

## **Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel**

**Date: 03 November 2021**

Wards: All

### **Subject: Departmental Update**

Lead officer: Jane McSherry, Director of Children, Schools and Families

Lead member: Cllr Eleanor Stringer, Joint Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Education

Contact officer: Karl Mittelstadt, Head of Performance, Policy and Partnerships

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#### **Recommendations:**

- A. Members of the panel to discuss and comment on the contents of the report
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## **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1. The report provides members of the panel with information on key developments affecting the Children, Schools and Families Department, since the panel's last meeting and not covered elsewhere on the agenda. It focusses on those aspects of particular relevance to the department.

## **2 DETAILS**

### **CHILDREN, SCHOOLS & FAMILIES**

- 2.1. It is only one month since my last update to you. However, since then a lot has happened. The Council has had its first meeting with the DfE 'Safety Valve' team (led by Tony McArdle). The negotiations with the DfE about support to balance the Designated Schools Grant will continue for the next three months. This will remain a focus of mine for the foreseeable future.
- 2.2. I am pleased to report that our recruitment for a permanent Head of Service (Children and Safeguarding) was successful. Theresa Hills will be joining us from Wandsworth Council where she currently works as Service Manager.
- 2.3. At last month's Corporate Parenting Board I was again reminded of the incredible talent and enthusiasm of the children in our care. We heard powerful testimonies from care experienced children about some of the challenges they face when trying to negotiate their path into adulthood.
- 2.4. The ability to listen to children and their families about their experiences is at the core of what we do and I am determined this continues as we take on future challenges.

## **Supporting Vulnerable Children**

### **Supporting Children & Young People with Special Educational Needs**

- 2.5. The Education directorate is currently reviewing the SEN Support offer and a focus for this academic year is the graduated response (assess, plan, do, review) process. The review of how mainstream maintained schools and academies are meeting the Special Educational Needs of their pupils and utilising their notional funding will support the directorate in understanding further the reasons for the continued demand in referrals for Education Health and Care Needs assessments.
- 2.6. Demand for statutory assessments continues. At the end of September the total number of EHCPs was 2482.
- 2.7. We continue to see an increase in meeting the 20-week statutory timescale for issuing Education Health and Care Plans. Our year-to-date figure (calendar year) for issuing plans within 20 weeks was 66% at the end of September.
- 2.8. We monitor our 20-week timeliness on a monthly basis and saw further improvement in September where 87% of EHCPs were issued within 20 weeks. The improvement in meeting timescales is because of our continued work with partners to improve processes for receiving professional advice within the 6-week statutory timescale.
- 2.9. Since the return to school in September 2021 we have reconvened the fortnightly multi-agency Risk Assessment meeting with Perseid Special School attended by Public Health, Social Care, Education, Central London Community Health and the Senior Leadership Team within Perseid Specialist School. This process allows us to monitor the impact of Covid for our most vulnerable pupils.
- 2.10. The meeting enables us to monitor the impact of Covid for our most vulnerable pupils with a focus on staff and pupil Covid rates, and agreeing actions to prevent the spread of Covid. Public Health are supporting the school with the recruitment of an additional nurse to undertake PCR testing within the school so that pupils have access to the tests and to prevent pupils having to be sent home to isolate due to the inability to have PCR tests. We are currently recruiting for this position. The meeting also ensures that respite activities are monitored and that the network are aware of particularly vulnerable families.

### ***Discretionary Grant (School Transport) – Tom Proctor***

- 2.11. A report is being submitted to Cabinet on 8 November to seek agreement to commence a consultation on home to school travel assistance policy. It had been previously agreed by budget Council in Spring 2020 that the policy would be reviewed. Merton Council has not formally reviewed its home to school travel assistance policy for a number of years and in this time expenditure has increased considerably year-on-year to over £6.5 million per annum.
- 2.12. The consultation will provide a number of options, and we are engaging with parents on the matter.
- 2.13. A paper will be brought to this committee before any decision is made.

