Chair's Introduction

Supporting young people’s life chances and enabling them to fulfil their potential is a priority for the borough. It is also a priority for the Children & Family Scrutiny Committee, one which has cut across its work throughout the year, either by looking at how we engage with young people, specific services such as the support for young people with SEN or considering key issues such as school attendance.

There is some amazing work under way in Waltham Forest – the Life Chances Commission in 2017 and more recently the Life Chances Youth Task Force being great examples of this. The Children and Families Scrutiny Committee decided to build on this work by looking at how parents can be best supported to support their children. The Committee strongly believes that improving the parenting support offer can improve young people’s life chances. This is why the key focus of this review is to ensure that parents are provided with the necessary tools to confidently support their children through the numerous phases, challenges and opportunities that pre-teens, teenagers and families face.

Over the last year, the Committee received invaluable and wide ranging contributions and evidence from internal services, external organisations, schools and parents who shared their views on the benefits of supporting parents, current parenting support offer, innovative ways of providing support, areas for development and parents’ needs. Based on these findings, the Committee made 7 formal recommendations. These focus primarily on how the current parenting support offer can be improved in a way which destigmatises support, promotes peer-led activity and enables parents to support their pre-teen and teenage children with confidence. We have sought to set out concrete steps to improve this offer whilst ensuring the recommendations reflect the feedback we received from stakeholders and build upon the excellent work already under way in the borough.

I would like express my gratitude to the services, organisations, parents and schools which provided the Committee with invaluable input and reports throughout the past year. Their time, knowledge and experience have allowed the Committee to produce a review which supports the Council in advancing its commitment to young people’s life chances and to the parents who support them every step of the way.
Summary of recommendations

The Committee recommends:

Recommendation 1:
That the Council works with partner organisations and community networks to develop support for parents of pre-teens and, particularly, teenagers. This should aim to equip parents with the necessary information, advice, support and signposting to ensure they feel more prepared, confident and capable.

Recommendation 2:
That the Council identifies information from this report to share internally and with partner organisations to highlight how helping parents to support pre-teens and teenagers will have significant benefits in terms of the young people themselves. That this information is used for engagement with services to discuss the benefits of the ways in which support for parents of pre-teens and teenagers can be built into their work.

Recommendation 3:
That the Council considers how universal support for parents of pre-teens and teenagers can be built into, supported and informed by the Life Chances, Connecting Communities and Think Family programmes. Within this to consider how these projects could support the development of local groups for parents of pre-teens and teenagers and peer-to-peer activity.

Recommendation 4:
That the CCG and the Council consider how they commission all services to ensure these are family focused.

Recommendation 5:
That the Council works with internal services and partner organisations to identify ways to support parents understanding how to discuss social media and online safety with their children.

Recommendation 6:
That the Council looks to engage with secondary schools and colleges about the opportunities for engaging with and providing a wide range of information for parents.
Recommendation 7:

That the Council considers how specific information for parents of pre-teens and teenagers can be produced and disseminated.

That the Council looks to target communications for parents of pre-teens and teenagers in order to reduce the stigma of accessing support and ensures that parenting support is framed in a destigmatising way.

Background

The Children and Families Scrutiny Committee has spent 2018/19 reviewing the support currently offered by the Council to parents of pre-teens and teenagers in the borough, and discussing how this offer can be improved. The goal of this themed review has been to assess what kind of challenges parents face, what other local authorities and organisations are doing in the field of parenting support, and what kind of Council support could improve family resilience.

By enabling parents and families with the skill set and tools to support their children the council can reduce long-term risk, improve educational attainment and the demand for statutory services such as child protection.

The council already provides a number of parenting support programmes, including:

- Triple P Primary and Triple P teen (6-8 week programme)
- Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (13 week programme)
- Incredible Years 0-5 (10 week programme)
- Stepping Stones (for children with disabilities, 6-8 week programme)

The council also commissions a provider HENRY to run a parenting programme using volunteers. Support for parents is a Cabinet Member priority, and services are developing plans for how this will developed over the coming year.

Methodology

Initial scoping for this themed review was carried over summer 2018. At its September meeting, on the 12th September 2018, the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee reviewed the scoping document, and agreed to analyse the Council’s offer in the field of parenting as part of its themed review over 2018/19. Parents, young advisors and the young advisory group were in attendance.

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1 https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=727&MId=4668&Ver=4
The Committee used its meetings from November 2018 to March 2019 to understand parents' main challenges, review the existing parenting support offered by the Council and assess best practice elsewhere. These included:

12 September 2018²

Andrew Spragg, Scrutiny Officer, presented the themed review scoping document, setting out the review’s background, objectives, timeline and possible risks. This document was scoped by the Chair of the Committee and the Scrutiny Officer, and agreed by the Committee.

September – October 2018

Engagement with parents was carried out to inform the review on existing parenting support. Parents were invited to contribute through social media channels, and two separate meetings were organised with parents who had received parenting support from the local authority and health partners. The case studies which resulted from these two meetings were considered by the Committee at the January 2019 meeting.

