

From Councillor Mary Curtin to the Cabinet member for Children and Education

How is the council working to support children and young people given the rise in mental health issues?

Reply

We are very concerned about the rise in mental health issues amongst young people. We were seeing a rise in mental health concerns pre-pandemic. We are now seeing heightened concerns for those children who were already suffering, but also a rise in young people's anxiety because of the pandemic.

The council is working closely with the CCG and partners to develop a new approach to mental health in Merton, called 'i-Thrive'. This is a culture change involving the expansion of service provided to children and young people at different levels of identified risk.

To support this approach we have developed new partnerships of schools and colleges. The partnerships work together to develop whole school models to support good mental wellbeing. This approach is supported by a mental health in schools team that support low-level issues. We now have four such partnerships in Merton led by Ursuline Secondary School, South Thames College, Cricket Green and Hillcross School. The aim is that by 2023 all schools in Merton will be in such a partnership or cluster, and we are well on the way to achieving this. This has been supported through successful bids for additional government funding and increased CCG funding for young people's mental health.

In addition, the CCG have commissioned a range of additional mental health support from the KOOTH app, through which young people can access support 24/7 on their phones from 'Off the Record', which accepts direct referrals from young people on line and face to face.

A significant concern that young people have told us about is their anxiety about having missed so much education. We have been working with schools on their catch up and recovery curriculums to support children's wellbeing as they return to schools.

St George's Mental Health Trust has also now developed an out-of-hours crisis line. The lead clinician outlined this service to schools at the termly mental health leads forum and promotional materials were circulated before the summer.

The development of the i-Thrive model involves cultural change over time. Work is ongoing to pilot more targeted support for young people who have experienced trauma. We are also in the process of a surveying and listening exercise with young people, hearing their views, through a borough wide youth survey. This will inform the next developments of services to support our young people.

From Councillor Hayley Ormrod to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education:

From 2013 the number of children with ECHPs began to rise, however it is only recently that the council began to expand in borough provision, why was this?

Reply

It is incorrect to state that the council has only begun to expand in-borough specialist provision - the council has been expanding special schools and resourced provision significantly for a decade – it is just that the rise in demand in Merton, as has occurred nationally, has exceeded any forecast that could reasonably be made. A summary of the major expansions already implemented over the past 10 years are as follows:

- Completed 2011 - Perseid School new upper school site providing for additional pupils
- Completed 2013 – Cricket Green expansion through use of adjacent former doctors surgery and Chapel Orchard
- Completed 2015 – Hatfeild School opening of ARP (Additionally Resourced Provision)
- Completed 2015 – Perseid School further expansion of lower school site
- Completed 2018 – Perseid School further expansion of upper school site
- Completed 2019 – Stanford School opening of ARP
- Completed 2020 – Cricket Green further major expansion
- Under construction and completing in late 2021 – Melrose School expansion including primary phase

From Councillor Dennis Pearce to the Cabinet member for Children and Education

How has the council supported schools to safely re-open this term?

Reply

Schools have been supported in a variety of ways to open safely this term:

- Weekly meetings have been held with headteachers both prior to the summer holidays (when the first set of guidance for return was issued by the government), and restarting just before the beginning of the autumn term. Chaired by the Assistant Director for Education and Early Help, and attended by Merton Public Health and other senior Education officers, these meetings helped schools to unpick the guidance, enabled key questions to be answered, and provided a forum for problem solving amongst themselves.
- These meetings covered the key issues facing schools on return including: onsite testing in secondary schools; the role of school in Track and Trace; supporting staff and pupils to return under the different arrangements (no bubbles, masks, social distancing, but with ongoing enhanced cleaning, hand sanitisation and ventilation); vaccinations of different groups; and self-isolation rules.
- Daily emails to Headteachers during term time (and again resuming before the beginning of term) ensured that they were alerted to new guidance in a timely

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fashion, and summaries of the guidance were provided to help them focus on the key points.

