

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: April 16th 2013

Agenda item: 7

Wards: All

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

Lead officer: Yvette Stanley

Lead member: Cllr Maxi Martin, Cllr Martin Whelton

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 of the panel with information on key developments affecting Children, Schools and Families Department since the panel's last update report in February 2013.

2 DETAILS

2.1 The Ofsted inspection of Merton's adoption service took place in February 2013 and the report was published last week. Having been assessed as 'satisfactory' at the last inspection in 2009, the service has improved its overall rating to 'good'. In arriving at this judgement, inspectors found leadership and management, outcomes for children and arrangements to safeguard children all to be 'good'. The judgement for quality of service was 'adequate' based, largely, on historic issues of delay in key processes including assessing prospective adopters and decision-making over whether a child should be placed for adoption. Inspectors acknowledged that significant improvement has already been made in addressing these issues while recommending ongoing focus on improving timeliness. Other recommendations for improvement included providing additional information for children in the guides which are provided and improving the information provided to birth parents about support available to them.

2.2 In line with the strong commitment to continuous improvement, an action plan to address recommendations arising from the inspection will be produced and monitored by senior managers at the CSF Department's Continuous Improvement Board.

2.3 As part of its national 'Ending Gang and Youth Violence' (EGYV) programme, supported by the Local Government Association, the Home Office recently undertook a peer review of Merton's approach to these issues. The aims of the review programme are to assist local areas ensure

- that their partnerships have effective structures and responses in place to contribute to ending gang and youth violence. A local position statement was prepared for the reviewers along with data and a range of strategic and operational documentation. The review examined strategic leadership; how accurately Merton has 'mapped' the extent of gang activity and serious youth crime and how effectively our partnerships are responding. Following the week's fieldwork in March, the Home Office team provided headline feedback and a formal report is expected shortly.
- 2.4 The headline feedback noted clear political support for the EGYV agenda and a strong culture of partnership working between council staff, police service, schools and the voluntary and community sector. Reviewers found that Merton has a good understanding of the problems and challenges, based on good quality data and information and intelligence sharing. Clear protocols are in place and there are well established and effective mechanisms – eg Youth Offending Service; Offender Management Panel – which enable agencies to work together to plan and deliver interventions designed to minimise the extent of gang activity and serious youth crime and 'break the cycle' for individual young people.
- 2.5 Although reviewers noted that arrangements in Merton were some of the best seen in over 40 reviews to date, areas for development identified by the review include better engagement of health services; further development of approaches to violence against young women and girls and the link between gang activity and the sexual exploitation of girls; improved cross border work with neighbouring local authorities and more sophisticated evaluation of the impact of Merton's approach. These findings will be considered by the Youth Crime and Prevention Executive Board in due course.
- 2.6 Two further Ofsted school inspections using the new more taxing inspection framework introduced in September 2012 have reported since the last update to panel members in February 2013. Holy Trinity school has improved its rating to 'outstanding'. Bond school now 'requires improvement', the equivalent judgement to the previous rating of 'satisfactory', and a detailed improvement plan will be supported by the local authority's school improvement services. Three further schools – Benedict, Rutlish and Ricards Lodge – have received inspections but reports have not yet been published.
- 2.7 Panel members will be aware that safeguarding concerns at a local private day nursery were exposed in a recent national newspaper. At the time of writing this update report a police investigation is ongoing, led by Croydon police, and the nursery has been closed by Ofsted, the regulator for day-care provision, until further notice. The Children, Schools and Families Department is liaising closely with all agencies involved and safeguarding procedures are being implemented. CSF staff have attended a number of meetings with parents/carers as has the local MP. Support is being offered to parents and carers of children attending the nursery during what is clearly a concerning and uncertain time and we are providing assistance to those seeking alternative day care places. A verbal update may be available at the Panel's meeting.

- 2.8 Towards the end of 2012, DfE produced a national report on take up of Free School Meals (FSMs). The Children’s Society, with a number of other charitable organisations and Trades Unions, has subsequently launched a campaign – ‘Fair and Square’ – aimed at increasing both eligibility for and take up of FSMs. The DfE report showed that 22% of Merton pupils were entitled to FSMs but only 16% were taking FSMs. There were some 1400 children entitled pupils not taking up FSMs which represented a 27% under-registration rate. This compared with an outer London average under-registration rate of 17%, an inner London rate of 9% and a national under-registration rate of 14%. Examination of data on eligibility and take up in Merton’s schools on ‘School Census’ days shows, further, that although take up in primary and secondary schools has increased, the gap between eligibility and take up has risen from a baseline in 2009.
- 2.9 Current steps to maximise the numbers of eligible pupils applying for and taking FSMs include providing leaflets and information in a wide variety of settings; providing these materials to all applicants for school places on a routine basis; ongoing training for outreach staff working with 0 - 5s to ensure maximum uptake of benefits and therefore possible eligibility for FSM to encourage parents/carers to apply for their children at an early stage of their school careers and awareness raising and information giving at Headteacher meetings, EYFS co-ordinator meetings and PVI manager meetings. Increasing numbers of schools operate cashless systems which are designed to minimise the potential stigma which pupils taking FSMs can experience.
- 2.10 Merton’s school admissions team use the DfE eligibility checking system for free school meals, which offers an easy and quick service to determine applicants’ eligibility for FSM. Officers are keeping closely in touch with the DfE for information on changes related to the introduction of the new universal credit system.
- 2.11 Officers recognise that more needs to be done to increase FSM awareness, applications and take up. To this end within the corporate anti-poverty strategy we have set a target of increasing registration for FSMs by a minimum 5% year on year in 2013-14 and 2014-15 to match outer London levels. General information giving and encouragement needs to be supported by more targeted approaches and data analysis will be undertaken to support this targeting to, for example, particular pupil groups, schools, and areas in the borough.

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