14 November 2018³

Joe McDonnell, Director of Public Health, presented a report on what is already being done in the borough to support good parenting, particularly for pre-teens and teenagers. This included integrated work in Children and Family Centres, parenting programmes offered by health services and specific services like family partnerships supporting teenage parents.

17 January 2019⁴

A report was presented by Andrew Spragg, Scrutiny Officer, on areas of good practice regarding parenting support, both within the borough and externally. Representatives from the council’s Functional Family Therapy, St Mary’s Catholic School and from Open Door – a not-for-profit organisation based in Haringey – attended this meeting and discussed how their respective areas of work support parents, and what is shown to work well in respect to improving family resilience and promoting good parenting skills. Committee members also had the opportunity to review two Children’s Society’s reports on parenting and adolescent neglect.

January – February 2019

A series of phone calls and meetings took place between the Chair of the Committee and relevant organisations working in the field of parenting support, to discuss best practice and identify possible gaps in the existing offer and opportunities going forward. The Chair spoke to representatives of the Leytonstone School, Carefree Kids – a children’s mental health charity based in the borough –, Relate – a national charity providing counselling services and Barnardo’s – the UK’s largest children’s charity.

Key findings

As part of its themed review report into the existing parenting support offer in the borough, the Children and Families Committee identified an issue with regards to the level of universal support and services offered to parents of pre-teens and teenagers. The Director of Public Health briefed the Committee on the existing range of support offered to parents and acknowledged that there was less support available for parents with pre-teens and those transitioning into adolescence. This was reiterated by the Clinical Director of Carefree Kids, who noted that there is a particular gap for parents of pre-teens, both in terms of information and support available. This is of particular concern as there is extensive research on the positive outcomes of parenting interventions – namely the promotion of a supportive family environment, the reduction of parental stress and improvement of mental health.

The Committee also noted the importance of improving the current offer in close collaboration with partner organisations – responsible for delivering some of the existing services – and community networks, in an effort to promote resilience amongst the community and voluntary sector and amongst parents themselves. The importance of the latter was noted by one of the mothers interviewed as part of the review who spoke about the benefits of hearing similar experiences from other parents and highlighted how she had benefitted from the social component of the parenting support she received. The benefits of supporting parents developing confidence in themselves was also highlighted both by parents and the organisations the Committee heard from. For example, Relate stated that supporting parents to develop their confidence was, in their experience, often more effective than solely providing them with information, as confident parents are more resilient and able to seek information themselves.

Based on the information above, the Committee believes that there is an opportunity for the Council to expand and strengthen its parenting support offer for pre-teens and teenagers. The recommendation below sets out a general framework for this.

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5 https://democracy.walthamforest.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=727&MId=4669&Ver=4
expansion, whereas the following recommendations seek to focus on the delivery aspect of this change. The Committee therefore recommends:

**Recommendation 1:**

That the Council works with partner organisations and community networks to develop support for parents of pre-teens and, particularly, teenagers. This should aim to equip parents with the necessary information, advice, support and signposting to ensure they feel more prepared, confident and capable.

**Benefits of improving the parenting offer**

Engagement was a central element of this themed review – both with parents who had received parenting support in the borough and with organisations working in the field. The views collected as part of this process have been reflected in this report and are in line with the formal recommendations put forward by the Committee.

A key element of the feedback received from parents was the positive impact parenting support can have on children and young people. The Committee heard from two mothers who had received support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), namely Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) Parenting Therapy. One of the mothers also took part in the Incredible Years Basic School Age Programme. Both parents reported they were satisfied with the outcome of this support and that, as a result, felt more confident, had an improved self-esteem and were able to begin implementing new behaviour management techniques. Both agreed that these changes had had a positive and visible impact on their children’s wellbeing and behaviour. The Committee therefore believes supporting parents to build their confidence and capacity to speak to their children should be a central element to our parenting offer.

The input received from organisations working with parents in the borough also revealed the need to ensure that supporting parents is widely acknowledged as an effective way to support children and young people themselves. Relate, for example, emphasised this issue in relation to bereavement and how parents can and should be supported to support their children processing and managing grief. This organisation noted that it was important to provide this support through schools and, simultaneously, through organisations that work with children and young people, parents and bereavement organisations.

The input provided by parents and organisations as part of this themed review can be vital to inform the work of internal services and partner organisations – such as those working with young people, schools and health partners. This report aims to
channel these findings to emphasise the impact parenting support can have on the wellbeing of young people themselves and encourage parenting support to be built into wider work programmes for young people.

The Committee therefore recommends:

**Recommendation 2:**

That the Council identifies information from this report to share internally and with partner organisations to highlight how helping parents to support pre-teens and teenagers will have significant benefits in terms of the young people themselves.

That this information is used for engagement with services to discuss the benefits of the ways in which support for parents of pre-teens and teenagers can be built into their work.