- Schools are now required to have 'Outbreak Management Plans' in place: a model template for this was provided to schools.
- The Merton Public Health team supporting education settings has been expanded. There are now 1.6 FTE Infection Prevention and Control Coordinators, as well as a 1FTE Senior Public Health Principal.
- The Public Health team have streamlined the ways in which schools can contact them to log new cases and seek advice, which they have continued to do throughout the holidays and into the new term.
- Schools have been funded to employ 'Covid Resilience Leads' from September 2021, for 12 months. In the majority of cases schools are using the funding to enable current staff to step up into this role. The leads will support school leaders to manage the next steps of the pandemic. They will be trained by Merton Public Health, and meet regularly together. They will cascade key Covid messages to staff, and support the development of key Covid policies/processes.

Schools are reporting a relatively smooth return, though some have indeed had some cases, with which they have been supported by the Public Health team.

From Councillor Omar Bush to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education:

Based on Merton's 251 data, the spending on independent placements has been the highest in the country per capita. Please provide the breakdown between education and social care spending on independent placements since 2014.

Reply

The majority of the spend on the DSG in relation to independent placements are for independent day placements which is almost always an education not a social care reason for the placement and would therefore be fully funded by the DSG. The level of independent day placement spend is driven by a number of factors, a key one being the amount of independent provision in a borough. Merton has a high level of independent provision and has had less local authority provision. We therefore have more spend in that sector. However, we have been addressing that as part of the DSG recovery plan by increasing special school places.

There are a small number of independent residential placements – between 25-35 a year and these can be for 38 weeks (term time only) or 52 weeks. For each case an assessment of the social care (adult or children's social care) and health contributions (where they are appropriate) are made. Children's social care contributions are generally provided for the 52 placements and are divided on a 38/14 week split education/children's social care.

From Councillor Jenifer Gould to the Joint Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Education

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We know how important early years' education and socialisation are for children's lifelong learning. Unfortunately, following COVID this has been diminished for many young children. We also recognise the impact that communication problems can have on every aspect of life, with particular concern surrounding the long-term effects on young children. What support is available to parents to help their children with any communication problems, or speech and language difficulties, specifically for the age range 3-5 who may not be in education or accessing an education establishment? Also what targeted speech and language support is available for all school-age children without a EHCP (such as for those with a stammer or other speech impediment, or following a head injury)?

Reply

All children under 5, regardless of whether they are in a setting or not, can access speech and language therapy service, community paediatrics, physiotherapy and occupational therapy services through their health visitor/professional, where this is deemed necessary and a referral made and accepted.

If children are known to the Children with Disabilities service (CWD), they will have a social worker with whom parents can speak; social workers are also able to engage with the health visitor/professional who again will assess and signpost where appropriate.

Professionals who may be working with the families can also refer to a range of evidenced based parenting programmes and/or group programmes for children with additional needs around communication, speech and language in Children's Centres. (criteria apply). Families will be supported and encouraged to take up a place in an early years setting.

Parents can also source information on line, and there are a range of national programmes that have been produced to support parents help their children [Hungry Little Minds – Simple fun, activities for kids aged 0 – 5 \(campaign.gov.uk\)](https://www.campaign.gov.uk) , as well as our own Face book page [Merton information for families | Facebook](#)

For school aged children without an EHCP, and who have speech and language issues such as a stammer, speech impediment or head injury: these would require clinical speech and language therapy, which is provided by the NHS through a contract with CLCH. Access to these services does not require an EHCP.

For children in mainstream school with general speech and language difficulties, without and EHCP, the Local Authority Language and Learning service offers a school buy back service that can be used to support pupils. Under lockdown, therapy for children continued even when children were not in school, as on line therapy. This meant that there was more interaction between therapist and parents. We will look to see how we can build on this and enhance the LA offer moving forwards.

