, 1992), which has eight rungs:

- 8 Young people and adults share decision-making
- 7 Young people lead and initiate action
- 6 Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people
- 5 Young people consulted and informed
- 4 Young people assigned and informed
- 3 Young people tokenised
- 2 Young people are decoration
- 1 Young people are manipulated

The last three rungs are not considered participation.

The Committee agreed that it was essential that all schools within the Borough fell within rung four at the very least, with visions and plans in place to develop further.

5.4 The Committee noted that research into the strength of student voice in schools in the UK has highlighted that more attention needs to be paid to this aspect of school life. "Research produced in 2010 by the University of Edinburgh found that, while school councils were popular and common, there were problems with their design, execution and support that could undermine the whole point of the project" (Guardian, 2012). Other research has advocated for stronger models of student voice within school communities based on the following reasons (Ruddock, 2005):

- Talking and listening to students will help schools enhance communication between the school leadership and students. From Paul Cox's representations to the Committee, it was apparent that students wanted to have more involvement in decision making on issues affecting them. Strengthening student voice and participation will help "bridge the gap between young people's capabilities and standing in school" (Ruddock, 2005, p1).
- The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines the right of children to express their views and to have due weight given to them. Ofsted's Inspection Framework looks at the impact that teaching has on the promotion of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. In summary, it could be said that there has been a 'student voice movement', requiring a big focus to be paid on this aspect of school life.
- Students should be seen as experts in improving their experiences of learning in school; "students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement" (Ruddock, 2005, p1).
- "The qualities that we look for in young people are those that participation and consultation can help develop"... "The 'positive-passive' student may be more compliant and easier to teach but with the new emphasis on the school as a community, teachers are increasingly valuing the 'positive-active'

student. And looking to life beyond school, employers seem to be valuing similar qualities: a capacity for independent initiative, working collaboratively, and competence in the management of time and task. Consultation can help develop these qualities” (Ruddock, 2005, p2).

5.5 In terms of school councils, a major tool for student voice, the following line sums up their importance well:

*“These are the two main reasons we have school councils: to enable young people to influence their communities and education and to learn how to do that in a democratic and constructive way” (Involver).*

## 6. Scoping

6.1 Due to the wide scope of student voice, and given the timescale and resources, the Committee felt it could have the most impact by focusing its attention on **supporting and strengthening school councils in Barking and Dagenham**. A school council is *“a representative group of students who have been proposed and elected by their peers to represent their views and raise issues with the Senior Managers and Governors of their school. A School Council can also propose and take forward initiatives and projects on behalf of their peers, and be involved in strategic planning and processes such as the School Development Plan, governing body meetings and staff appointments” (SoundOut).*

### 6.2 Terms of Reference

6.2.1 The Committee agreed to shape the terms of reference for this Review in a way that would address the BADYF's concern that school management teams across the Borough show variability in their willingness to support or take heed of students' views. The Committee agreed that the best way to do this was by seeking to:

1. Take a detailed look at local school council provision.
2. Look at best practice on a wider level and compare this to local school council provision and practice to see if recommendations for improvement can be made directly to schools (while recognising their independence from the Council in this regards) to address any gaps or areas of inconsistency.
3. During this Review, ensure areas of concern raised by the BADYF are addressed.
4. Consider practical ways the Council could add to school council/ student voice provision.
5. To produce a final report with recommendations for future policy and/or practice.

*(CSSC, 18 December 2012 and Informal discussion notes).*

6.3 The indicators of success would be based on:

1. Whether the recommendations made by the Committee are accepted and implemented by schools and/or the Council.
2. Whether the BADYF endorses the recommendations of the Review.

3. The BADYF's report back to the Committee six months after the circulation of this Report, outlining their perceptions of student voice in schools. (CSSC, 18 December, 2012)

## 7. Methodology

### 7.1 Overview

- 7.1.1 Evidence was gathered in the formal committee meetings held between 29 May 2012 and 12 June 2013 and through several ad hoc and informal sessions between members and those providing evidence. The Committee received presentations, reports, formal written evidence, and oral evidence from a range of stakeholders including:

<b>Paul Cox</b>	(Chair of BAD Youth Forum and co-opted member)
<b>Helen Jenner</b>	(LBBB, Corporate Director of Children's Services)
<b>Sem Simkins</b>	(Consultant, School Councils UK)
<b>Anne Pepper</b>	(LBBB, Principal Adviser, Secondary Schools)
<b>Erik Stein</b>	(LBBB, Group Manager, Integrated Youth Services)
<b>Danni Almond</b>	(All Saints School, LEC Manager & Student voice Coordinator)
<b>The Children's Trust</b>	(A local partnership board)

- 7.1.2 Extensive web-based research was undertaken by the Scrutiny team to utilise online guidance and reference tools available from organisations such as:

<b>Involver</b>	( <a href="http://www.involver.org.uk">www.involver.org.uk</a> )
<b>The Guardian</b>	( <a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/education">www.guardian.co.uk/education</a> )
<b>School Councils UK</b>	( <a href="http://www.schoolcouncils.org/">http://www.schoolcouncils.org/</a> )
<b>Sound Out</b>	( <a href="http://www.soundout.org">www.soundout.org</a> )
<b>Teaching Times</b>	( <a href="http://www.teachingtimes.com">www.teachingtimes.com</a> )

- 7.1.3 The Committee agreed to complete this Review within the municipal year 2012/2013; however, it was noted that the Lead Member's term of office was until April 2014 and therefore, some flexibility could be allowed to extend the period of the Review beyond this, if it would add value to the Review (*Informal discussion notes, 2013*).
- 7.1.4 The following sections will provide a summary of the methods listed above which helped the Committee to identify and understand issues around student voice in the Borough.

### 7.2 Paul Cox's BAD Youth Forum presentation

- 7.2.1 Paul Cox delivered a presentation to the Committee outlining why the BADYF had raised student voice as a topic for review. He explained how he had participated in student voice for six years and, in that time, he and his contemporaries have noticed several flaws in the execution of student voice programmes in several of the schools in the Borough. He highlighted the Forum's main concerns which shaped the direction of this Review and its recommendations. These were:

- Outcomes from student voice lobbying/activity are hard to quantify;
- Perceived lack of power and authority / sidelined; and,
- Dependent on the individual “lead teacher” on whether student voice is successful or not (including issues surrounding capacity, training, and experience)

7.2.2 In terms of the Council's role in supporting student voice, members broadly discussed the Council's difficult budget situation and, whilst recognising that no additional financial resources could be directed towards student voice activity, members were keen to explore how the Council could better use its influence to support student voice within schools and raise its profile among teachers, council officers, and councillors, many of whom were school governors (*CSSC, 18 September 2012*).

### **7.3 Barking & Dagenham Secondary Schools' Student Council Summit**

7.3.1 The Lead Member attended the ‘Barking and Dagenham Secondary Schools' Student Council Summit’ at All Saints Catholic School on 7 December 2012. This was organised and attended by school council representatives from across the Borough, including: All Saints Catholic School, Barking Abbey School, Dagenham Park Church of England School, Eastbrook Comprehensive School, Eastbury Comprehensive School, Jo Richardson Community School, Robert Clack School, Sydney Russell Comprehensive School, and Warren Comprehensive School.

7.3.2 The Summit involved students partaking in five workshops covering the role of the school council, effective decision making, 'talk versus discussion' and effective decision making processes'. The students rated each workshop for its usefulness and all workshops received a rating at least four out of five (with five being the highest) from most students.

The 'Feedback Analysis' of the Summit is provided as **Appendix 2** of this Report.

### **7.4 Sem Simkins- Consultant, School Councils UK**

7.4.1 Throughout the Review the presentation delivered by Paul Cox was at the forefront of the Committee's thoughts. Mindful that there was potentially a lack of consistency across school councils the Committee resolved to determine nationally recognised best practice which would outline the benchmark all schools should be striving to reach. The Committee used best practice evidence researched by Scrutiny Officers and a meeting with Sem Simkins, Trainer and Consultant from School Councils UK, on 20 March 2013 to do this.