**Whole family, whole community approach**

Based on the feedback received regarding the positive impact of parenting support on young people, the Committee identified the need to mainstream parenting support across different internal services and on-going programmes. The Council’s Life Chances, Connecting Communities and Think Family programmes – dedicated to improve young people’s life chances, change the way in which the Council engages with its communities and work side by side with families and communities to deliver services – were considered excellent platforms through which to support parents of pre-teens and teenagers. Building on these programmes’ networks and whole-family/whole-community approaches, the existing parenting support can be strengthened and widened, for example, by supporting the development of peer-led groups for parents of pre-teens. The Committee also noted the need to use local intelligence gathered by the three programmes as a way to ensure that the approaches deployed by the Council to support parents of pre-teens and teenagers are evidence based.

The Committee is of the view that the services commissioned by the Council and the Clinical Commissioning Group should focus on the family as a whole, draw on the family’s strengths and acknowledge the positive impact of parenting support on children and young people. The Committee equally emphasises the role and benefits of peer-support and of informal networks led by parents themselves.

The Committee therefore recommends:
Recommendation 3:

That the Council considers how universal support for parents of pre-teens and teenagers can be built into, supported and informed by the Life Chances, Connecting Communities and Think Family programmes.

Within this to consider how these projects could support the development of local groups for parents of pre-teens and teenagers and peer-to-peer activity.

Recommendation 4:

That the CCG and the Council consider how they commission all services to ensure these are family focused.

Social Media and Online Safety

The Committee identified the field of social media and online safety as being of particular importance when considering how the existing parenting support offer could be improved. This is an area of widespread concern, as reports of social media’s negative impact on children’s and young people’s development and safety grow in number. A report produced by the Children’s Commissioner states that one third of current internet users are under the age of 18, and a number of risks for children and young people, including cyber-bullying and self-harm, have been extensively identified. Parental involvement is understood to be an effective way to support children and young people manage these risks and their online behaviour.

Several of the organisations contacted by the Committee – including Barnardo’s and Relate – have reiterated these research findings and flagged social media and online safety as an area where parenting support should be extended to and strengthened. Both organisations argued that there is a need to support parents in understanding their children’s online behaviour and the pressures that arise from social media, but also to support their children to develop the necessary skills to manage the risks. Relate, in particular, emphasised the importance of having informal support networks for parents to understand social media and to support their children. Based on these findings, the Committee believes it is crucial to consider how parents in Waltham Forest can be best supported both by internal services and partner organisations.

The Committee therefore recommends:

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Recommendation 5:

That the Council works with internal services and partner organisations to identify ways to support parents understanding how to discuss social media and online safety with their children.

Providing parents with the information they need

The Committee acknowledges that both the services offered and how these are communicated to parents are important elements to ensure parents can access the support they need. The lack of information available – or a lack of dissemination – regarding certain services combined with the existing stigma associated with parenting support, can play an important role in preventing parents from being adequately supported. This includes both information regarding the existing universal and targeted offer and specific information regarding, for example, social media.

The Committee believes schools have a particular role in disseminating this information to parents, due to their proximity to families. Through its review, the Committee identified a particular gap regarding the level of information provided, in particular, by secondary schools and colleges. Relate provided the Committee with the example of parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), who experience a gap in support from schools at a secondary level, with regards to the child’s development as they grow up.

The Committee has identified the importance of providing support to parents of pre-teens and teenagers, particularly in terms of supporting young people themselves. The Committee therefore believes there is a need to develop the support for parents to ensure that information, signposting and assistance can be accessed whenever necessary.

Overall, the Committee thinks that the information regarding existing parenting support services should be framed in a destigmatising way, which acknowledges parenting as complex and unique to different individuals, and sets support as a tool and a platform to improve families’ well-being. The Committee strongly believes there is no one form of ‘good’ parenting and that, instead, parenting support should build on each parent’s strengths and tackle stigmatising and damaging views of what parenting should look like.

The Committee therefore recommends:
Recommendation 6:

That the Council looks to engage with secondary schools and colleges about the opportunities for engaging with and providing a wide range of information for parents.

Recommendation 7:

That the Council considers how specific information for parents of pre-teens and teenagers can be produced and disseminated.

That the Council looks to target communications for parents of pre-teens and teenagers in order to reduce the stigma of accessing support and ensures that parenting support is framed in a destigmatising way.

Conclusion

The Children and Families Committee reviewed the existing parenting support offer in Waltham Forest, having drawn on close engagement with internal services, external organisations and parents throughout the year. It recognises the positive aspects of the existing offer – as per the services’ evidence base and parents’ feedback – and identifies an opportunity with regards to the support offered to parents of pre-teens and teenagers. The Committee acknowledges the existence of constraints associated with the provision of services, particularly against a backdrop of decreasing funding, but equally points towards the tools, platforms and partners which the Council already holds. The recommendations put forward by this report propose to build on and utilise the opportunity brought by the excellent work of key programmes – such as Think Family, Life Chances and Connecting Communities –; to inform and support internal services and partners; and to maximise key relationships with schools, organisations and parents in the borough. This review highlights both the importance of having services available and of disseminating them efficiently – in a way which tackles the stigma preventing parents from accessing support. The report seeks to acknowledge the work already under way to support parents in the borough and set next steps to improve this offer in a collaborative and multi-faceted way.