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Children in mainstream school often also have access to broader speech and language support from their school staff. For example, more than 20 primary schools in Merton took part in the Department for Education-funded Nuffield Early Language Intervention in 2021, an evidence-based programme that trains up Teaching Assistants to assess pupils' language skills and deliver targeted one-to-one and group sessions for pupils in Reception year.

From Councillor John Dehaney to the Cabinet member for Children and Education

There has been concern about youth crime over the summer in London. What has Merton been doing to reduce youth offending?

Reply

A comprehensive operation between police, social care and the youth service has been taking place throughout the summer in Merton. This has involved weekly meetings to discuss partnership interventions to prevent youth crime and an enhanced police response. Meetings between key partners has enabled target support and interventions to be in place before concerns arise in the community. This partnership working resulted in swift information sharing and improved communication between agencies. It enabled all agencies to respond quickly to any emerging intelligence regarding youth violence and measures were put in place to control serious youth violence wherever possible. It equally means that all key partner agencies and professionals are aware of the concerns, what action is being taken to reduce them. Partners have been able to provide tailored support and focused safeguarding to individual young people as required. Where areas or locations of concern became known, there has been a targeted support and presence in that area to disrupt activity, but also support engagement with young people. Cross-border partnership work with colleagues in multiple London boroughs has additionally safeguarded young people travelling across London to commit offences.

Additional Summer Scheme (Holidays Activities and Food) sessions were funded to increase the engagement of young people and keep them safe, including provision running extended opening hours to support young people. Targeted day activities were also provided to engage older young people and support them into post 16 placements.

From Councillor Adam Bush to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education:

The budget outturn report for 2017/18 told us that there was a DSG overspend of £1.8 million yet no action was taken by your department to halt the overspend. Surely you must have been aware of this, so why did you not make the DSG a priority when you became the portfolio holder?

Reply

I became Cabinet member for Education in May 2019, and the minute of CYP Scrutiny in June 2019 show that I then stated that two of my top priorities were SEND funding the amounts we are paying for independent school places for children with EHCPs. It has been an ongoing priority for me ever since. More widely, the Council has been looking to address this issue for some time although I should point out that it is extremely challenging when government funding has just not kept up with the requirements set out in their Children's and Families Act 2014 legislation.

You will note a plan was presented in early 2019 and in autumn 2019 when it was considered by the Schools Forum, and a public report was presented to Cabinet in January 2020 Agenda for Cabinet on Monday 27 January 2020, 7.15 pm - Merton Council We met the DfE on the matter in February 2020.

Over the last 18 months resources have been prioritised on assisting schools to keep open during this difficult global pandemic period, and we support the DfE working with us on an issue which is significant for the council to address.

From Pauline Cowper to the Cabinet member for Children and Education

What did the council do to support disadvantaged pupils when schools closed over the holidays?

Reply

Following on from activities which took place in the Easter holiday this year, the council worked with schools and voluntary sector providers to offer the Merton Fun and Food scheme funded by the Department for Education Holidays Activities and Food (HAF) project. This enabled children that are eligible for free school meals to access free summer provision, which must meet HAF standards. These standards include: provision of at least four hours a day, four days a week of engagement activities; a meal every day meeting school nutritional standards; physical exercise; and nutritional education.

We are still collecting finalised data from providers but we estimate that 1600 children and young people accessed a four-day provision. This was slightly down on predicted numbers, as some schemes had to shut because of Covid outbreaks. However, that constitutes a reach to approximately 25% of those eligible for free school meals aged 5-16 in Merton. We estimate that 85% of the children accessing the summer scheme were from black and minority ethnic families, and 13% had EHCPs. We took direct referrals from social workers, offered open access provision in areas of high need, as well as targeting provision for particular communities. This included a week of activities in the Holiday Inn hotel in Colliers Wood to support the children.

