

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 4 November 2014

Agenda item: 5

Wards: All wards

Subject: Corporate Parenting Report

Lead officer: Paul Angeli, Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion, Children Schools and Families

Lead member(s): Councillor Maxi Martin; Councillor Martin Whelton.

Forward Plan reference number: n/a

Contact officer: Sarah Daly, Service Manager Permanence, LAC and Care Leavers.

Recommendations: That the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Panel considers the Merton Annual Corporate Parenting Report and:

- (1) Notes the roles and responsibilities of all councillors as corporate parents to children looked after and care leavers.
- (2) Notes the performance in respect of the Corporate Parenting activity in 2013-14.

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report sets out an annual update on the corporate parenting arrangements in Merton. It advises members on key legislation and guidance which has seen a significant change in recent years. The report aims to strengthen the role and responsibilities of Merton's corporate parents in improving outcomes for children and young people.
- 1.2 The information presented in this report does not include all children looked after end of year figures for April 2013-14 as these were not available at the time of writing.

2. DETAILS

Corporate Parenting our responsibilities – The Legal Framework

- 2.1 The Children Act 1989 and the Leaving Care Act 2000 place clear statutory duties upon the Council to protect children from suffering significant harm and to provide continued financial and transition support to care leavers aged up to 21 (or 25 if in full time education). Underpinning corporate parenting is a wide range of national policies, guidance, regulations and legislation, which are subject to change by High Court rulings, such as the Southwark ruling in 2009.
- 2.2 The revised care planning regulations and guidance, including The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case

Review Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers and the Statutory Guidance on Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children March 2010, place increased emphasis on effective care planning with a focus on the child, and are designed to improve the quality and consistency of care planning, placement and case review for looked after children. They also aim to improve the care and support provided to care leavers.

- 2.3 Central Government has made significant reforms to the youth remand framework with the implementation of the LASPO Act in December 2012. The Act implicitly attributes further responsibility to Local Authorities by means of children and young people being remanded to youth detention accommodation, being treated as children looked after and being eligible for leaving care services if they are looked after beyond 13-weeks.
- 2.4 The Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers (Revised May 2013) sets out expectations for local authorities in respect of planning and arranging suitable accommodation for the transition to independent living, including 'accommodation with former foster carers (Staying Put) arrangements'. The Staying Put legislation places a legal duty on local authorities to support every care leaver who wants to stay with their foster carers until their 21st birthday. The opportunity to 'stay put' should apply equally to young people that have been cared for by foster carers from the local authority or independent fostering services.
- 2.5 Effective corporate parenting requires knowledge and awareness of the needs of children and young people who are looked after and the services that they receive. This is a shared responsibility for the Council as a whole. The role of the corporate parent is:
 - a. To receive and consider accurate and timely management information reports on the numbers, characteristics and needs of looked after children and care leavers
 - b. To receive and consider reports demonstrating how effectively Merton is serving its looked after population through the provision of services and targeted initiatives
 - c. To receive briefings on new national and local initiatives designed to improve children and young people's life chances
 - d. To gain knowledge of services based on direct involvement and opportunities to meet and gain the views of stakeholders, especially listening to the views of children and young people looked after and members of the Children in Care Council
 - e. To monitor and review progress on the delivery of the Pledge to children looked after and care leavers
 - f. Ensure that decisive action is taken to address any shortcomings in the services provided to children and young people

Corporate Parenting Board Overview

2.6 The Corporate Parenting Board is chaired by Merton council's Chief Executive.

2.7 The Board meets 6 times each year.

2.8 Over the past year the Board has considered reports on topics including:

- Educational progress of looked after children
- Health outcomes of looked after children
- Children's rights and advocacy
- Participation of looked after children
- Assessments of young people aged 16 & 17 years presenting as homeless
- Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO)
- Trends in the care population

Corporate Parenting in Merton

2.9 The local Family Poverty Needs Assessment shows that Merton is a relatively affluent borough, ranking as the fourth least deprived authority of London's 33 boroughs. It is characterised by pockets of high deprivation alongside areas of high affluence. There is a stark east/west divide with the east of the borough covering the school planning areas of East and West Mitcham and East Morden being considerably more deprived than the west of the borough which includes the school planning areas of East and West Wimbledon and West Morden (London Borough of Merton Family Poverty Strategy 2011-15).

60% of the LAC population came from an area of deprivation (Indices of Deprivation Affecting Children Index bottom 30%), an increase of 9% from 2013. The majority of children looked after as at 31 March lived in wards, pre intervention, in the east and south of the borough.

2.10 Looked After Children (LAC) are those children and young people aged 0-18 years who cannot safely remain with their family and are cared for by the local authority. The local authority has continuing legal and financial responsibilities to many of these children until they are 21 (or 25 if in full time education). This includes all unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and children with disabilities who are receiving more than 75 days of respite care per year.

