

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL  
11 FEBRUARY 2014

(19.15 - 21.15)

PRESENT

Councillors Councillor Jeff Hanna (in the Chair),  
Councillor James Holmes, Councillor Agatha Mary Akyigyina,  
Councillor Laxmi Attawar, Councillor Iain Dysart,  
Councillor Karin Forbes, Councillor Oonagh Moulton,  
Councillor Peter Walker, and Councillor Miles Windsor

Co-opted members: Peter Connellan, Colin Powell

Councillor Maxi Martin (Cabinet Member for Children's  
Services) and Councillor Martin Whelton (Cabinet Member for  
Education)

Paul Ballatt (Head of Commissioning, Strategy and  
Performance), Yvette Stanley (Director of Children, Schools and  
Families), Kate Saksena (Manager of Merton School  
Improvement), Keith Shipman (Education Inclusion Manager),  
Jan Martin (Head of Education), Rebecca Redman (Scrutiny  
Officer)

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Agenda Item 1)

None.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Linda Taylor, Miles Windsor  
had been appointed to the Panel membership for this meeting.

3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 14 JANUARY 2014 (Agenda Item 3)

**RESOLVED:** The Panel agreed the minutes as a true record of the meeting.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES (Agenda Item 4)

None.

5. SCHOOL STANDARDS (Agenda Item 5)

Janet Martin introduced the report.

Councillor Karin Forbes enquired about the variation between Merton Schools in the percentage meeting the required standard of phonic decoding between 38% and 88% and asked if any patterns or trends had been identified to explain this gap. Kate Saksena explained that this was a new test and therefore the results were hugely varied over the two years the test has been running, as well as in the way it is created by schools that run the test differently. This means that comparative data from year 1 to year 2 is difficult to capture. The School Improvement Team is looking for comparison between foundation stages in literacy and phonics. Some schools have also taught their students how to sit this test. Councillor Karin Forbes asked if schools that were not performing as well in this area were being supported by the better performing schools on this particular test. Kate Saksena informed the Panel that this was in place, focused on literacy and teaching phonics. In some schools phonic are taught by teaching assistants.

Councillor Oonagh Moulton expressed her concerns about ensuring attainment could be improved at early years level, particularly in writing. Janet Martin added that as this was the first year of the new system the results are variable. The test also is not suited to the early year's stage. Kate Saksena added that there are 17 areas in the foundation stage and these are all new this year. Some schools stuck rigidly to the guidance whilst others didn't and this hasn't allowed actual skill levels to be accurately captured. Writing skills need to be improved at KS1 and KS2.

Councillor Iain Dysart asked if schools have discretion to set list of 40 words that the phonics test covers. Jan Martin confirmed that this was a set list for all schools.

Councillor Iain Dysart asked what was being done to address the fact that mixed heritage groups had the widest attainment gaps. Jan Martin explained that discussions were being held with schools and pupil groups where there are issues to agree a course of action.

Colin Powell stated that these results were to be celebrated given the reduced staffing within schools and also the School Improvement Team. Colin Powell said that there has also been lots of work on SEN pupils which is good to see but noted concerns that higher achievers do not receive as much support and encouragement as those who are underachieving.

Kate Saksena explained that the recent OFSTED report and national government guidelines had increased emphasis on the percentage of children who were classes as high achievers and schools are proactive in providing support to this group of children. The School Improvement Team have undertaken whole school reviews and looked at specific groups and as part of this, looked at how high achievers are being challenged.

Councillor Peter Walker commented on the categories used and if these should be updated to be more relevant.

Councillor Iain Dysart asked about the number of 16-18 year olds that were not in education but their participation status was not known. Keith Shipman explained that, upon leaving school, the council needs to identify where young people go on to, whether this is college, work, unemployed etc. This can be quite hard to do when young people have moved out of the borough. Until the route all young people have taken can be qualified then they remain on the not known list. The current rate of 'not known' destinations of school leavers in Merton is 6%. Yvette Stanley added that identification often results in an increase in NEET's.

Councillor Agatha Akyigyina asked what the council were doing to reduce the number of 'not known' and also NEET'S. Keith Shipman explained that the council have reviewed their processes and the service has been restructured and now has a dedicated team looking at 'not known' leavers. Working with other boroughs has also helped determine where these young people are and this has helped to reduce figures.

Councillor Peter Walker commented on the improvement in overall attendance of Looked After Children (LAC) which was positive. However, he expressed concerns about the absence figures shown. Yvette Stanley added that data on LAC is often harder to capture because they may not live or go to school in the borough.

Councillor Karin Forbes commented on enforcing school attendance policies. Kate Saksena added that this is being looked at and that there is a need for schools to challenge parents on the issue if absence.

Councillor James Holmes asked what the council were doing to encourage school based challenge and support to improve outcomes. Keith Shipman informed the Panel that the council identify schools with low levels of attendance and persistent absentees. This is to enable trends to be established and through the school improvement team there can be a challenge to individual school systems and ideas about what other schools are doing to tackle this issue can be offered.

Councillor Agatha Akyigyina enquired about how absence rates among those children on School Action Plans could be cut down. Keith Shipman added that figures have reduced dramatically and that they are well below the national average. The council also work with SENCO's and schools to address this.