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Of the 21 HAF providers, 12 were schools (five primary and seven secondary) who remained open during the holiday, and offered summer activities to their pupils, sometimes in partnership with other schools or voluntary sector providers. Merton Youth Service ran a summer scheme and hosted voluntary sector providers. We estimate that 8000 healthy meals were provided; 750 hours of physical activity; and 200 hours of nutritional education. Of course, this is in addition to children and young people having a lot of fun!

We would like to thank Merton Connected for working so hard to support our excellent offer in the voluntary sector: Tooting and Mitcham Football Club, AFC Wimbledon, Filmanthropy, Ashton Jazz, Hercules Athletics, Uptown Youth, Jimmy Asher Foundation, Unique Talent, Revoke.

One offer we would single out was run by the Jimmy Asher foundation for children at home. Activities and on line cooking were offered to children who would struggle to leave their homes. We also offered 1200 'take and make' meals, which involved a family having a box of fresh ingredients to enable them to cook the meal at home. These boxes were very popular during the Easter holiday, and so we continued to fund them across the summer.

We are now planning for the Christmas holidays which will continue the HAF offer.

In addition, Merton Council continued to offer food vouchers for families with children with free school meals across the summer. The government provided a 'Covid Support grant' but unfortunately the grant allocation to Merton did not provide for the increased number of children on free school meals. To ensure that all children on free school meals received a £80 voucher to cover the summer holiday period, Merton topped up the grant by some £72,000.

From Councillor James Holmes to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education:

As the number of children with ECHPs rose did the number of staff members dedicated to reviewing the ECHP also rise, and can you give me the average number of cases for an officer in 2013 compared with today?

Reply

In September 2013, before the Children and Families Act 2014, when pupils had a Statement of SEN, we had 1013 Statements of SEN and 4 FTE SEN Case Officer posts who had an average caseload of 253. In 2013, the age range for pupils with a Statement of SEN was up to the age of 19.

As of today's date, we have 2463 EHCPs (0-25years) and 11 FTE EHC Co-ordinator posts who manage final EHCPs with an average caseload of 223. We also have 6 EHC Co-ordinators undertaking EHC needs assessments.

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Since 2013 the number of EHC Co-ordinators who manage final EHCPs has risen by 7 full time equivalent.

From Councillor Stan Anderson to the Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Skills

Can the Cabinet member update Council on apprenticeships for young people in the borough?

Reply

The numbers of apprenticeships taken up by young people in Merton continue to be low, but are proportionately similar to neighbouring boroughs with low levels of Not in Education Training or Employment. Merton has been in and continues to be in the top quartile nationally for children in education training and employment with very strong levels of children staying in education 16-18. In areas with high levels of education apprenticeship take up is low. In Merton, this is approximately 800 apprentices per year. This figure fell last year regionally with many companies unable to offer apprenticeships. Merton College working with local businesses offers a range of apprenticeships to young people.

Feedback over time from young people and parents is that many apprenticeships do not pay sufficiently and/ or the key skills element puts them off. This is particularly true at level 1 and 2 apprenticeships where pay can be lower. The My Futures team which support young people who are not in education training or employment works hard with parents in particular where young people do have the qualifications to access higher paid apprenticeships but parental perception can be a barrier.

The London Borough of Merton currently employs 16 young Apprentices aged between 16-24. 6 of those apprentices started in 2021.

The Council has a dedicated apprenticeship [webpage](#) targeted at young people as an attraction piece on the types of apprenticeships within the local authority.

In addition to apprenticeships the council runs a Towards Employment team. This externally funded service supports young people furthest from employment into employment through purposeful links with employers.

The Towards Employment team are supporting Merton HR in the engagement and recruitment of YP to Merton's Kickstart scheme, holding Kickstart specific job clubs at the job centre where they have conducted interviews on behalf of managers. We have prioritised vulnerable young people to ensure that they get at least an interview. As of 10th September the Council has taken on a total of 24 Kick Start placements and is out to advert on a further 10 Kick Start job roles. These are all 16 – 25 year olds.