2.11 There are clear thresholds for admitting children into care and in all cases significant attempts should have been made to support the child or young person to remain with their family or within their community. In Merton an Edge of Care and Rehabilitation Panel has been established to ensure management oversight of care planning in the decision making to accommodate a child or rehabilitate them home.

2.12 As at 31 March 2014 there were 150 Looked After Children in Merton which represents a 7% increase from 2013 (140 children). In England and Wales there were 68,840 looked after children as at March 2014 an increase of 1% from 2013 (68,060). In addition Merton has 96 young people aged 19-25 years accessing

leaving care services, making Merton a corporate parent to over 246 vulnerable children and young people.

- 2.13 In the year 2013-14 there were 114 new admissions into care; young people aged 16 and 17 years remained the largest cohort at 34% of children entering care. This is consistent with the previous year when 41% of children entering care were aged 16 and 17 years. Overall 16 and 17 year olds make up 41% of our LAC population compared with a national figure of 21%. Whilst Merton has seen a rise in its looked after child population in the past 4 years the rates per 10,000 population remain stable and we continue have one of the lowest LAC populations when compared to our statistical neighbours. Merton has the 2nd lowest rate amongst its Statistical Neighbours. There are only eight (three in London) local authorities with a rate per 10,000 less than Merton.
- 2.14 More children ceased to be looked after in 2013-14 than in previous years. 107 care episodes ceased during the year ending 31 March 2014, an increase of 19% from 2013 and an increase of 41% from 2010. These are larger increases than those shown nationally.

The percentage of children aged 0-4 years ceasing to be looked after has increased by 136% on the 2013 numbers. This dramatic increase reflects the focus on permanence work for the cohort of children in the 0-5 year age range.

Approximately half of the children ceasing care in 2013-14 returned home to live with parents/relatives. Nationally one third ceases care and return home.

- 2.15 As at 31 March 2014 64% of our LAC cohort was male and 36% female (compared with a national return of 55% male and 45% female). The majority of children looked after in Merton are from a white background. This is a lower proportion than the general resident population (18%). There is an under representation of Asian or Asian British when compared with the Merton population. Mixed ethnic backgrounds, Black or Black British heritage and 'other ethnic groups', have looked after children proportions over represented in comparison to the resident population.
- 2.16 In 2014 there was a decrease in the percentage of looked after children cautioned or convicted during the year (6 children. 10%), however this performance was 4% above national rates. A multi-agency operational group has been set up to consider all Looked After Children where there is joint working between YOT and Children's Social Care. This group has ensured an improved overview of processes and joint care planning.
- 2.17 Children are looked after in a variety of settings; foster care, children's homes, residential special schools, Youth Offending Institutes and a small number are in hospital settings. At 31 March 2014 71% of looked after children (106 children) were placed in foster care. 33 children (49%) of our looked after children were placed with in house foster carers. This continues to be an area of scrutiny for us due to the impact on budget, but also due the fact that agency placements are often outside of the borough. The most common use of agency placements if for adolescents, as a number of our in house carers are only willing to foster children

up to the age of 10 years. The Access to Resources Team is seeking to undertake targeted recruitment of teenage carers, however there is a Pan London issue with many agencies and Local Authorities competing for a small number of carers.

- 2.18 As at 31 March 2014 17% of our Looked After Children live more than 20 miles away from their home address. For some young people placements away from their home community are a key part of the care plan as a result of anti-social behaviour/risk taking behaviours. For some the needs of the young people are such that they require specialist placements which are not available in Merton or surrounding boroughs. For all children being placed outside of the borough the DCS is required to sign off agreement for the placement. Care plans for these children and young people are reviewed to ensure that where possible young people are supported to return to their home community at the earliest opportunity. A more detailed analysis of these placements will be available in Merton's 'Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children and Care Leavers' strategy refresh in spring 2015.
- 2.19 6 weekly visiting is a statutory requirement for all children who are in their first year of placement. This rate of visiting enables the social worker to develop a relationship with the child and ensure that the placement is able to meet the child's needs. In Merton we have applied the 6 weekly visiting rule to all children in care although there are exceptions for children in permanent placements who request for reduced visiting at the 3 monthly rate. It is therefore concerning that in 2014 we only achieved 62% of visits in timescales. During this time we were reviewing our business processes to address the issues identified relating to practice and data quality and we anticipate improved performance in the year 2014-2015.
- 2.20 Placement stability continues to be an area of focus for us as we have remained above the national average of 11% for the past 5 years. However, performance at the year-end 2014 did see the lowest percentage of three or more moves since 2010. There are still too many of our looked after children failing to find the stability of placement that will have a significant positive impact on their outcomes. Work has been undertaken to understand the cohort of children to ensure that there is learning in terms of future placement planning. This work has continued into the year 2014-15 with review of all children in the 2 and 3 moves category. The cases in currently in the 2 moves cohort will be subject to a thematic audit in November 2014 so that vulnerable placements can be identified and support interventions put in place.
- 2.21 Permanence planning for children aged 0-5 years has seen a great deal of focus over the past 18 months and as a result we have seen an increase in the number of Special Guardianship and Adoption Orders made (Ten looked after children were adopted and four made subject of a Special Guardianship Order during the year). In 2014 we also focused on progressing a number of legacy cases which were complex in nature (which is reflected in the slight increase in the 3 year rolling average). We ensure that we track each child progressing to adoption so that we can understand their journey and learn from any drift that has been experienced. There is still improvement to be made in this area; however we also

have several complex cases within our current adoptive cohort who will impact on performance when the adoption orders are made this year.