### ***DfE Safety Valve Programme***

- 2.14. We had our first meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> October and had the opportunity to put our perspective on and reasons for the deficit position, and the particular challenges within the local authority. We highlighted the high number of requests for EHCPs (fourth highest rate in England) as well as our reliance on independent specialist schools and the challenges of effective contract and financial monitoring.
- 2.15. Importantly, we were able to demonstrate some evidence of ‘rebalancing’ the SEND system which we have already been able to undertake, including an increase in placements in state funded mainstream provision since 2020 underpinned by robust monitoring arrangements to ensure sustainability of the placement. Our EHCP assessment timeliness is increasing demonstrating greater multi-agency cooperation as well as an expansion of specialist provision in the borough.
- 2.16. Over the autumn, we will continue to work closely with the department’s team. During this process, we will be asked to develop and refine our actions to address the deficit with a view to negotiate a sustainable and achievable recovery plan. This process is overseen by our Chief Executive, and the work is co-ordinated by the Education Division.
- 2.17. Final proposals will be submitted to the department in early December.

### ***Social Workers in Schools Project***

- 2.18. The Social Workers in Schools Project led by the What Works Centre and Cardiff University has been in place in Merton since September 2020 and there are currently six social workers working across six of Merton’s Secondary Schools: Harris Academy Merton, Harris Academy Morden, Harris Academy Wimbledon, Melrose, Rutlish and Ursuline. There is also a social work student based at Harris Academy Merton who began in September 2021 and a social work student will be joining Rutlish in November 2021.
- 2.19. There are currently 64 allocated children being supported within statutory interventions in the team (the aim for statutory allocations is 70, with 12 children per social worker). Alongside the statutory allocations each social worker undertakes preventative interventions which include (but are not limited to) mentoring, drop-ins, parenting support, contextual harm support and threshold guidance.
- 2.20. The main areas of need highlighted in the project have been in relation to children missing education, child mental health challenges and contextual safeguarding. The Social Workers in Schools Project is set to come to an end in March 2022.

### ***Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSL) Supervision Project***

- 2.21. The DSL Supervision project, which is also led by the What Works Centre, started in Merton in September 2021 providing individual supervision to DSLs in 22 primary schools and group supervision regarding child sexual abuse to 5 secondary schools. This project is expected to run until July 2022.

## ***Social Work Academy***

- 2.22. The Frontline students started with us on 6 September 2021. This academic year we have increased from one to two units – eight students (four students in each unit). Each of the units has a Consultant Social Worker attached. The students have been provided with some initial training and shadowing opportunities. They have also now started to co-work or work cases. There are 28 children allocated among the student group, with the named worker being the CSW. We now have pen pictures of each student, their skills, experience and interests to help us match the families with the students.
- 2.23. Four ASYEs (Assessed and Support Year in Employment) were also due to start; three of these started on Monday 18 October. All of their social work registrations came through at the last minute, so they could start as ASYEs (rather than Child and Family Workers as originally thought).
- 2.24. There is one more ASYE to start in the Children With Disabilities Team (CWDT); she is currently working her notice period and will join us in the next couple of weeks. All of the ASYEs are assigned to an FSS Team/CWDT and, in the main, the Practice Educators are within the same teams. The ASYEs have started their inductions and training via Me Learning. Over the past week we have been identifying cases to be allocated to them – one ASYE already has seven children allocated, and one has four children allocated.
- 2.25. We also have other ASYEs within FSS and CWDT who are part way through the assessed year. They have varying caseloads – usually lower level and lower numbers – starting with around five children, then around 10-12 at the six-month point, rising to approximately 18 as they approach the 12-month point. Two ASYEs are finishing this month and will be fully qualified; they are staying with us in the teams they are already working in. We have four more who are part way through (approximately six months in). There is one ASYE where some issues have been identified and a process is in place with the University and HR.

## **Supporting Families**

### ***Household Support Grant***

- 2.26. On 6 October it was confirmed that Merton Council will receive a £1,186,607 “Household Support Grant” allocation “to support those most in need this winter” for the period from now to 31 March 2022. The provision of the grant coincides with the removal of the £20 weekly uplift in Universal Credit, the Covid Support Grant stopping which funded FSM (Free School Meals) vouchers during the holidays, and other cost of living pressures on households.
- 2.27. The logistics of distributing the grant fairly and effectively in the timescale is complicated and officers in CSF department are working with colleagues in C&H and CS departments to agree the most effective means. However, we have agreed that we will use at least £400,000 of the grant to provide £15 per week supermarket vouchers for FSM children in our schools for the holiday periods up to the end of March. Schools are now arranging/have arranged the vouchers for children for the October half term.