7.4.2 At this session Mr Simkins delivered a talk to the Committee based on his 12 years' experience working on school council training as well as 32 years' experience in schools teaching. He recommended the two following, very useful, resources in the field of school councils:

- *School Councils – School Improvement (Prof. Lynn Davies and Hiromi Yamashita, University of Birmingham, 2007)*
- *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action (Geoff Whitty & Emma Wisby, Institute of Education, University of London, 2007)*

7.4.3 Members agreed at this session that student voice was ultimately about improving opportunities for young people to have a voice and become active within their school, which would have continuous benefits for them in later life. The Committee agreed that this very powerfully underlined the importance of schools committing to strengthening student voice through school councils.

## **7.5 Children's Services Department: School Improvement's Study of School Councils in the Borough**

7.5.1 The BADYF and the Committee asked that all school councils be visited by a trained School Improvement Officer. They wanted an objective view of every school council so that each could have an individual snapshot of itself to see how it compared with others across the Borough. This work would also provide helpful evidence for schools as it would contribute to the student voice strand of the schools' own self-evaluation evidence. The Committee was extremely pleased that the Schools' Forum agreed to set aside funding to allow all schools to have a student voice evidence gathering visit.

7.5.2 This programme of visits was coordinated by Ms Anne Pepper, an experienced school improvement officer and Ofsted Inspector within the School Improvement section of the Council, with oversight from Erik Stein, Group Manager and expert on engaging young people. The visits took place between February and April 2013. The meetings were structured as follows:

- Meeting with School Council representatives
- Meeting with Senior Leadership Team lead for student voice
- Reading of any relevant documents/minutes
- Brief feedback to head or nominated senior leader

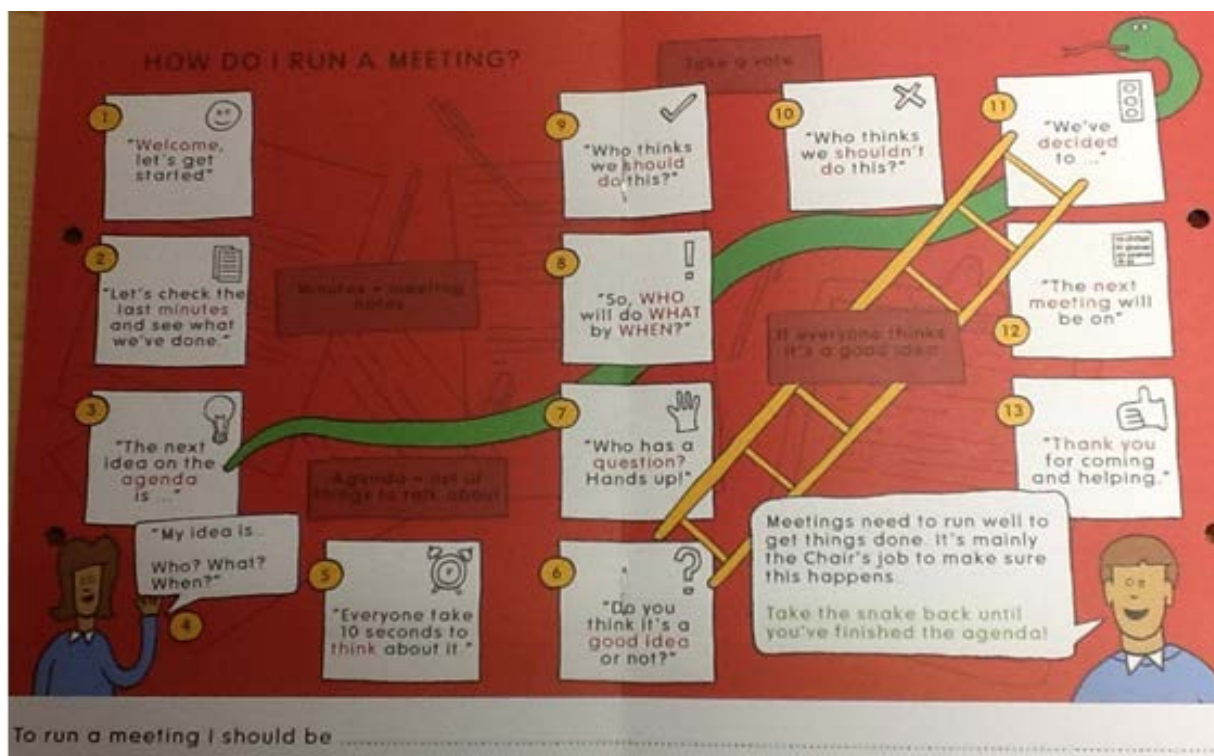
7.5.3 Key points were captured on a pro-forma agreed and provided for the school. The results were summarised into a report which is referred to as 'School Improvement's report' throughout this Report.

7.5.4 The visits were carried out by the above officers as well as 17 others. As a part of this piece of work head teachers were presented with the best practice guidance published by School Councils UK.

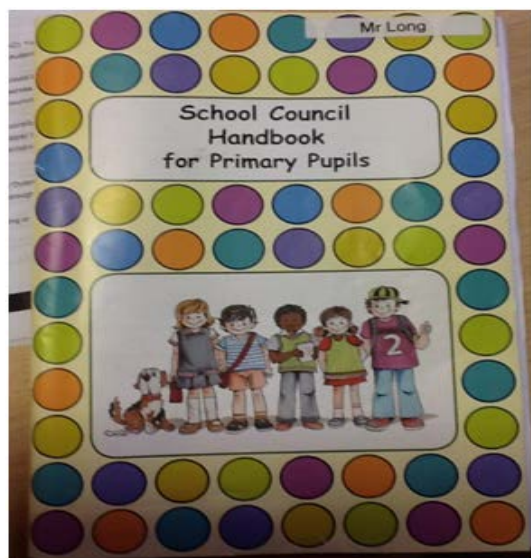
7.5.5 Evidence from 50 of the 58 schools was included in School Improvement's report. The schools visited comprised of nine secondary schools, 39 primary schools, one special school, and one specialist alternative provision. The schools that were not able to participate at the time were reoffered a visit; however, the results of visits at schools who agreed to participate at this later stage were not available at the time of this Review.

7.5.6 As such an extensive study was carried out, the Committee felt confident to base a number of its recommendations on this Report, which highlighted the strengths of school councils in this Borough, as well as key areas for improvement.

7.5.7 Below are some images officers took during their visits:



(Northbury Junior School, 5 March 2013)



(Ripple Primary School, 6 March 2013)

7.5.8 School Improvement's summary report is provided as **Appendix 1** of this Report.

## 7.6 The Children's Trust

7.6.1 The Children's Trust, a local partnership board, consisting of representatives of secondary and primary schools, the local authority, the Police, Health and the voluntary and community sector, was consulted on this Review in the form of verbal briefing by the Lead Member, at its meeting in May 2013, which was themed 'Participation and Views of Children and Young People'. The Trust was excited to see the end result of the Review, endorsed the Committee's aim to strengthen



student voice and asked the Lead Member to take its comments back to the Committee for consideration (*Children's Trust, 21 May 2013*).

## 9. Formulation of the Select Committee's Recommendations

9.1 This section summarises how the evidence collated from the above methods helped the Committee to arrive at its recommendations.

### 9.2 Extending the Voice of School Councils

9.2.1 Mr Simkins advised the Committee that nationally, the most successful school councils were ones who were holistic in whom they involved; they involved more than just students and teachers. There are good examples of schools liaising with their care takers and kitchen supervisors to resolve matters effectively. Establishing links with the governing body was essential for the student voice having an impact on wider school policy areas. Involvement also backs the idea of a strong relationship between the student council and governing body and suggests ways this could be done on its website.

School Improvement's report notes that "Little contact or active involvement with governors was identified. One school holds a 'governors' day' once a year to share student voice work as it was felt to be more effective than having a student attend Governing Body meetings. The need to identify constructive and effective ways of working more closely with governors was identified as an action point in several reports" (p4). It further notes that "The relationship between school councils and governing bodies is an issue for development across both primary and secondary schools. There was little evidence of regular contact or active involvement with governors" (p7).

