

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
21 OCTOBER 2015

(19.15 - 21.02)

PRESENT Councillors Councillor Katy Neep (in the Chair),
Councillor Linda Taylor, Councillor Charlie Chirico,
Councillor Edward Foley, Councillor James Holmes,
Councillor Marsie Skeete, Councillor Dennis Pearce,
Colin Powell, Denis Popovs and Councillor Jeff Hanna

Councillor Maxi Martin (Cabinet Member for Children's Services),
Councillor Martin Whelton (Cabinet Member for Education)
Yvette Stanley (Director of Children, Schools and Families),
Jane McSherry (Assistant Director of Education),
Paul Angeli (Assistant Director of Children's Social Care),
Rebecca Redman (Scrutiny Officer)

1 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 1)

None

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 2)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Agatha Akyigyina and Paul Ballatt.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

Councillor Linda Taylor asked what work had been undertaken to promote apprenticeships, as discussed at the last meeting. Yvette Stanley advised that this would be discussed with departments across the council as it wasn't solely the responsibility of CSF.

Councillor Joan Henry enquired about progress regarding Harris Academy. Yvette Stanley confirmed that work was on-going and that the council did not own this land. There are no decisions for the council to take at this time.

Councillor Linda Taylor enquired about the progress being made on universal youth services. Yvette Stanley confirmed that funding had been secured for Pollards Hill. Discussions are on-going concerning Phipps Bridge.

Councillor Charlie Chirico enquired about progress with recruitment of new social workers from Russell Group universities. Paul Angeli conformed that 4 front line graduates had been recruited and started working with the council in September 2015. The department are now considering taking on a second cohort for 2016/17. The scheme is progressing well.

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

4 LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CORPORATE PARENTING (Agenda Item 4)

Paul Angeli introduced the report. Support is provided to looked after children and care leavers up to the age of 21 and in some instances, 25 years old. The Corporate Parenting Board oversees the work of the council and scrutinises their work in support of these young people. Paul explained the challenges that an older cohort of looked after children make on a range of issues including placement stability. Younger children are often successfully moved out of care into adoption quite quickly. There has, however, been improved performance in this area. Problems that present in this older cohort are often behavioural and conduct issues and minors being unaccompanied or at risk of homelessness. They have a range of complex needs for which they require additional support. Some also present at the edge of care with issues that the council try to resolve to ensure young people can remain with their families, for example through the Transforming Families Programme.

Councillor Sally Kenny asked if support was still provided by the council to 21 and 25 year olds that have been adopted. Paul Angeli confirmed that this was the case and that the council work with a regional consortium to offer post adoption support. He added that this could be improved upon by providing an equal offer for children across London to services such as CAHMS. There is also some work underway pan London regarding the post adoption support offer and Merton Council has bid to be involved in this.

Councillor Jeff Hanna asked about the data regarding unsuitable accommodation and asked what support has been provided. Paul Angeli explained that those young people on remand would always count as not being in appropriate accommodation and also confirmed that a small cohort of 3 unaccompanied minors, are at risk of arrest or of being deported from the UK. These young people are not within the system but do keep in touch with practitioners. Access to legal support is also provided before leaving care.

RESOLVED: Panel noted the report.

5 ANNUAL REPORT AND BUSINESS PLAN - MERTON SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD (Agenda Item 5)

Paul Angeli introduced the report. He highlighted the following priorities for the MSCB to tackle/address:

- Child sexual exploitation;
- Female Genital Mutilation;
- The 'Prevent' Agenda and tackling radicalisation; and
- Domestic violence/violence against women and girls

Councillor James Holmes asked how effective the Board was. Yvette Stanley explained that the Board has an independent chair and 2.5 FTE staff within the council support its work. The Council host the Board and it has the role of challenging all of those agencies on the Board. The effectiveness of the MSCB in scrutinising the work of the council is determined in the children's safeguarding inspection. The Board is also underpinned by a complex legal framework. The Board has to assure itself that all partners are delivering and are effective. The Board also has a Business Plan that it measures itself against.

Councillor Jeff Hanna asked if there was a correlation between income deprivation and children in need who are on a care plan or are looked after children. Paul Angeli explained that there was a very strong correlation. Yvette Stanley added that the department work hard to place looked after children near family and friends, where appropriate.

Councillor Jeff Hanna enquired about the Governments recent budget announcements and how they would affect families in deprived areas and asked if there was an anticipated increase in the number of children requiring support as a result of the proposed cuts to tax credits. Yvette Stanley informed the Panel that the department were unable to comment on this other than anecdotally at present, however, there was a perception of families moving from inner to outer London for cheaper accommodation. Councillor Jeff Hanna proposed that the Panel send a letter expressing their concern for the potentially negative impact of the proposed changes to the family tax credit scheme on Merton residents.