### ***Holiday Activities and Food Programme***

- 2.28. The Department for Education has reiterated their position that the grant cannot be spent at half-term and we are therefore not offering this service during October half-term. This has an impact on vulnerable families in Merton who have been accessing the Holiday Activities and Food Programme.
- 2.29. Our Youth Centres in Pollards Hill and Phipps Bridge as well as the Adventure Playground will be open and running free half term activities across the half term week.
- 2.30. We are in the process of working with Voluntary sector groups to develop our offer for children on free school meals for the Christmas holiday period.

### ***Nursery take-up***

- 2.31. Take up of early years services across our Children's Centres is high, with all the current Early Learning Together courses fully booked. Bookings are available for our January programmes, and families or professionals can book directly via our web pages. Feedback remains positive, particularly for the Baby programme, which supports new parents/carers with babies up to 7 months old
- 2.32. Take up across our Private, Voluntary and Independent sector is increasing, and Merton has seen a relatively stable position over the past 18 months. We continue to monitor supply and are planning our Childcare Sufficiency for 2022 – 2023 to better capture demand and changes to patterns of usage for under 5s childcare.
- 2.33. Numbers for 2, 3 and 4 year olds have been steadily improving and early indicators for the October count suggest that take up of funded early education places continues to increase .

### **Supporting Schools**

#### ***Covid recovery and attendance***

- 2.34. Schools continue to not be required to collapse bubbles any more in the event of an outbreak, but pupil, and in some cases, staff, absence rates are higher than normal at this time of year.
- 2.35. As of 21<sup>st</sup> October, average pupil attendance across Merton schools was 92.5%, which compares with the most recent national average of 90%. Attendance in primary schools ranges from 84.3% to 98.1%; in secondary from 89.8% to 95.7%. Where there are lower rates of attendance this corresponds in the main to Covid outbreaks; however, with higher rates of other illnesses in the community, some schools are also affected by these. Attendance for pupils with a social worker (82%), with an EHCP (87.5%), and in receipt of free school meals (88.9%) is below that for all pupils: schools are being reminded of their responsibilities to these pupils, and support and challenge is being provided by the Education Welfare Service and Merton School Improvement.
- 2.36. Schools continue to be supported by the Public Health team to implement additional measures to manage outbreaks. At the moment these are being managed at 'green' and 'amber' levels; 'red' levels (including measures that would potentially restrict education) have not yet been required.

- 2.37. Schools with secondary age pupils are providing venues for the roll out of the vaccination programme for 12 – 15 year olds. Take up has been low so far, and South West London NHS are holding clinics over half term for children to attend with their parents. This will support those families where parents would like to be present when their child is vaccinated, and those who missed their in school vaccination opportunity (if that occurred before half term).
- 2.38. Schools are supporting all pupils following the return to 'normal' education since the last lockdown in March 2021. There is support in particular for vulnerable pupils with regards to their academic progress as well as their mental health and wellbeing. There is more detail about this work in the separate paper presented at this meeting, 'Support for Pupils after the Pandemic'.

### ***Ofsted and school improvement support***

- 2.39. Ofsted have resumed routine inspection this term. This includes the inspection of outstanding schools who were previously exempt from routine inspection: Ofsted have been very clear that the bar for outstanding has been significantly raised, and that they are expecting the numbers of schools deemed to be outstanding to drop considerably. Three schools have so far been inspected in Merton and the associated reports will be published over the next few weeks. A paper on implications and challenges is being brought to the next School Standards Panel.
- 2.40. Merton School Improvement has resumed all normal work with schools, including preparation for Ofsted. The training programme for schools also continues as normal, though some events continue remotely (something that has boosted attendance. Of note is the work being carried out through the DSL forum, including working with schools on the changes to 'Keeping Children Safe in Education 2021', and this document's focus on harmful sexual behaviours.