#### **Recommendation 1:**

**Create clear and active links between their governing body and school council to ensure students are routinely consulted and involved in decisions about school policy and given an opportunity to report to governors on the impact of student voice on wider aspects of the curriculum, for example, by ensuring the governing body's agendas have a regular item about consultation with the school council and, allowing the opportunity for the school council to put forward items for the governing body's consideration.**

9.2.2 Mr Simkins advised that model school councils were ones that enlighten staff of pupils' perceptions. Members felt that although there was strong evidence (such as the success of the 2012 Summit and the high profile of the BADYF) that in this Borough students themselves did not appear to become disinterested in participating in student voice initiatives at the secondary stage, there was evidence that staff in some secondary schools held what students perceived to be conservative views about the roles of students in schools, and the key was how to change their mind sets (*CSSC, September 2012*). Mr Simkins suggested that a novel way to ensure staff to obtain students' perceptions was to schedule a few minutes for school council representatives to address staff at their staff meetings whenever it was appropriate.



**Recommendation 2:**

**Allocate a slot for school council representatives to address staff during staff meetings or on staff training days, where this is likely to add momentum to a school council initiative or improve communication between the school council and staff.**

- 9.2.3 Involver advocates the use of assemblies to promote student voice:  
“A key focus of the assemblies should be to be really clear and positive about what impact the school council and committees have had”.

During the session with Mr Simkins, the Corporate Director of Children's Services stated that despite achieving good academic results, “softer” skills such as speaking and presenting appeared to have not been developed to their full potential, which could make young people from the Borough less competitive at job interviews, for an example.

School Improvement’s report notes that some secondary and primary schools used the school assembly to share information about school council activities and decisions, as well as other methods (p3). The Committee was keen that the school assembly be utilised consistently by all schools to give the school council a platform as it would embed the importance of the school council in the psyche of the whole school, and provide an opportunity for pupils to develop confidence and key skills such as presentation and communication skills.

**Recommendation 3:**

**Dedicate at least one school assembly every year to receiving a talk or presentation from their school council on a matter that is important to students.**

## 9.3 Mechanisms for Providing Meaningful Feedback

- 9.3.1 Mr Simkins confirmed that it was best practice to allow pupils time and space to meet and receive feedback from the representatives who attend school council meetings on a regular basis. When the school council meets it should be given the opportunity to put forward alternative options if they feel the options in place are not viable. Representatives should develop the skill of checking the reasons for decisions with their peers.

School Improvement's report notes, with regards to secondary schools that "Most schools have regular meetings either monthly or fortnightly; the shortest recorded was only 20 minutes a month which is clearly insufficient time for students to engage in discussion of the issues brought to their council. The meetings are conducted formally with agendas, minutes and constitutions. Students appoint their own officers and the Chair runs the meetings. All councils are supported by the teacher/s with responsibility for the school council" (p3). It further notes that "Meetings are generally held during the school day allowing full attendance. In a few cases, timing is an issue, for example, when meetings are held after school there may be clashes with clubs and activities and, more significantly, those who have to pick up or look after younger siblings are unable to attend" (p3). It found that "A number of schools reported that not all teachers enable time for council representatives to feed back to their tutor groups regularly" (p3).

The report states in relation to primary schools that "Meetings are generally held during the school day enabling full attendance. Students prefer meetings to be held during curriculum time rather than break, assembly or lunchtimes. Where meetings are held after school attendance is variable and it is difficult for some students to attend. Some councils meet weekly or fortnightly, some monthly or half-termly but for a longer period" (p5). It states that "The majority of schools arrange for students to give regular feedback about council decisions to their classes. The issue of consistency was identified in a number of schools where not all teachers enable time for this" (p6).

**Recommendation 4:**

**All schools ensure that school councillors are able to provide good feedback to their class by supporting them to hold regular meetings which are held during school time, in a recognised venue, and with sufficient time to discuss matters on the school council's agenda.**

- 9.3.2 Mr Simkins' outlined the importance of school councils not only being seen as the sole responsibility of the link-teacher and the need for input from all staff. He advised that nationally some schools ensured a member of its Senior Management Team attended school council meetings, which sent out a resounding message to pupils about their role in the school. Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation showed that models of citizenship could be meaningful on one end, but tokenistic on the other. Mr Simkins advised, based on his experience and research that having a tokenistic or ineffective school council was worse than having no school council due to the messages it sent out to pupils. It was therefore essential that when a school council's proposal is refused by the senior leadership team of the school, reasons for the decision and detailed feedback is provided to the school council.

School Improvement's report notes with regards to secondary schools that "Opportunities for contact between school councils and senior leaders varies between schools. In one school the council representatives meet regularly with the headteacher to share the views of their fellow students. In some cases council members felt that there should be more active involvement of senior leaders with the school council" (p4). This was in line with Paul Cox's presentation to the Committee which highlighted that one of the BADYF's concerns was the inconsistent communication between student voice bodies and senior management teams across schools.

**Recommendation 5:**

**All schools ensure a member of the Senior Management Team attends a school council meeting on a termly basis to provide meaningful feedback to the school council on decisions affecting students and to create an opportunity for a two way dialogue to take place.**

- 9.3.3 Mr Simkins' evidence suggested that it was important for school councils to receive feedback on issues that were wider than those that only related to their school. One of the best models he had seen whereby students received wider feedback was one in Wales. This model involved all schools having a school council, that fed into an 'area youth council', which reflected the Welsh Assembly model.

The Committee noted that the purpose of the BADYF is to:

- Be democratic
- Give members the opportunity to represent other young people, their school or youth group, and bring their views to meetings and sessions
- Have access to people who make decisions locally that affect young people's lives
- Create and maintain good links with decision makers in local and national government
- Act on issues that are important to young people and to work at its own pace.

*(BADYF)*



*(BADYF, May 2013- Question and Answer session in Council Chambers with the Council, Health, Police and TFL representatives)*

The Committee agreed that the BADYF, due to its high profile and active nature, was an excellent way for young people to tap into wider issues than those of their own school and communicate with their peers from across the Borough to take joint action on issues important to them.

**Recommendation 6:**

**All secondary schools support their school council to establish good links with the Barking & Dagenham Youth Forum (BADYF) and ensure mechanisms are in place to feedback and share information, for example, by including BADYT matters as a standing item on the school council's agendas, and recommending items from the school council's minutes to go forward to be discussed at the BADYF.**

- 9.3.4 Whilst the Committee recognised that there was no elected cross-Borough forum for primary phase schools, it agreed that primary school councils should also be given the opportunity to engage in borough wide issues through existing channels.

**Recommendation 7:**

**All primary schools seek to share and disseminate good practice and engage with wider Borough issues through the 5-12 Children's Forum, which is organised by Integrated Youth Services and held three times a year.**

- 9.3.5 The Committee noted that the Borough was represented on the UK Youth Parliament (UKYP), which was run by young people to give young people a voice on issues affecting them.



*(UKYP, July 2012- local Member of UKYP Faraz, attended the national event to speak up on behalf of all children and young people in Barking and Dagenham)*

At the meeting with Mr Simkins, Paul Cox confirmed that currently there was no structured system in place for the Borough's representatives on the UKYP to feedback issues to school councils.

#### **Recommendation 8:**

**The BADYF put in place a system for the Borough's UK Youth Parliament representatives to feedback relevant matters to all school councils.**

- 9.3.6 Mr Simkins' experience told the Committee that nationally, there was a tendency in some primary schools to operate a 'decision- action' model whereby the students would identify the action that needed to be taken but the action itself would be taken by the teacher. The Committee agreed that where appropriate, students should also be involved in taking action. Furthermore, it was important that school councils avoided a 'no-moans' culture and instead promoted a proactive one where students are motivated to do something about issues they are not happy with. Although students may not always be in a position to make or enforce a decision with regards to a particular problem, taking other action, such as raising their problems with decision makers, both within the school and outside, would help develop confidence in dealing with the outside world and develop a wider skill set such as questioning and holding decision makers to account. It would promote active citizenship and partnership working.