- 2.22 Substance misuse – we are working closely with Catch 22 to ensure that we meet the needs of our LAC cohort who have been identified as having a substance misuse problem. We are confident that we have a good rate of successful identification, but need to improve performance in engaging young people with interventions. It is hoped that the placement of the Catch 22 worker in the 14+ Team 1 day a week will support this improvement.
- 2.23 Health outcomes remain positive for our looked after children but there is a need to ensure a good practice focus on dental appointments and LAC health appointments (both of which should take place on a 6 monthly basis). Scrutiny has been increased on the process for securing initial health appointments and this has significantly improved outcomes in this area. The LAC review should be used to ensure that the child's health needs are being met and escalate matters of concern.
- 2.24 SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) profiling is used to identify children and young people who may require support regarding their emotional wellbeing. There was an issue with the collation of this data in 2013-14 due to the restructuring of the LAC team. This has now been resolved and we will therefore see an improvement in the submission of reports for 2014-15. For those children where concerns are identified liaison takes place with CAMHS to ensure that needs are met. In some cases where children are not in settled placements the provision of support can prove challenging due to the local CAMHS policy of non-engagement with children not in permanent/long term placements. In these cases support will be considered for the carers.
- 2.25 Due to the timing of the Looked After Children Return and the academic year, education outcomes are delayed. National publication in the Adoption Score Card and Performance Tables 2014 will provide a three year average of 2011-2013. The indicators represented are calculated for all the school age children looked after continuously for 12 months in the year ending the 31 March. For a complete picture of Education outcomes of Merton's Looked After Children population please refer to 'The Virtual School Annual Report'.
- 2.26 Our care leaver cohort has seen a steady increase over the past 5 years. This is a result of an increase in our UASC cohort and young people coming into care in their teenage years due to long term neglect and parenting issues.
- 2.27 Performance in the Care Leaver area is challenging and we are therefore working with partners to develop a Care Leaver Strategy which will target issues relating to housing, employment and health. We aim to have a first draft of the strategy in place by December 2014 and initial meetings with partners have been held. In respect of accommodation performance Merton has a smaller proportion of care leavers in suitable accommodation (64%) than national (83%), but this is an issue both locally and nationally. The dip in performance in young people living in suitable accommodation reflects the fact that we had four young people (14%) in custody on or around their 19th birthday. We also had several young

people (21%) who were not in contact with the Local Authority and we were therefore unable to gather up to date information on their circumstances.

- 2.28 The Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)/ Education, Employment or Training (EET) figures also identify a decrease in performance in terms of outcomes for our young people. Merton's percentage of care leavers in Education, Employment or Training (EET) (60%) is above national (53%). In order to address this we had identified a My Futures worker to be based in the 14+ Team several days per week. Unfortunately this worker has been on long term sick leave since July 2014. The additional issue is that a large number of the young people in this cohort live outside of Merton and therefore do not fall under the remit of the local EET/NEET service. Meetings have recently been held with the Virtual School and the My Futures Team and it is hoped that a strategy for working with all the young people in this cohort will be agreed as part of the overall development of the Care Leaver Strategy.

Children in Care Council

- 2.29 The role of the Merton Child in Care Council is as follows:

- Provide a voice for the wider population of children looked after and care leavers
- Help to monitor and implement the Lambeth Pledge
- Bring together service users and senior managers to influence positive change
- Develops skills and confidence building

- 2.30 The Children in Care Council directly supports the Corporate Parenting Board to measure and monitor the effectiveness and quality of 'Corporate Parenting' in Merton.

- 2.31 The group currently consists of 8 members who meet on a monthly basis. They have a chair and each member of the CICC has a lead area (e.g. complaints and housing). The group meet regularly with senior managers to discuss important issues affecting children and young people in care. The CICC have a standing agenda item at Corporate Parenting Board Meetings and a young person attends the Corporate Parenting Board.

3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1 The Panel's scrutiny work programme is determined by the members of the Panel.

4. CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1 The Panel has agreed to consider the corporate parenting report on an annual basis.

5. APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- 5.1 Appendix 1: Research and Information Team: Statistical Report 2014/15 (October 2014)

6. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 6.1 None.

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