RESOLVED:

- Panel agreed to forward a letter to the relevant Government Department expressing its concerns and ensure that it would have cross party agreement from the Panel.
- Panel noted the report.

6 SCOPING REPORT - HOUSING AND HEALTH OFFER FOR CARE LEAVERS AND LAC (TO BE TABLED) (Agenda Item 6)

RESOLVED: Panel agreed the scope and the following Councillors volunteered to sit on the task group: Cllrs Holmes, Neep, Henry, Chirico and Taylor. The Chair of the task group will be agreed at the first meeting and the review will focus on housing and employment, not health.

7 SCOPING REPORT - EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FOR DISABLED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE (TO BE TABLED) (Agenda Item 7)

RESOLVED: Panel agreed the scope and that the review would begin in January 2016. Volunteers to sit on the task group would be sought at a later date.

8 UPDATE REPORT (Agenda Item 8)

Yvette Stanley introduced the report and highlighted to Members that:

- Two recent school inspections results would be included in the next update report to the Panel;
- That information on summer born children had been attached and that some parents have agreed to defer entry to school in the September term;
- Tower Hamlets have located over 70 families within the borough, in temporary accommodation, as they have purchased Vantage House in Wimbledon
- Crèche provision is being developed for under 5's and pregnant mums

Members asked about Vantage House and what responsibilities the council had to the 70 families placed in temporary accommodation in the borough by Tower Hamlets. Yvette Stanley confirmed that Tower Hamlets had explained that they will provide permanent accommodation when it becomes available. In the meantime Merton has a duty to provide services for the children and families and have spoken to the Leader of Tower Hamlets Council with a view to agreeing how these services might be financed or jointly supported.

Councillor Linda Taylor added that in her view the building is not suitable for families and that the leader of the Conservative Party in Merton, Councillor Oonagh Moulton, has written to Tower Hamlets Council to discuss this.

Councillor Maxi Martin explained that the Council are working with the local mosques to try and support these families, as a number of them are Muslim and do not have English as a second language, if at all. This is one way of providing

a network to the families that have been displaced from their local communities and support.

Paul Angeli added that the council has a duty to provide social care services to these families.

Councillor Dennis Pearce asked about the likely impact on the mental health of young people in the families that have been moved to Vantage House on short term placements and the inevitable lack of stability for young people during this time. Yvette Stanley explained that a high churn of families in and out of temporary accommodation at Vantage House was not expected. Merton will work constructively with Tower Hamlets to get the best support for the families. Councillor Charlie Chirico asked about victims of domestic violence within these families and how the council will support them as they will be isolated and have no family connections. Yvette Stanley informed the Panel that health visitors are going to Vantage House, 3 days a week, and providing intensive support. The early years service is also providing under fives drop in sessions for these families and there is an ongoing dialogue with the mosque and voluntary sector about how best to support people suffering or at risk of domestic violence. Councillor Maxi Martin added that the Leader had met with the Leader of Tower Hamlets council to address some of these issues.

Councillor Katy Neep highlighted the need for the council to ensure that other properties could not be purchased by London boroughs that will then simply be converted to temporary accommodation and place pressure on already strained resources and services for Merton.

Yvette Stanley explained that the council are taking part in discussions about this at London Councils and that a protocol is in place so that the borough, in which the property is located, cannot be outbid by a neighbouring borough when seeking to purchase that property.

Councillor Jeff Hanna enquired about free school meals and about the loss of pupil premium to the council from 1000 children being removed from the free school meals register. Yvette Stanley explained that there is still a commitment from government to providing free school meals, but that the changes to welfare and benefits are making it harder for parents and children coming into the system. The pupils that have been removed from the register are no longer entitled.

Councillor Charlie Chirico asked about the number of refugees Merton was planning to accommodate. Yvette Stanley explained that this was being led by the Mayor's Office and London Councils who will provide a coordinated response on behalf of all London boroughs. There is no vacant accommodation

in Merton at present and therefore those received would have to be placed in temporary accommodation. Some residents in some boroughs have also offered up second homes and wherever placed, that borough would take on the associated service delivery.

Councillor James Holmes proposed that the Panel look at raising the participation age at a future Panel meeting. Yvette Stanley added that this could be provided in the update report that would be received by the Panel at their January 2015 meeting.

RESOLVED:

Panel noted the report.

Panel agreed to email to the Leader of the Council supporting his conversations with Tower Hamlets Council and London Councils and asking for an update as appropriate.

9 PERFORMANCE REPORT (Agenda Item 9)

Councillor James Holmes asked what had stimulated the improvement in placement stability performance. Yvette Stanley explained that the department had undertaken analysis regarding placement stability and had put an action plan in place. This is monitored on a regular basis through placement planning meetings and at a monthly review meeting.

RESOLVED: Panel noted the report.

10 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 10)

RESOLVED: Panel noted the programme.