School Improvement's report notes that "There were many good examples of how students had recognised a problem and designed a strategy to address it. In one school students spoke passionately about their involvement in a project linked to an action from their recent Ofsted inspection: lateness was identified as an issue by Ofsted and the students linked this to problems with some of the buses coming from Barking to their school. They set up a project group to investigate the problem, contacted Transport for London, (TfL) and asked the Director of Children's Services for support. The students are hoping for a meeting with TfL to discuss the timetabling of particular bus routes to address the problem" (p3).

The Children's Trust had a discussion around the links between student voice and children's rights and suggested that the Committee consider whether it could be made clearer to school councils that they had the right to request representatives of



different organisations to attend their meetings to help solve particular problems they were facing and answer questions.



*(Urban Question Time, January 2009- School Council Pupils have a question and answer session with senior officials across the council, Health and Police).*

#### **Recommendation 9:**

**All schools ensure their school council is aware of its right to call representatives of organisations that impact on children's policy to attend its meetings to consult on issues on the school council's agenda, for example, by prescribing this right in the school council's constitution.**

## **9.4 Supporting School Councils to be More Dynamic and Raising their Profiles**

9.4.1 Mr Simkins' evidence suggested that the structure of the school council should form part of the school's teaching strategy. The whole basis of the school council is to serve and impact positively on all the students of the school. Even with the right environment and culture in place, school councils are only effective when students have the confidence and encouragement in their roles as representatives. It's often necessary for staff to allow students to take ownership. Tutors need support and training to empower students. Nationally, the issue of consistency in how staff across the school view the school council was particularly crucial for secondary schools and could be improved via training. His many years of experience told him that effective school councils lead to school improvement.

Members strongly expressed their views that schools need to make it clear that young people would be listened to. They noted that in many communities it is very difficult to engage even adults into being active in their communities. It was therefore important to shape school councils to become interesting places which make real differences. The Committee noted that best practice requires schools to "put student voice at the heart of learning and school life." "Schools see better learning when student voice is included. Giving students control over aspects of their learning leads to much more engagement" (*School Councils UK*).

The Committee expressed concern that in order to truly empower school councils, teachers needed to put in time, and needed support. Mr Simkins recognised that nationally, staff time was an issue for many schools; however, schools which

ensured that their school council was a part of their policies, and acknowledged that the skills students picked up in being involved were ones that could be applied to all subjects, thereby leading to an improvement in attainment and behaviour, had more chance of being successful.

School Improvement's report notes with regards to secondary schools that "Agendas tend to focus on students' immediate concerns rather than longer term policy issues. Issues most commonly referred to were uniform, improving school facilities, transport, litter, school meals and charity fundraising" (p3). It states that "Although teaching and learning are not generally discussed by students, there are examples in some secondary schools of student involvement in teacher appointments and evaluating teaching" (p8).

The Report notes, in relation to primary schools that the "the link between the development of student voice and the improvement in issues such as behaviour, attendance and the ethos for learning was strongly identified by the students" (p7). One of the case studies taken from a primary school describes the students' enthusiasm when giving evidence that managing behaviour in a positive way was having a significant impact across the school.

The Report further states that "There are also some examples where staff and students are able to make a very clear connection between the work of school councils and other student voice initiatives and improvements in behaviour and attendance and the resultant improvements in learning. This is an aspect for further development" (p8).

The Report advocates for an improvement in 'teachers' understanding of how the work of the school council has the potential to support and contribute to whole school issues and aspects of the wider curriculum, e.g. behaviour, attendance, teaching and learning, SMSC, Citizenship, PSHE. It found that the "Understanding of the links with the spiritual dimension of students' experience and development appears to be a weak aspect" (p9).

The Committee noted that school staff felt that further local face to face training in supporting school councils was needed (CSSC, 20 March 2013).

#### **Recommendation 10:**

**All schools arrange training to ensure teachers are clearer on how opportunities to include debate and discussion on the diverse range of issues affecting schools, and spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects of the curriculum, in their school council's activities, impact upon attainment and behaviour.**

- 9.4.2 The outcomes of the Student Council Summit held in December 2012 were collated and analysed to establish how useful students found the session. The Committee believed the Summit was extremely valuable. It was noted in the Feedback Analysis:

"Young people think in a different way to adults and it is incredible to see what they are capable of imagining if we do not lead them towards pre-empted responses.

"The Student Council Summit was designed to be only semi-structured and wholly student led, thus allowing students to be creative and lead their own discussions; the results have been outstanding.

"There have already been calls from many of the students to continue the summit and make it an annual or even bi-annual event, with many schools offering to host the next one; a very encouraging outcome indeed" (p6).

School Improvement's report also notes that students found this one day seminar very beneficial: "School councillors were able to meet to discuss common issues and solutions. It gave us a pool of shared experience. We were able to hear about best practice and share our own. It was interesting to see how different councils work" (p2).

Paul Cox, during his presentation, explained the BADYF's enthusiasm for the Student Council Summit, which was the first of its kind. He believed the Summit would be beneficial as it would involve:

- Building cohesive relationships between school councils;
- Tackling relevant issues to have a positive impact on all schools;
- Developing leadership and communication skills;

And involve

- Workshops promoting discussion about best practice;
- Guest speakers such as Mr Kevin Donovan (LBBD, Children's Services).

(CSSC, 18 September 2013)

#### **Recommendation 11:**

**All secondary schools support their school councils to take part in an organised annual School Councils' Summit whereby students from schools across the Borough can get together to share ideas and network.**

- 9.4.3 Mr Simkins was of the view that model school councils are ones that operate on the principles of democracy and promote good citizenship. School council elections should be democratic and the best model was the secret ballot. In some schools the elections take place during break time with about 68 percent turnout, which was very positive and telling. Election information should spell out what role a school council representative will play and feedback following the election should be given. Nationally, this was an area for weakness for some schools and one where tutors could provide more support by learning from practice.

The Committee was pleased to note that School Improvement's Report found that generally, school council elections in the Borough were run democratically. However, the Committee noted that when it came to the annual elections to the BADYF, although the majority of secondary schools participated fully, there were occasions where some schools were not as responsive as they could be. It felt that whilst the responsibility for carrying out the elections remain within Integrated Youth Services, all schools should actively participate through the arranging of candidates with in-school election campaigns and the wide promotion of the election day itself (via the school council and other ways) to ensure that as many young people vote as possible with a sound understanding of the purpose of the elections and the wider Forum (*Informal discussion notes, 2013*).



**Recommendation 12:**

**All secondary schools fully participate in and publicise annual democratic elections to the BADYF across all key stages.**

- 9.4.4 At the session with Mr Simkins it was agreed that school councils should celebrate big and small successes and promote these to the school community. He firmly believed that the school council should have a high profile and to do this it needs to plan how it would communicate with year groups and staff. He confirmed that that nationally, different tools for raising the school council's profile were used such as the school handbook or prospectus to ensure all students, including new ones, know the structure and their points of contact. The Notice Board was also a good way to promote the school council's work, particularly to visitors and guests. Furthermore, raising the profile of the school council may also engage parents to become aware of the work of the school council and take pride in the ethos of the school. It may also encourage parents to support their children to be active within the school council, encouraging wider participation than just members of the school council. He suggested that parents' evenings and notice boards were effective ways to promote school councils to parents.

In relation to primary schools, good practice was identified by School Improvement in that "Many schools publicise the activities of the council through notice boards, photos of members, holding open meetings, all ensuring that they are accessible and accountable to their peers (p6). Furthermore, "Students were very enthusiastic about their achievements and gave many examples such as promoting healthy food in school, carrying out a survey on attitudes to reading and students' preferred authors and genres, surveys on bullying, playtime buddy schemes and links with community groups (p6)." In relation to secondary schools, the Report states that "There were some reports that websites were not regularly updated or that students did not access them" (p4).