Councillor Oonagh Moulton asked what action was being taken to address fixed term exclusions which were above the London and national averages in Merton. Kate Saksena explained that this figure is reducing and that the council are in discussion

with secondary heads. In addition, schools have reviewed their systems and shared new processes with one another.

Councillor Peter Walker commented on 54% of permanent exclusions being from BME groups. He added that an action point should be to increase the number of BME leaders in schools Senior Management Teams to reflect the diverse population in our schools.

Councillor James Holmes enquired about the Singapore maths programme. Kate Saksena explained that this was a model for teaching maths which was employed in schools in Singapore which Merton explored and have successfully piloted, and now run, in a number of schools in the borough. Teachers also receive training in this method. Councillor James Holmes congratulated the department on such an innovative response to improving attainment in maths in Merton schools.

Colin Powell asked how the council would maintain all of the improvements it has made in driving up school standards and achievement. Jan Martin highlighted the role of the Merton Education Partnership in this which was working well and doing good work to build on school capacity to support each other to maintain standards. Councillor Laxmi Attawar asked what support the council provides to schools to stop it going into special measures. Kate Saksena informed the Panel that the council collect data to identify any gaps or issues and where concerns are raised, Head teachers are invited to meet with the school improvement team Manager, Head of Education and Governors. The aim is to identify the contributing factors and help schools build capacity and leadership.

Councillor Peter Walker asked how many schools were not involved in the Merton Education Partnership. Jan Martin confirmed that only two schools were not involved.

**RESOLVED:** Panel thanked officers for all their good work and congratulated them on the improvements made which have been reflected in the increasing attainment of pupils. Panel noted the report.

## 6. FREE SCHOOL MEALS - PROGRESS REPORT (Agenda Item 6)

Paul Ballatt introduced the report. Councillor Peter Walker expressed his concerns regarding the loss of funding for schools due to low take up of Free School Meals (FSM). Paul Ballatt confirmed that the registered rate for FSM in Merton Schools is lagging behind in terms of the numbers registered compared to outer London and national trends. The gap between entitlement and registration in Merton is 23% (equates to approx. 1200 students) and in outer London it is 15%. This is both a loss

to the child because they are entitled to a free school meal and also to the schools' budgets in terms of loss of pupil premium income.

Paul Ballatt explained that there is a project group set up to look at the reasons for low take up and to encourage parents to sign up for FSM. A number of activities have been undertaken to increase take up with schools and parents, and also on application procedures. There have also been discussions with other local authorities to see what they do and how Merton could utilise any best practice. It was acknowledged that there needs to be a more targeted approach to increase registrations.

Paul Ballatt explained that there are issues with accessing data on parents on income support etc. which would enable this more targeted approach. However, the department are talking to housing needs and asking libraries to offer advice and raise awareness, There will also be specialist communications in this area as corporate communications have identified this as one of their campaigns for the year.

Peter Connellan suggested that health visitors and GPs may also be able to raise awareness and talk to parents about benefits and eligibility for FSM. Yvette Stanley added that Children's Centres had been working with health workers on this.

Councillor Agatha Akyigyina added that there is a stigma to FSM and this may explain the low take up. Paul Ballatt said that they were working with the school meals contractor to improve the environment to encourage people to take up FSM and that they were looking at patterns in different communities of applying/not applying for FSM.

Councillor Jeff Hanna added that it may be worth making a representation through local MPs to enable councils to have more of a role in applying on behalf of those who are entitled.

Councillor Iain Dysart suggested that posters and leaflets be displayed at community centres and at community forum meetings.

Councillor Jeff Hanna asked how we can get past data protection issues to support identification of eligible families. He suggested contact with parents and stepping up a communications campaign to sell the benefits of FSM to them. Paul Ballatt noted that, in addition to the targeted approach to increasing FSM registration and take up, government had recently announced universal FSMs to pupils in reception class and years one and two. Some capital has been allocated to Merton to support this new policy but further guidance is still outstanding.

Councillor Jeff Hanna proposed that this be a potential topic for the workshop that would be arranged to plan the Panels 2014/15 work programme.

**RESOLVED:** Panel noted the report.

7. CSF UPDATE REPORT (Agenda Item 7)

The letter requested to be written to lobby local MP's, at the Panels request, on the necessity of funding being made available to implement any agreed provisions within the current Children and Families Bill was tabled.

Councillor James Holmes queried what resources were available within the Merton Education Partnership (MEP) for innovative projects and initiatives to be rolled out around improving school standards. Jan Martin explained that the council provide administrative resource to the MEP and that there is a £100,000 fund (£50k from the Schools Forum and £50k from the local authority) which members of the partnership can bid for to carry out initiatives. Recently 10 bids were received from schools and funds allocated. This amount will be the same in the following year. Schools can apply for funding for collaborative initiatives and in future years match funding criteria may be applied.

**RESOLVED:** Panel noted the report.

8. PERFORMANCE MONITORING (Agenda Item 8)

**RESOLVED:** Panel noted the report.

9. WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14 (Agenda Item 9)

**RESOLVED:**

Panel agreed to combine the two items on the agenda for the 26<sup>th</sup> March meeting. Alternative Education and Raising the Participation Age will be presented as one report.

Panel noted the work programme.