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CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
22 MARCH 2016

(7.15 pm - 9.55 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Councillor Katy Neep (in the Chair),
Councillor Linda Taylor, Councillor Charlie Chirico,
Councillor Edward Foley, Councillor Joan Henry,
Councillor James Holmes, Councillor Dennis Pearce,
Councillor Peter Southgate, Denis Popovs,
Councillor Jeff Hanna and Councillor Agatha Mary Akyigyina

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Judy Saunders (Cabinet Member for Children's
Services)

Paul Angeli (Head of Children's Social Care), Paul Ballatt (Head
of Commissioning, Strategy and Performance, CSF), Nick
Berbiers (Head of Young People's Services, The Who Cares?
Trust), Liz Broughton (Head of Access to Resources), Elizabeth
Fitzpatrick (Head of School Improvement), Jane McSherry
(Assistant Director of Education), Caroline Muller (Head of
Service Quality, Assurance and Practice Development), Yvette
Stanley (Director, Children, Schools & Families Department) and
Annette Wiles (Scrutiny Officer)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Co-opted representative Colin Powell (Church of England, Southwark Diocesan
Board of Education) gave his apologies.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There was no declaration of pecuniary interests.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted as a true and accurate record
with the following amendment: Jeff Hanna provide his apologies to the meeting.

4 EXPERT WITNESS: NICK BERBIERS, HEAD OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S
SERVICES, THE WHO CARES? TRUST (Agenda Item 4)

The panel received a presentation from Nick Berbiers, Head of Young People's
Services at The Who Cares? Trust.

Nick is a qualified social worker who has worked as a practitioner and manager of
services for children and young people for over thirty years. The trust is a voice and

champion for children and young people in the UK living in care; its aim is to improve the day to day experience of all children and young people in care.

The presentation provided a background briefing for Panel members on scrutiny of the Council's corporate parenting role. This focused on:

- Scene setting: the key issues for authorities in fulfilling their corporate parenting role;
- Best practice: best practice in corporate parenting; and
- Scrutiny: what scrutiny of the corporate parenting role looks like.

The similarity between the role of corporate parents and that of good parents was highlighted as was the need to listen to the voices of the children and young people for whom the Council fulfils the role of corporate parent. Members were encouraged to understand the structure of corporate parenting in Merton as well as the characteristics of the care and care leaver population. The responsibility for corporate parenting across all parts of the Council was emphasised.

A copy of the presentation is available with the papers for the meeting.

In response to member questions, Nick Berbiers clarified that corporate parenting of adolescents, like other age groups, requires stability and security with support for emotional and mental health needs. It was highlighted that as in Merton, support is now extending into older age groups. The requirement for a plurality of resources determined by needs to support those in care and leaving care was emphasised.

RESOLVED: to thank Nick Berbiers for his presentation

5 WORKSHOP 1: CORPORATE PARENTING (Agenda Item 5)

This workshop looked at the effectiveness of the Council as a corporate parent.

In response to member questions, Paul Angeli outlined a number of criteria by which the Council's corporate parenting might be judged:

- Stability and permanency of placements/arrangements for children in care;
- The educational attainment of those in and leaving care;
- The degree to which the health needs of those in and leaving care are met; and
- The extent to which the Council aspires for those that are in and leaving care.

It was noted that all of these are easier to achieve the younger that children come into care; successful outcomes are much more difficult to achieve when care starts in adolescence.

Through its discussions the group identified the following specific current successes of the Council's corporate parenting role:

- Provision of mentoring support and opportunities that have supported those in care to develop confidence in a variety of situations;
- The recent intervention of the task group on the housing and employment offer for care leavers and looked after children has supported other Council departments to make this their focus;
- Through the use of robust Personal Education Plans the Virtual School supports the education of Merton's Looked After Children. Whilst educational outcomes at Key Stage 4 for those in care remain volatile (reflecting the impact of increasing numbers coming into care as adolescents and giving only a short time during which to achieve a positive outcome), outcomes at Key Stage 2 are positive;
- The Children, Schools and Families Department is successful in building partnerships to drive the quality of provision for children in and leaving care. An example is the developing relationship with registered social landlords with which the department is working to increase the provision of suitable housing options for care leavers;
- The quality of the relationship between the Children, Schools and Families Department and the Corporate Parenting Board is supporting both to provide better outcomes;
- The quality and permanence of the Looked-After Children (LAC) team. This is evidenced through reviews with Looked-After Children conducted by Independent Reviewing Officers. Success has been achieved by investing in the development of the LAC team;
- The quality of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) service for LAC; and
- Improvement in suitable housing options for those in care (which is up to 93%). This includes where foster carers have made a long-term commitment to an individual young person.

It was noted that the small LAC population in Merton means an individual child has a bigger impact on the statistical measure of performance.