The Committee agreed that the above methods as well as social media tools were an easy and practical way to keep the whole school updated on the school council's successes and activities, and these should be utilised consistently by all schools to celebrate and raise the profile of the school council (*Informal discussion notes, 2013*).

**Recommendation 13:**

**All schools raise the profile of their school council by promoting its activities and celebrating its successes through authorised social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter, the school handbook or prospectus, the school website, notice boards in prominent areas and, official school publications that are shared with parents.**

- 9.4.5 At the Children's Trust meeting, Sergeant Evers from the Safer Schools Team within Barking and Dagenham Metropolitan Police explained that there was a perceived gap between the Team and school councils in the Borough. If a link was established, the Police could input into school councils when necessary, leading to improved communication between children and young people and the Team so that a two way dialogue could take place on matters relating to crime and safety.

It was noted that this work should also link to the work of the Young People's Safety Group (YPSG), which acted as young person advisory body to the Local

Safeguarding Children's Board. This work needs to be better publicised and linked in at school level (*Informal discussion notes, 2013*).



(YPSG, March 2010- Secondary School Pupils attending termly meeting)

The Committee was pleased to note that the Corporate Director of Children's Services was working the Police to set up a system linking primary schools to Safer Schools Officers. It also commended the Borough Commander's decision to maintain a full complement of Safer Schools Officers when many other Boroughs were reducing them (*Children's Trust, 21 May 2013*).

**Recommendation 14:**

**All secondary schools seek to embed police input and presence into school council meetings via the Safer School Officers and ensure the work of the Borough's Young People's Safety Group (YPSG) is regularly discussed at school council level to ensure there is a link between school and borough-wide issues of safety, and utilise the opportunity to forward any arising issues to the YPSG.**

- 9.4.6 Mr Simkins supported the idea of schools having an allocated budget due to the perception this was likely to create amongst students about the standing of the school council as well as the skills this would help students develop.

The Committee noted that "A budget for a school council is crucial for giving the council a sense that it matters. It is even more important, however, in encouraging the council to think outside the traditional parameters" and "A budget of its own allows the council to make more informed decisions, and to take positive steps in implementing them" (*Teaching Times*).

School Councils UK's 'tip sheet' encourages school councils to "Secure a budget, even a small one; this will give the school council a sense of autonomy, so they don't basically end up being tokenistic".

School Improvement's report notes that "Most councils do not have an allocated budget and are often involved in fundraising to enable them to carry out specific projects identified by students. One council has a budget of £500 which the student action groups can bid for. Some expressed the view that a budget would enable them to plan their activities more effectively" (p3).

Paul Cox, on behalf of the BADYF advocated for a dedicated budget for school councils to support student voice (*CSSC, 18 September 2012*).

**Recommendation 15:**

**All schools ask their governing bodies to consider whether it would be appropriate to allocate an amount of funding to their school council.**

## **9.5 Recommendations for the Local Authority to Help Support Student Voice**

- 9.5.1 Paul Cox highlighted that a lack of support from the Local Authority in advancing student voice was another concern of the BADYF (CSSC, 18 September 2012). The following paragraphs explain the reasoning behind recommendations that have been made to the Council and particularly, to the Children's Services Department to support student voice.

Mr Simkins outlined that some primary school children have very active roles on their school council in their final year but after their transition to secondary school, they have very little opportunity to voice their opinions as their secondary school is not aware of their previous role.

At the Committee meeting in December 2012, a member of the BADYF highlighted the importance of the Forum and urged the Committee to ask officers to organise joint meetings between primary and secondary age groups. It was noted that the Borough has a 5-12 Children's Forum.

**Recommendation 16:**

**Integrated Youth Services explore practical ways to link the work of the BAD Youth Forum to the 5 – 12 Children's Forum.**

- 9.5.2 The Committee agreed that it was essential for students to have opportunities to become familiar with principles of local democracy and participate in the wider democratic process. Involver supports the idea of school councils 'doing democracy:

*"Real democracy enables everyone to share responsibility and have an equal role in shaping their society. A doing democracy is one which not only encourages everyone to have his or her say, but enables them to put their views into action" (involver).*

School Improvement's report notes that "Some schools had met local councillors to discuss particular issues. This was evidence of students participating in the wider democratic process and seen as 'a fantastic opportunity' by one school: 'We set up a meeting with Cllr. Liam Smith regarding proposed savings to Student Services in the Borough. We were able to ask questions and challenge him. If we felt something had to be accountable we challenged it" (p2).

**Recommendation 17:**

**Ward councillors ensure that each school council in their ward receives an offer from them annually to attend a school council meeting in the academic year along with information about their surgery times and an invitation to raise any items it would like with them.**

- 9.5.3 School Improvement's report notes that "Several school councils had made visits either to Barking Town Hall or Dagenham Civic Centre which had extended their understanding of how local democracy works. Students were extremely positive about the value of these visits:

*'We met with other school councillors and spoke with the Mayor. It was good because we shared ideas and picked things up from each other.'*

*'Being a Mayor is as important as being a school councillor – they both have important jobs to do" (p2).*

The Committee was disappointed that due to budget cuts and conflicting priorities for scarce resources, future school visits could not be supported by officers. However, in view of the recognised value of these sessions to young people, it agreed that the local democracy presentations should continue to be delivered to young people where possible.

**Recommendation 18:**

**Children's Services liaise with colleagues in Democratic Services to review the options available to continue, in appropriate settings, local democracy presentations for children and young people to help students understand how local democracy works and how they can use these principles to strengthen student voice.**

- 9.5.4 The Committee noted that 'Youth4Us' is the Borough's dedicated micro-site for young people. Re-launched in 2013, the site includes a range of information for young people including details of the various ways in which children and young people can make their voices heard. The website actively promotes the work of the BADYF and the UK YP in an accountable way and encourages young people to contribute their views on a range of issues. The Committee noted that this was to be extended to the implementation of young people's surveys in the future (*Informal discussion notes, 2013*).



**Recommendation 19:**

**Children's Services regularly produce a list of upcoming student voice activities which is published on the 'Youth 4 Us' website.**

- 9.5.5 The recommendations of Scrutiny can clearly only be effective if they are shared with key stakeholders and decision makers. In this case the decision makers for recommendations 1 to 15 are schools in the Borough. The Committee asks for an initial response from schools upon receiving this Report to obtain an estimate of the potential impact this Review will have on student voice.

**Recommendation 20:**

**Children's Services ensure this Report and its recommendations are disseminated to schools in the Borough and seek an initial formal response to it from each so that the Committee can estimate the potential impact of this Review.**

- 9.5.6 It is important for Scrutiny to evaluate its work so that it can judge whether there has been a good 'return on investment' and learn lessons for future reviews of policy. More specifically, this Review was initiated by young people themselves through the BADYF and the Committee are eager to see whether this Review has helped to address their concerns and, made a difference to how they feel about

student voice in their schools. The Committee heard views from various stakeholders that well-structured and active school councils may impact positively on behaviour and attainment and develop key skills, which help pupils in their journeys after they have left school; another important reason why it wishes to establish whether its recommendations are implemented by schools.

**Recommendation 21:**

**Children Services monitor the progress of the recommendations and feed this back to the Committee approximately six months after the Report has been disseminated to schools, and at the same time, seek feedback from the BADYF on their perceptions of how schools have responded to this Report, and provide this information to the Committee.**

## 10. What Happens Next

- 10.1 The Committee recognises that the initiation, implementation, organisation, and execution of student voice activity is the sole prerogative of the schools themselves. The Committee cannot enforce its recommendations, but requests that schools give serious consideration to their implementation for reasons outlined in this Report. This Review was undertaken to support schools.
- 10.2 When finalised and agreed, the findings of this Report are to be publicised in the following ways:
- A downloadable copy will be made available from [www.lbbd.gov.uk/scrutiny](http://www.lbbd.gov.uk/scrutiny)
  - The Report will be sent to head teachers and governing bodies asking for a formal response to the recommendations.
  - The Report will be sent to the BADYF asking for a formal response.
  - The Report will be promoted and shared with other stakeholders including those who gave evidence, the Council's Corporate Management Team and councillors.
- 10.3 Children's Services will be asked to provide a monitoring update to the Committee approximately six months' after the dissemination of this Report to schools, which will cover the progress of all the recommendations. The BADYF will also be asked for their opinion on the impact of the Review around this time.

