

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: January 18th 2012

Agenda item: 7

Wards: All

Subject: Update on Developments Affecting Children, Schools and Families Department

Lead officer: Yvette Stanley, Director, CSF Department

Lead member: Cllr Maxi Martin; Cllr Peter Walker

Forward Plan reference number: N/A

Contact officer: Paul Ballatt

Recommendations:

A. Members of the panel note the contents of the report.

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The report provides members with information on key developments affecting Children, Schools and Families Department since the panel's last update report in September 2011. It contains information originally provided in a report deferred from the last panel meeting in November 2011 as well as more contemporaneous items.

2 DETAILS

EDUCATION ISSUES

- 2.1. Members will be aware of the major challenge for the council in providing sufficient and suitable primary school places for the rising population of school age children. Nine additional reception classes were provided for September 2011 entry at All Saints, Gorrington Park, Liberty, St Mary's Singlegate, William Morris, Wimbledon Park, Dundonald, Hillcross and The Priory schools. As indicated at the September panel, a further additional class was required and this was confirmed at Merton Abbey school.
- 2.2. At end of December 2011, there were 10 reception class vacancies across the primary sector. All Merton children of statutory school age requiring places have received offers although 5 children remain unplaced. The admissions team routinely follow these cases up in order to clarify the residual demand for Merton school places. The additional class at Merton Abbey school, provided via a temporary building from the end of November 2011, currently has only 4 vacancies.
- 2.3. Following the pre decision scrutiny conducted by this panel on the proposal to permanently expand Dundonald School, Cabinet took the decision on 19th September 2011 to proceed to the next stage of the proposal.

- 2.4. Officers have undertaken consultation processes for five other permanent expansions at All Saints, Gorrington Park, Liberty, Singlegate and Wimbledon Park schools during November and December 2011.
- 2.5. Work is also being undertaken to consider options for further primary school expansion needed and the medium term implications for growth in demand for secondary and special school provision. These will be reported to Cabinet shortly and the CYP Panel may wish to receive a report in due course.
- 2.6. Recent inspections of schools have included a monitoring visit to William Morris school which found good progress has been made in improvements needed for it to be removed in due course from an Ofsted category. Wimbledon Park school has moved from satisfactory to good, the Priory school has remained as good and Garden school has remained as satisfactory following their recent inspections.
- 2.7. Analysis of most recent national Key Stage 2 performance shows that standards in all key indicators are above the national average including the percentage of pupils gaining Level 5. Overall, pupils in Merton primary schools made better progress than in 88% of other local authorities.
- 2.8. Standards in all key indicators at Key Stage 4 are also above national average with pupils in Merton secondary schools making better progress than in 94% of other local authorities.

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN/SAFEGUARDING/YOUTH INCLUSION ISSUES

- 2.9. Officers have refreshed the council's strategy for Looked After Children which will be presented to the next Corporate Parenting Group. CYP Panel members may also wish to receive information on the strategy at a future meeting.
- 2.10. An increasing number of Merton's care leavers began higher education courses in September 2011. This and other achievements were marked at a LAC achievers event before Christmas. A number of our foster carers completed CWDC awards in 2011, achievements which were celebrated at the annual foster carers' reception.
- 2.11. The Department received notification in December 2011 of the Ofsted announced inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services of which will take place between 9th – 20th January. The first element of the inspection will examine comprehensively how effectively the council and other services in the borough are working together to safeguard children through case file study, practice observation, examination of policies, procedures and data, interviews with service users, staff, managers, elected members and with focus groups. The second element will employ broadly similar methods in respect of our work with looked after children.
- 2.12. Information was provided to panel at its September meeting on the recent inspection of key elements of Merton's Youth Offending service. A number of substantial areas for improvement were identified and an action plan has been drawn up to address these issues. Some additional capacity via a specialist consultant has been obtained to support this work.

- 2.13. In response to a number of knife crime incidents, the CYP Panel Chair in December 2011 requested a briefing for the panel on this offending behaviour and actions taken by agencies in the borough to reduce its incidence. The briefing is provided as an additional item on the current panel agenda.

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS

- 2.14. The Institute of Fiscal Studies has recently published a report on the implications for families arising from the current economic climate and 'austerity' measures being taken by government including taxation and benefits changes. The report highlights the particular pressures on families, especially lone parent families, and carers and projects significant reductions in income levels for these groups. Additional financial pressures on families may well result in greater demands on council services including those provided by CSF Department. The report will be considered in the corporate Family Poverty Group in due course.
- 2.15. Results of the 2011 residents and young residents survey show promising improvement in perceptions of adults and young people about living in Merton and receiving council services. Satisfaction with Merton's schools and social care services for children increased quite significantly from 2010. Young people reported a decrease in bullying and an increase in feeling safe in the borough. Young people also reported increased opportunities for involvement although fewer thought their views were listened to and fewer thought they were kept informed of issues important to them.
- 2.16. As a result of media interest in school financial management and human resources issues, the chair of the panel has sought information regarding the support provided to schools in relation to these matters.
- 2.17. In terms of finance support, schools are supplied with a copy of a guidance manual produced and updated by our internal audit service which supports appropriate financial management systems and processes. Schools are expected to comply with appropriate financial procedures by adopting the council's own financial regulations or formally establishing their own. These should cover all procurement activity. There is an annual programme of school audits undertaken by the council (this is reducing as a result of lower capacity in the service and schools are selected for audit on a risk based approach. The corporate finance service supports budget monitoring – again a risk based selection of schools. The service is also open to requests from schools for support – inc advice and training – which is routinely provided subject to capacity. Governors specifically are offered training centrally as part of the overall programme of governor training. Additionally some finance/premises sub committees of school governing bodies have requested and received finance training.
- 2.18. Schools are fully accountable for managing their budgets appropriately. Most, but not all, schools buy into finance support from the council via an annual SLA. In the case of all schools, however, the council is empowered to issue 'a notice of financial concern' to schools if deficits in financial management are found. Council services will, in these circumstances, work closely with schools including governing bodies to ensure required improvements are made.

- 2.19 The council's HR service provides advice, guidance and assistance on all HR matters to schools via an SLA. Most (but a reducing number) buy into this SLA. Schools are required to have in place comprehensive HR procedures for dealing with competency, grievance, disciplinary, sickness issues etc – they are offered the opportunity to use council procedures but they are not bound to do so. Schools receive advice and support from the council's schools HR staff as and when necessary. School staff have access to the council's Employee Assistance Programme which provides general advice and counselling amongst other services.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1. None for the purposes of this report.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1. None for the purposes of this report.

5 TIMETABLE

- 5.1. N/A.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. No specific implications.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. No specific implications.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. No specific implications.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. No specific implications.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. No specific implications.

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

N/A

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 12.1. None