The following issues were highlighted and potentially should be a focus for scrutiny of Merton's corporate parenting role during the coming year:

- The percentage of children in and leaving care that are 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET). It was highlighted that this is correlated with the increase in those coming into care at an older age (14 plus) and/or with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). This is being addressed through the appointment of a targeted worker with whom Paul Angeli holds monthly reviews. Members were also reminded of the need to consider progress and not just attainment of cohorts where prior attainment is affecting outcomes;
- Obtaining quoracy at child protection conferences, in particularly securing the attendance of the police and school nurses. It was highlighted that some agencies have been under particular pressures but that work is on-going with those that are struggling to attend to ensure that this is addressed;
- The changing profile of the LAC population in Merton (coming into care at an older age) is affecting outcomes at KS4 for some pupils;

- The stability of placements is key to positive outcomes for children in care and should therefore remain a focus;
- Whilst a high quality LAC team has been successfully developed, there is a need to ensure that this is retained going forward. Additionally, there is a need to recruit more child protection officers;
- There remains a difficulty in securing foster carers within the borough and there is a desire to move away from foster carers that are sourced through independent agencies. (This can cause difficulties where these are also caring for Looked-After Children from other areas and there is no opportunity to plan cohesively for all children in their care. Additionally, this provision is expensive.) It was noted that all Merton's Looked-After Children are placed with foster carers within five miles of the borough and that better provision of foster carer places is a London-wide issue that is being addressed collectively with other authorities; and
- Housing provision is a real challenge as the Council fulfils its promise to allow children in care to "stay put" potentially up until the age of 25 years and older for those that require additional support. As a result, the Council needs to provide a broader menu of options which is reflected in the current discussions with registered social landlords to provide short term lets and supported lodgings. The Council is also discussing with a third party its interest in opening a children's home within the borough.

6 WORKSHOP 2: PLACEMENT PROVISION (Agenda Item 6)

This workshop considered the effectiveness of the Council's provision of placements for all Looked-After Children (LAC) in its care.

The Head of Access to Resources explained her role is to ensure young people have appropriate placements. This includes ensuring the placement meets the care plan, it is within (or as near as possible to) the local area (unless a more distant placement is required to meet particular needs) and meets ethnicity, language and cultural needs. It was emphasised that LAC in Merton have for many years been cared for beyond the age of eighteen and the department is still supporting a number of older care leavers, the oldest currently being twenty seven.

The team are trying to increase the pool of foster carers. There are currently sixty sets and sixty eight children have been placed. In response to member questions, it was established that an annual sufficiency statement is produced which outlines an analysis of need and the current provision of placements. At the moment, there is a need for placements for teenagers which could be fulfilled through a children's home (at the current time, there is no children's home within the borough and therefore no provision of this form of placement for children in Merton's care). Provision of foster care is also poorly distributed across the borough with fewer foster carers in the Wimbledon area.

In response to member questions the Assistant Director for Commissioning, Strategy and Performance highlighted:

- Commissioners are committed to getting the best value from all service provision although in Merton children are never moved or placed in provision for financial reasons;
- Merton does use different types of foster carers including same sex and single parents, although there is a need to expand the type of people approached and to try new ways of recruiting, (such as recruiting professionals experienced in working with adolescents as foster carers). Generally, the Council is successful at recruiting foster carers but it is a competitive market and there is a need for more foster carers for teenagers and those with complex needs;
- The Council will not provide its own children's home but rather is exploring either commissioning a small bespoke home or supporting a provider with whom the Council could negotiate nomination rights. A business case is currently being prepared to progress the commissioning approach and, in parallel, we are working with a third party organisation which has expressed an interest in providing a service. The Council is supporting the development of this provision including preparation for Ofsted registration and service planning; and
- The department is not complacent about feedback and is mindful that an 80% satisfaction rating in the young people survey of placements means 20% are not happy. It was highlighted that asking young people their views on their placements is a relatively new approach which Merton is committed to develop further. As yet there are no national benchmarks with which to make comparisons. It was highlighted by the Head of Access to Resources the cohort is small (only 35 children) and that the underlying reasons for young people's dissatisfaction will be explored further.

A panel member spoke about her personal experience as a foster carer. She highlighted foster carers need support in their role and to be given a full understanding of the background of the child to be placed in order to provide adequate care.

In summary, the following successes were highlighted about Merton's foster carer provision:

- The majority of Merton LAC are placed in or close to the borough;
- The quality of placements is carefully monitored and the department will not use independent foster carer agencies (or residential providers) if they do not meet our quality expectations; and
- Merton is relatively successful in recruiting carers and sourcing suitable placements more generally for children in our care.