## 11. Conclusion

- 11.1 This has been an important, leading edge review. The Select Committee should be commended on the work undertaken which shows that whilst there is variability in provision, there is outstanding practice in the Borough. The detailed review of each school has given a real platform for improvement, which is welcomed by the School Improvement Team and the Head Teachers. Implementing the recommendations should be straightforward and will enable us to move towards truly outstanding student voice practices – which will in turn, impact on young people's attainment and their future roles as Borough citizens. This Report and its appendices should be essential reading for all school leaders.

**Helen Jenner**  
Corporate Director of Children Services



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## Student Voice in Barking and Dagenham

### Purpose of the study

The study was commissioned by the Barking and Dagenham (BAD) Youth Forum to evaluate the effectiveness of school councils and the development of student voice in primary and secondary schools in Barking and Dagenham.

### Summary of findings

Of those schools and settings evaluated for this report, overall 78% of school councils are good or outstanding.

### Strengths include:

- almost all schools have formally established school councils, the vast majority are well-embedded within school processes
- relationships between students/pupils and teachers in schools are good with high levels of trust and honesty in how councils are set up and run
- the vast majority of students are confident that they are listened to and their concerns acted upon
- councils are moving from discussions on more peripheral issues such as uniforms, toilets and food to a greater focus on issues related to behaviour and safety, a few outstanding councils have a strong focus on teaching and learning and the key experiences of students/pupils in classrooms.

### Key areas for improvement:

- improve systems for feedback to all students / pupils in the school, showing the impact of decisions made, improve links to senior leaders and governors
- develop more opportunities for student voice beyond the school council, particularly linked to key aspects of school life such as behaviour and learning
- through training, ensure teachers and students / pupils are clearer on the opportunities available to address wider curriculum issues including democratic processes, opportunities for debate and spiritual, moral social and cultural aspects of the curriculum.

### Data collected

58 schools, separate school sites and settings were invited to participate in the study. Evidence was collected by School Improvement Service (SIS) personnel visiting schools to engage in discussions with staff involved in leading and supporting school councils, semi-structured group interviews with students, and evaluation of documentation relating to school councils. The student groups comprised a mix of school council and non-council members. Documentary evidence included council agendas, minutes, constitutions, aims statements and action plans. Each visit lasted approximately 1.5 hours.



## **Participating schools**

Evidence from 50 of the 58 schools are included in this summary report: 9 secondary schools, 39 primary schools, 1 special school, and 1 specialist alternative provision. Following the visits all schools received brief verbal feedback and, later, a written summary highlighting areas of strength and areas for development. Schools were given individual and confidential evaluations on a scale of (1) outstanding, (2) good, (3) satisfactory, or (4) inadequate.

## **Overview of secondary responses**

### **The organisation and running of School Councils**

#### **Elections**

All but one of the schools have a formally established school council. Annual elections are held, in most cases involving nominations, either by self or peers, or, in some cases by staff. Hustings are organised and students may make speeches, produce manifestos and leaflets. Secret ballots are held.

#### **Training**

In most schools the councillors have no specific training. One school has run a full day of training which identified focus group areas. In some schools students have been trained as peer mentors. Some students have taken part in training on debating and take part in inter-school debates.

One school described the induction of new council members:

‘We get them integrated, explain what their responsibilities are, everyone reads and signs the constitution. Then they learn about decision making by experience.’

Students in one school reported the success of a one day seminar organised by the BAD Youth Forum: ‘School councillors were able to meet to discuss common issues and solutions. It gave us a pool of shared experience. We were able to hear about best practice and share our own. It was interesting to see how different councils work.’

Some schools had met local councillors to discuss particular issues. This was evidence of students participating in the wider democratic process and seen as ‘a fantastic opportunity’ by one school:

‘We set up a meeting with Cllr. Liam Smith regarding proposed savings to Student Services in the Borough. We were able to ask questions and challenge him. If we felt something had to be accountable we challenged it.’

A further example from the same school was how common problems can be shared between schools through their membership of the BAD Youth Forum:

'If problems aren't just in our school, like school transport, we can meet with others and share problems and solutions. Another example is that we wanted more life skills topics in PSHE – we were able to meet and discuss this with the PSHE Adviser from the Borough.'

## **Organisation of meetings**

Most schools have regular meetings either monthly or fortnightly; the shortest recorded was only 20 minutes a month which is clearly insufficient time for students to engage in discussion of the issues brought to their council. The meetings are conducted formally with agendas, minutes and constitutions. Students appoint their own officers and the Chair runs the meetings. All councils are supported by the teacher/s with responsibility for the school council.

Meetings are generally held during the school day allowing full attendance. In a few cases, timing is an issue, for example, when meetings are held after school there may be clashes with clubs and activities and, more significantly, those who have to pick up or look after younger siblings are unable to attend.

## **Budgets**

Most councils do not have an allocated budget and are often involved in fundraising to enable them to carry out specific projects identified by students. One council has a budget of £500 which the student action groups can bid for. Some expressed the view that a budget would enable them to plan their activities more effectively.

## **Agendas**

In most cases students contribute to the agenda. Schools have a variety of approaches including council representatives collecting suggestions and views from tutor groups, suggestion boxes and emails. Agendas tend to focus on students' immediate concerns rather than longer term policy issues. Issues most commonly referred to were uniform, improving school facilities, transport, litter, school meals and charity fundraising.

One school has 'BAD Youth Forum' as a standing item, saying that this "helps us with keeping safe and knowing where local 'hot spots' are."

Minutes are recorded in eight of the schools, frequently taken by a student 'clerk'. Information about council decisions and activities is shared in a variety of ways including presentations by students in assemblies, via websites or student newsletters. A number of schools reported that not all teachers enable time for council representatives to feed back to their tutor groups regularly.

There were many good examples of how students had recognised a problem and designed a strategy to address it. In one school students spoke passionately about their involvement in a project linked to an action from their recent Ofsted inspection: lateness was identified as an issue by Ofsted and the students linked this to problems with some of the buses coming from Barking to their school. They set up a project group to investigate the problem, contacted Transport for London, (TfL) and asked the Director of Children's Services for support. The students are hoping for a meeting with TfL to discuss the timetabling of particular bus routes to address the problem.

Students were generally satisfied that where it had not proved possible to implement a suggestion from the school council full and satisfactory explanations had been given by senior leaders.

Opportunities for contact between school councils and senior leaders varies between schools. In one school the council representatives meet regularly with the headteacher to share the views of their fellow students. In some cases council members felt that there should be more active involvement of senior leaders with the school council.

### **Use of ICT**

In most of the schools minutes and other information relating to the school councils is put on the school website. In some cases students are encouraged to email questions or items for inclusion on agendas. One school has a student blog, which has had 3000 hits. They also use Survey Monkey to explore students' opinions. There were some reports that websites were not regularly updated or that students did not access them, and that responses to online questionnaires were disappointing.

### **Governors**

Little contact or active involvement with governors was identified. One school holds a 'governors' day' once a year to share student voice work as it was felt to be more effective than having a student attend Governing Body meetings. The need to identify constructive and effective ways of working more closely with governors was identified as an action point in several reports.

### **Wider opportunities for student voice**

The most effective schools featured a wider range of student voice pathways beyond the school council. These included:

Peer mentors trained to support other students.

Students involved in interviewing staff and carrying out lesson observations of beginning teachers. In one school these students are trained in observation and feedback. As one student explained: 'We give a different point of view, we explain how we see the lessons as more beneficial to us.'

Student action groups: one school has 18.

Focus groups set up to explore student voice.

Student surveys and questionnaires which are analysed by the students and the results used to develop action plans.

