

Committee: Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Date: 15 March 2022

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, Improvement and Partnerships

Recommendations:

A. Members of the panel to discuss and comment on the contents of the report

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. At the time of writing this update, we are just coming to the end of our inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS). The early help and children's social care inspection focuses on the impact we have on the lives of children and young people, including the effectiveness of leaders and managers, and the quality of our professional practice. Under the ILACS framework, local authorities previously judged 'Good' receive a short inspection, which takes two weeks. During the first week the inspectors are off-site and evaluate a significant amount of data and evidence which we are asked to submit in the first few days. During week two, which took place for us from Monday 28th February to Friday 4th March, the inspectors are on-site and focus on direct practice by holding discussions with practitioners across our system and reviewing children's case files. They also attended our Children in Care Council, Our Voice; met with two of our Young Inspectors; and they had 1:1 meetings with several other care experienced young people.

2.2. I am really proud of our Directorate, who have worked tirelessly during this period to showcase the great practice we have in Merton. It has been a challenging two years, operating in a time of significant uncertainty, and our practitioners were able to demonstrate how we have risen to the challenges

to ensure that children, young people and families continue to receive the support they need. The inspectors will now write up their findings over the coming weeks. However, their provisional, verbal feedback to us was positive. They spoke to us about seeing great examples of child-centred, direct practice, by passionate and committed workers. They highlighted effective collaboration, well-coordinated support for children and families, and strong multi-agency working. We are confident that the Directorate, along with our partners, have evidenced to inspectors strong practice here in Merton, and we are looking forward to receiving their report.

- 2.3. The next steps are that the inspectors will draft their report and share it with us on Friday 18th March for us to review for factual accuracy. The report and will remain under embargo until publication.

Supporting Vulnerable Children

Supporting vulnerable Children and with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities

- 2.4. The statutory SEN2 data return was completed and uploaded on the 3rd March 2021. As of this date, Merton maintained 2467 Education Health and Care Plans.
- 2.5. The total number of referrals received in the 2021 Calendar Year was 361 of which the LA agreed to undertake an Education Health Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) on 309 cases and did not agree to issue 18 following of these plans following the EHCNA.
- 2.6. In 2021, the LA issued a total of 334 new EHCPs, some of which were referred during 2020.
- 2.7. The year to date timeliness (20 weeks for EHCNA) has significantly improved over the year and has shown an increase of 32.4% since the 2020 SEN2 resulting in the total number of EHCPs excluding exception cases issued within 20 weeks as 72%.
- 2.8. As members will be aware from previous updates, Merton was invited to participate in the second round of the DfE's 'safety valve' intervention programme with the aim of agreeing a package of reform to the high needs system that will bring the DSG deficit under control. The initial part of the process has now concluded, and negotiations have been successful. The department continues to be in discussions about the finer detail regarding the programme. Inclusion in the programme will mean that the DfE contributes to the clearing of our historical DSG debt, on condition of the successful delivery of an ambitious plan to address the factors underlying the deficit.
- 2.9. Additional provision: Construction works to expand Melrose school to provide for primary age pupils have now successfully completed, and we are out to tender for works to open the Whatley Avenue provision in September as planned. Merton Medical Education Services are now using part of Lavender Nursery, who will fully move into their new home in Steers

Mead at the end of the Easter holiday period once these works are completed.

- 2.10. SEND travel assistance – following the report to this committee in February, a report is going to Cabinet on 21 March 2022.

Supporting Schools

School Admissions:

- 2.11. 1st March was secondary school admissions' offer day. Although there was a small decrease in the number of resident applications, there were substantially more first preferences for Merton secondary schools, reflecting a high and increasing confidence in the borough's secondary schools. This contributed to us being able to offer nearly 70% of school children a place at their first preference secondary school – an increase of more than 5% on previous years.

School Attendance

- 2.12. School Attendance is improving in Merton as we emerge from the pandemic. However, attendance rates remain below pre pandemic levels. Schools and services have been working hard with families to support children to return to full education. Public Health have continued to give excellent infection control advice for schools.
- 2.13. Schools have been averaging about 1% above national averages on the daily attendance. Attendance of vulnerable children has also risen, and in particular of children with EHCPs in mainstream schools. Their attendance is better than that for the wider population of children.
- 2.14. We continue to carefully monitor the attendance of children with a social worker, which has been below the national averages, particularly in secondary schools. We have run additional Children Missing Education panels to review all children with a social worker and receiving support from the Family Well Being service – reviewing all children known to us with an attendance rate of below 90%. Our Education Welfare Service will continue to work with schools to drive up attendance in schools.

Covid – Impact of and response from Merton Schools

- 2.15. Numbers of Covid infections are declining in Merton in line with the national figures, with the highest cases currently being seen in the 16-29 age group. There has been a marked reduction in case numbers in the 5-10 and 11-16 age groups. As of 4th March, there are six active Covid-19 outbreaks in education settings, four of which are in Merton maintained schools: one primary, two secondary and one SEN. There are a further three outbreaks under investigation. Cases are in significantly smaller numbers than we were seeing before half term and in each of these schools are below 30.

- 2.16. Headteachers have been updated with regard to the removal of restrictions in line with government plans and our Public Health team have drafted a letter to parents and carers which is likely to be circulated in the week ending 11th March. The Government has removed the legal requirement to self-isolate following a positive test; however the public health advice is that adults and children are advised to stay at home and limit contact with others, for at least five full days, when they test positive. Headteachers may advise parents and staff to follow this guidance.
- 2.17. Since the last meeting of this Committee, one further school has been inspected by Ofsted: William Morris Primary School. In addition the reports following inspection were published for Ursuline High School (which was judged as good, with outstanding sub-judgements for Behaviour and Attitudes, Personal Development and the Sixth Form) and Joseph Hood Primary School (which was judged as good).