Those issues that might be a focus for the scrutiny of foster carer provision over the coming year were also highlighted:

- Increasing recruitment of foster carers for adolescents;
- Supporting foster carers so they understand the vulnerability and complexity of the children they are looking after;

- Alternative options for placements for LAC aged 16 plus;
- Looking in detail at young people's views on placements specifically the response of those children that identify as dissatisfied; and
- Considering the options for a small scale children's home in Merton.

7 PLENARY SESSION: WORKSHOP FEEDBACK (Agenda Item 7)

Each workshop reported back to all Panel members and highlighted areas for scrutiny focus over the next year.

Members congratulated the Chair on the success of the workshop approach. It was noted that this had increased the amount of scrutiny being achieved at the meeting and made it easier for Panel members to contribute, to examine the scrutiny topic in-depth and question officers in detail.

RESOLVED: to consider a range ways of working to make scrutiny more effective in the next municipal year.

8 TASK GROUP REPORT (Agenda Item 8)

Panel members were reminded that two mini task groups had been established to investigate:

- Improving the education outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); and
- Preparing young people leaving care with specific reference to accessing and securing employment and housing.

The aspiration had also been for Panel members to be more involved in task group work, undertaking their own research and reporting back to the group.

Initial task group meetings established clear commonalities in the remit of both task groups and as a result it was recommended that these be merged to focus on routes into employment for vulnerable cohorts, specifically children with SEND and care leavers.

It was noted that the mini task group approach would not be abandoned and will be considered as part of next year's work programme.

Councillor Agatha Akyigyina volunteered to join the task group.

RESOLVED: to merge the two mini task groups into one with the recommended focus.

9 UPDATE REPORT: CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES DEPARTMENT DEVELOPMENTS (Agenda Item 9)

Secondary place provision

In response to member questions, Paul Ballatt clarified:

- Secondary place provision in Merton will be increased through a new school that is being commissioned by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and provided by Harris Academy. Members were reminded that whilst the Council is supporting this development, it is not responsible for the delivery;
- Due to the need for increased secondary places the Children, Schools and Families Department is taking an active role in the development of the new school including pursuing options for potential sites for the school with colleagues in the Environment and Regeneration Department. This followed a comprehensive site search which was limited by the shortage of available space in the west of the borough. There is currently a preferred option involving use of Council and third party owned land but because of commercial confidentiality this option cannot yet be publicised;
- The opening date for the new school is September 2017 but this may be delayed. Cabinet has already approved the expansion of Harris Academy Merton which will be able to accommodate some of the additional demand for places before the new school comes on stream; and
- Officers continue to consider that with the new school and between 1-3 further expansions (including Harris Merton as noted above) the Council will be able to fulfil its responsibility to provide secondary school places.

Academisation

In response to a member question, Jane McSherry clarified;

- The Children, Schools and Families Department is working with schools to plan for the implementation of the Government's recently announced academisation agenda (all schools to become Academies by 2020 or to have plans to do so by 2022);
- All schools have been contacted and advised that there is no rush to make a decision and that the emphasis is on thinking this through carefully. Meetings will be held with heads and governors next term and the department will also look at how other authorities are responding to the policy including those that already have multiple academies;
- There will be a need to liaise with the Catholic and Church of England Dioceses around their plans for implementation; and
- Most importantly, the department will work with all schools to ensure none are left isolated as this policy is implemented.

On-going scrutiny of children and young people's services

Paul Angeli highlighted there will be a need to consider how scrutiny of services for children and young people is achieved as some are regionalised or centralised across London. These services are likely to include adoption, youth offending and may also include other social care functions.

RESOLVED: to note the update report.

10 PERFORMANCE REPORT: CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES
DEPARTMENT (Agenda Item 10)

In response to member questions regarding the red status of the percentage of child protection conferences that are quorate, Paul Angeli clarified;

- It is the attendance of the police and school nurses that is causing the difficulty;
- School nurses were sending reports instead of attending conferences. This approach has been reversed by commissioners and the attendance of school nurses should now be secured; and
- Discussions are currently taking place with the police to address this issue.

RESOLVED: to note the performance report of the Children, Schools and Families Department.

11 SCRUTINY TOPIC SUGGESTIONS (Agenda Item 11)

Panel members were reminded to complete the annual member survey that has been distributed and provides the opportunity to make suggestions for next year's scrutiny work programme. (The closing date for responses is Friday 15 April 2016.)

Additionally, it was noted that the topic selection workshop will take place on Tuesday 24 May 2016 to which all Panel members are invited and their attendance very much encouraged. Items to consider at the workshop will include those identified during this meeting.

Some suggestions were made for topics for next year's scrutiny work programme:

- The attainment of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) cohorts;
- Ensuring the ethnic diversity of social workers to reflect the population characteristics of Looked-After Children;
- How to achieve the recruitment of foster carers from across the borough including areas where there is currently little provision (ie: the west of the borough, specifically Wimbledon); and
- Provision of secondary school places.