Students recognise the value of such activities, feeling that they have a voice within the school that is listened to and that they are developing lifelong learning and employability skills.

"It's the fact that children in the school get to have a say in what goes on and it's not completely run by the teachers."

## **Relationships**

Students were asked to describe the relationships between different groups in their schools.

In general students recognise and value the diversity of their schools. There are sometimes issues that have to be 'sorted'. One student commented that they were more likely to be bullied for how they looked or for being poor than for cultural or religious reasons. However, a common view across all the schools was: "We all get on."

"I would say it is free for all, everyone is different, no matter if they are gay, straight or disabled they have all got rights."

"We're like a big family that gets on well most of the time but sometimes get on each other's nerves."

## **Overview of primary school responses**

Overall, the students, including those in key stage 1, showed an impressive ability to communicate and work with others, significant pride in their achievements and a strong belief that they had been able to improve things. They will be leaving their primary schools having taken considerable responsibility, developed communication, leadership and social skills and an understanding of how the democratic process works. They were generally very positive that they are listened to by senior leaders. It is important that their skills and experience are recognised and built on when they reach secondary school.

## **Organisation**

### **Elections**

The majority of schools hold annual elections with two representatives from each class, a boy and a girl, nominated by their peers, or sometimes, by the class teacher. Elections are mostly by secret ballot. Students make speeches, give out leaflets or write manifestos. Most councils have a student as chair as well as a secretary.

### **Training**

Some schools give training on how councils work and pre-election training is sometimes given. Training may happen informally with students learning by doing the job.

### **Meetings**

Meetings are generally held during the school day enabling full attendance. Students prefer meetings to be held during curriculum time rather than break, assembly or lunchtimes. Where meetings are held after school attendance is variable and it is difficult for some students to attend. Some councils meet weekly or fortnightly, some monthly or half-termly but for a longer period. Minutes are most often taken by the student secretary, supported by the lead teacher.

Links with senior leaders were felt to be strong. Students recognise that, ultimately, decisions rest with the Headteacher:

'Miss feeds back to the Headteacher who agrees what's possible and what's not. Sometimes the Headteacher comes to our meeting and discusses with us.'

## **Agendas**

In most cases students contribute to the agenda in consultation with lead teachers. Schools have a variety of approaches to gaining students' views and ideas including class discussions and suggestion boxes. Information about the work of the council is shared in a variety of ways including presentations by students in assemblies, and via websites or newsletters.

Excellent practice was identified in one school where all members of the council have special books in which they systematically record the agenda and questions and answers from their meetings. These were exemplary, providing a complete record of council business and an aid when giving feedback to their classes.

The majority of schools arrange for students to give regular feedback about council decisions to their classes. The issue of consistency was identified in a number of schools where not all teachers enable time for this.

Many schools publicise the activities of the council through notice boards, photos of members, holding open meetings, all ensuring that they are accessible and accountable to their peers.

## **Examples of successful action by school councils**

Students were very enthusiastic about their achievements and gave many examples such as promoting healthy food in school, carrying out a survey on attitudes to reading and students' preferred authors and genres, surveys on bullying, playtime buddy schemes and links with community groups.

One school showed a very well developed awareness of the religious diversity of the school and wider community, explaining how they had discussed the need for more Halal food choices for Muslim students. 'We set up a meeting with the person responsible for school meals which resulted in changes and more choices.' They also spoke of how the school fete is held as a joint event with the local community and the school takes account of its diversity by organising a separate Halal barbeque.

Several school councils had made visits either to Barking Town Hall or Dagenham Civic Centre which had extended their understanding of how local democracy works. Students were extremely positive about the value of these visits:

'We met with other school councillors and spoke with the Mayor. It was good because we shared ideas and picked things up from each other.'

'Being a Mayor is as important as being a school councillor – they both have important jobs to do.'

## **Governors**

The relationship between school councils and governing bodies is an issue for development across both primary and secondary schools. There was little evidence of regular contact or active involvement with governors.

## **Relationships**

Students were very positive about relationships between different groups in the schools. Their comments included:

*'Most people are kind to each other most of the time.'*

*'It doesn't matter what religion you are – it's not OK to joke about people's religions.'*

*'We get on quite good; there's not much racism – your friends are all from different backgrounds, you all play together.'*

It is clear that, in many schools, students see themselves as having a role in supporting each other. In relation to bullying one student commented: 'At a lower level we can help sort things out, ask questions about why they do it, like in Circle Time. Kids support each other.' And, powerfully summed up by another student: 'The school is just like Baking and Dagenham – we usually get along, and we go together!'

Students identified the success of particular strategies for tackling bullying, for example: 'We have 'Stop it' boxes – you write it and put it in at the end of the day and it gets followed up... it's helpful if you're a bit shy, or it's about something that's happening not to you but to someone else.'

The link between the development of student voice and the improvement in issues such as behaviour, attendance and the ethos for learning was strongly identified by the students in some of the primary schools, illustrated in the case studies below.

### **School A**

The students were very thoughtful in discussing issues relating to behaviour in the school recognising the value of the support that is currently provided to help resolve issues: 'A lady comes in to help with our behaviour and talk about how we treat each other.' There was general agreement that 'We all get along except a few.' They felt that people coming into school speaking different languages are welcomed into the school and quickly make friends with people who speak the same language.' Racism 'makes teachers really angry', -and is always dealt with. Circle Time is valued by the students. One student described a time when she had been 'really sad' because of a situation at home and had found sharing her feelings in Circle Time had helped her. Another student explained that through Circle Time 'We can comfort her, give her courage and help her try not to be sad.'

### **School B**

The students explained that relationships between the different groups in the school work 'really well' and that any disagreements are sorted out quickly. They emphasised that 'race and religion don't matter – obviously not everyone is friends, and there are sometimes arguments but we do try.' They identified the best things about the school as the kindness



and support they receive from teachers: 'The strict side of teachers pushes you to your limit.' And 'Teachers are kind and fun – tell us what's best for us, encourage us.' There was general agreement with the final comment: 'The school believes everyone deserves a chance and that's exactly what you get here.'

## **School C**

In one junior school the students were extremely positive when asked to identify the strengths of their school, giving clear evidence that they recognise that the school's emphasis on managing and supporting behaviour is having a significant impact across the school. They emphasised the fact that they feel safe in school:

*'The best thing is the behaviour because Mr X helps people to act well in class.'  
'If you have a problem it's dealt with and you can be sure it won't happen again.'*

*'The rules here make the children feel safe – I feel nothing's going to happen to me at school.'*

The impact of the effective behaviour management was also identified in lessons:

*'Lessons are really good, no one's messing around.'*

They took their responsibilities for supporting others very seriously:

*'Friendship is good – if someone's by themselves you go and see if they want to play or if they really do want to be by themselves.'*

*'Everyone is welcomed with open arms – you feel like you've been in the school for ever.'*

## **What has been achieved by school councils?**

The main achievements across the phases are in improving school facilities, ethos and environment, quality of school meals, play equipment, recycling and other environmental projects, fund raising both for school projects and for local, national and international charities.

The report identifies examples of school council involvement in community projects such as gardening and recycling, and of working with parent groups to raise funds and plan events.

A few councils have engaged with outside agencies in order to address wider issues such as school transport, the allocation of funding to Student Services, and curriculum development.

Although teaching and learning are not generally discussed by students, there are examples in some secondary schools of student involvement in teacher appointments and evaluating teaching.

There are also some examples where staff and students are able to make a very clear connection between the work of school councils and other student voice initiatives and improvements in behaviour and attendance and the resultant improvements in learning. This is an aspect for further development.

## **Key recommendations/actions for school at all key stages**

Develop more planned opportunities for developing student voice beyond the school council

Extend students' experience and understanding of the wider democratic process through links with local councillors, for example

Create active links with the Governing Body to ensure the students are routinely consulted about and involved in decisions about school policy

Ensure all teachers recognise the importance of enabling School Council representatives to feed back to their class regularly, showing the impact of decisions

Improve teachers' understanding of how the work of the school council has the potential to support and contribute to whole school issues and aspects of the wider curriculum, e.g. behaviour, attendance, teaching and learning, SMSC, Citizenship, PSHE. Understanding of the links with the spiritual dimension of students' experience and development appears to be a weak aspect.

Establish stronger links between school councils/student voice initiatives and senior leaders, particularly in secondary schools.

# **Barking & Dagenham Secondary Schools Student Council Summit**

**December 7<sup>th</sup> 2012**

## **Feedback Analysis**

### Participating Schools

*All Saints Catholic School  
Barking Abbey School  
Dagenham Park Church of England School  
Eastbrook Comprehensive School  
Eastbury Comprehensive School  
Jo Richardson Community School  
Robert Clack School  
Sydney Russell Comprehensive School  
Warren Comprehensive School*



*Quantitative Feedback*

	<b>1 (least)</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 (most)</b>
Overall, how much did you enjoy the day?	2%	0%	18%	45%	35%
Did you feel that you were included and your opinions valued in any and all discussions?	0%	0%	14%	29%	57%
Which value best describes your knowledge of Pupil Voice prior to today?	4%	9%	21%	50%	16%
Which value best describes your knowledge of Pupil Voice after today?	0%	0%	4%	38%	58%
How useful was workshop 1 (The Role of the School Council)?	0%	2%	13%	43%	42%
How useful was workshop 2 (Effective Decision Making Processes)?	2%	2%	10%	37%	49%
How useful was workshop 3 (Talk Vs Discussion)?	0%	2%	11%	44%	43%
How useful was workshop 4 (Effective Meeting and Planning Strategies)?	2%	2%	8%	43%	45%
Were the activities suitable for the purpose of the day?	0%	0%	7%	51%	42%
Do you feel that the resources provided will be useful for your school's School Council?	0%	2%	21%	38%	39%
Do you feel that you will network with the other School Councils as a result of today?	6%	2%	18%	35%	39%
How confident are you that your council will follow its action plan?	2%	0%	7%	41%	50%



Indicates highest percentage

## Qualitative Feedback

### **Q) What was the most important thing you learnt today and why?**

Top 10 responses (generalised collective responses):

- The responsibility that comes with the power held by the School Council
- The importance of making the student voice heard in its entirety
- To be confident in your ability as a School Council representative and speak confidently for those you represent
- How to share ideas and work together with other schools and external bodies
- What the role of the School Council is and how to make it proactive
- How to make fair, effective and united decisions
- How to sit back and listen to others and let everyone have their say because everyone has their own opinions
- Your ideas suggestions should be reasoned rather than arbitrary
- How to hold an effective School Council Meeting
- The idea that I should ask as many questions I need to in order to gain sufficient knowledge about an issue or topic

### **Q) Is there anything you would change about today and why?**

Top 10 responses (generalised collective responses):

- Try to make the workshops more interactive
- More and better food & drinks
- More time in workshops
- Shorter workshops with more of them
- To be able to go outside for some of the activities
- Provide a brief workshop on basic school council skills
- Session where they can share the processes and running of each school's School Council and take on board other schools methods
- More badges
- An activity specifically about networking with other schools
- Students to be more enthusiastic and relaxed and to speak up

### **Q) What is one thing you think you will take from today and implement in your school?**

Top 7 responses (generalised collective responses):

- Action Planning
- Having reporters on committees and in School Councils
- Developing a networking with other schools
- About other schools' different ways of running their 'student voice'.
- Leadership skills
- How to communicate effectively and work as a team
- The activities that we did in the workshops will be good to use in School Council meetings such as the role of the school council

**Q) Are there any other comments you would like to make?**

- The Summit should carry on at least yearly
- I wish it could have been longer
- The food was good
- There was a great amount of cooperation from 6<sup>th</sup> formers and teachers
- We would like student council training for all year groups
- We should do this more often
- Overall it was a lovely day and nice to meet up with other School Councils
- I believe that today has helped me understand more about School council and Pupil Voice
- Thank you!

## Workshop Outcomes

*Here, the outcomes of each workshop have been outlined by the sixth formers who facilitated them. For each there is a brief explanation of the purpose of the workshop and then the outcomes as seen by the students and facilitators.*

### **Workshop 1 - The Role of the School Council**

Usefulness rating (majority) – 4/5

Prior to the event, we became aware that many students were unsure of the roles, duties and expectations of both the council as a whole and themselves as individual representatives; this workshop was designed to address that.

- Students felt that the role of the School Council was clarified
- Students were able to discuss the varying roles of the council in each school
- Students were made aware of appropriate and inappropriate agenda topics for council meetings

### **Workshop 2 - Effective Decision Making Processes**

Usefulness rating (majority) – 5/5

This workshop aimed to highlight the importance of democratic processes, united voices, clarity of reasoning and the essential nature of adapting to a changing context. Students were able to work together to come to the collective conclusions that:

- If you do not understand an instruction then you must ask for clarification
- You must be rational in your decision making
- When making a decision it must be reasoned. You must also ensure that the reason is consistent with all; this is for feedback purposes
- The ability to adapt to a changing context is essential
- The essential qualities of School Council representatives



### Workshop 3 - **Talk Vs Discussion**

Usefulness rating (majority) – 4/5

This workshop was designed to explore the subtle differences between informal ‘talk’ and formal ‘discussion’.

- Students were able to see the importance of engaging in formal discussions rather than informal talk when holding School Council meetings
- Understanding that listening is a key role of a council representative
- School Council meetings must have agreed rules and an agenda in order to be effective

### Workshop 4 - **Effective Meeting & Planning Strategies**

Usefulness rating (majority) – 5/5

This workshop was intended to examine effective meeting strategies and aid students’ understanding of how to create and follow a successful action plan, not only for events but for the council tasks in general.

- Students participated in an exercise in lateral thinking where they were called upon to draw out important messages from abstract pictures which were linked to team work, meeting strategies or decision making.
- Through this they learned that in a team you must work together to ensure your success
- Each group planned a School Disco
- They were able to go through all of the processes necessary to plan an event through the School Council
- Students were made to think about each individual action they would need to take, delegate members of the council to action those plans and finally outline what help they would need and from whom in order for their plans to become reality

## Summit Outcomes

The Pupil Voice initiative as a whole is one of the most important to be pushed forth in recent years. This programme encourages students to voice their opinions, concerns and suggestions, which are largely insightful and innovative.

We had two main objectives when we first introduced the summit: the first was to build the skills of student leaders and refine their knowledge base on how to run an effective school council. The second was to start a communication network between schools in the borough with the hopes of building relationships and improving individual school practice.

Young people think in a different way to adults and it is incredible to see what they are capable of imagining if we do not lead them towards pre-empted responses. When questioning young people, teachers, and adults in general, can sometimes have a tendency to lead them to a desired outcome. We have found that it is far more interesting and beneficial to allow them the freedom to think independently. The Student Council Summit was designed to be only semi-structured and wholly student led, thus allowing students to be creative and lead their own discussions; the results have been outstanding.

All secondary schools in the borough were represented at the event which signifies a strong commitment within the borough to raising the effectiveness of the Pupil Voice. In the past, students have become frustrated to find their voices falling on deaf ears; at All Saints we are very proud to be leading the way in efforts towards a collaborative solution. We feel that it is important not only to seek out the views and input of the young people we teach, but to listen to and respect their voices also.

Through the summit we have established greater networking links between the secondary schools in the borough and developed a more collaborative working environment. The students have also benefited significantly; giving them ownership of their councils, the decisions they choose to make and the activities they choose to pursue has resulted in a distinct sense of empowerment amongst them.

In order to achieve our goal of raising the profile and effectiveness of the Pupil Voice we need support from all schools and school councils in the borough. Effectiveness will not be realised over night, it is something that we will all need to work hard on together for an extended period of time. But it is imperative that we take the first steps on this road now and ensure that we encourage our young people to speak up *and* listen to them when they do.

There have already been calls from many of the students to continue the summit and make it an annual or even bi-annual event, with many schools offering to host the next one; a very encouraging outcome indeed.