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CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 21 MARCH 2017

(7.20 pm - 9.50 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors Dennis Pearce (in the Chair), Linda Taylor OBE, Mike Brunt, Pauline Cowper, Charlie Chirico, Edward Foley, Joan Henry, James Holmes, Jerome Neil and Marsie Skeete

Co-opted Members Mansoor Ahmad and Helen Forbes

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Caroline Cooper-Marbiah (Cabinet Member for Education) and Katy Neep (Cabinet Member for Children's Services) and officers Paul Angeli (Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion), Liz Broughton (Head of Access to Resources), Sarah Daly (Head of Service LAC, Permanency & Placements), Steve Langley, Jane McSherry (Assistant Director of Education), Yvette Stanley (Director, Children, Schools & Families Department) and Annette Wiles (Scrutiny Officer)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

No apologies for absence were received.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of pecuniary interest.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted as a true and accurate record.

There was one matter arising: the Chair reported that the report of the *Routes into Employment for Vulnerable Cohorts Task Group* was accepted by Cabinet at its meeting on 20 March 2017. The Panel will therefore receive an action plan for the implementation of the recommendations contained in the report.

4 RESPONSIBLE CABINET MEMBER REVIEW (Agenda Item 4)

The Cabinet Member for Education, (Councillor Cooper-Marbiah), highlighted the following in her report to the Panel:

- National funding formula: proposed by Government, this will possibly result in reduced funding for 10 Merton schools. Other schools will receive a small gain in funding but this will not prevent them from struggling financially (due to rising costs). Letters have been sent to all Merton schools so that they are aware of the impact of these changes.
- Aragon Primary School: is joining Glenthorne Academy in Sutton. The Council stated its position on wanting the school to remain in its family of schools and why

they think a MAT with Glenthorne is not in the best interest of local children. However, Aragon is now formalising its relationship with the academy trust;

- School expansion programme: now that the expansion of Dundonald has been finished, the expansion programme of Merton's primary schools is complete. The expansion of Merton's secondary schools has commenced with Harris Merton and the proposal for the new academy is out for consultation. In addition there are expansion plans for Cricket Green and Perseid Upper School;
- Harris Wimbledon consultation on admissions policy: this closes on 31 March 2017 and all are encouraged to participate. Officers were thanked for their work in raising awareness of the consultation amongst residents. Noted that several meetings had taken place and that the Councillor had attended including a meeting with residents in Colliers Wood which was well attended with much excitement expressed about the forthcoming secondary school and parents keen to ensure access for their children through the admission policy; and
- Secondary school places: all applications for secondary school places in Merton received an offer demonstrating school place projections were accurate. Officers were commended for their work.

In response to member questions, the Cabinet Member clarified:

- Arguments were made to encourage Aragon to remain in the Merton family of schools. Consultation with other heads has garnered very positive feedback about the school improvement support offered by the Council; and
- Harris Wimbledon will be built on Council purchased land and the Council owned High Path Resource Centre. In addition, a shared games area will be built partially on a small area of the Merton Abbey Primary School playing field. The use of this is being agreed in consultation with both schools.

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services, (Councillor Neep), highlighted the following in her report to the Panel:

- Social Work Day: highlighted that the meeting was happening on the national day of recognition for social workers. Thanks were given to all social workers;
- Child Sexual Exploitation Week: the Council worked with an extensive network of partners to provide a week long awareness raising event that featured a range of speakers covering subjects from gangs to online safety. Highlighted the work of the Breck Foundation which is working to raise awareness that it isn't just vulnerable but all children that are at risk online. Noted that this learning is being applied to universal services; and
- Merton Safeguarding Children Board Away Day: this had just happened and focused on current key priorities of early help, think family and adolescence services, all underpinned by the cross cutting issue of neglect. Noted that support is need from across the Council, from all departments, to get it right for all three areas. Called on the Panel to consider looking at these areas in partnership with other scrutiny Panels and Council departments.

In response to member questions, the Cabinet Member clarified her top areas of focus:

- providing support for young people transitioning into adulthood and adult services,
- access to mental health services (specifically helping parents and carers accessing this where needed),
- ensuring that young people are helping to shape services and that these aren't determined by adults and imposed on young people; and
- crucially ensuring that the young people the Council is progressing to independence have access to housing.

5 UPDATE REPORT: CORPORATE PARENTING (Agenda Item 5)

Paul Angeli, Assistant Director of Children, Schools and Families, introduced the item based on the information available in the officer's report and highlighted the following:

- Performance indicators for the service are subject to scrutiny by Ofsted;
- The number of looked after children in Merton has been around 150 – 160 for some time. This is small compared to other local authorities (the second lowest in London);
- Currently, there are 16 unaccompanied children in the Council's care. However, flagged this is likely to rise to 32 during the next year;
- The performance of the service has been improving over the last 2/3 years. This is demonstrated by:
 - Care proceedings being predicted to fall to 26 weeks (down from 60 weeks).
 - Older children, those who are disabled and with complex needs are being adopted.
 - There are good health outcomes in Merton for looked after children (excluding immunisation).
 - The falling number of looked after children and care leavers that are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) population.
 - The work on-going to address youth offending, substance abuse and child sexual exploitation.
 - Improvements in user voice/participation which is being supported by a new dedicated officer.
 - Placement stability being good especially for those in care for more than two years.
- Legislation is currently going through Parliament (Children and Social Work Bill) which will make councils responsible for children in care up until the age of 25.

In response to member questions, officers clarified:

- More detail on the bill extending responsibility for looked after children up to the age of 25 is needed. The requirements for the local offer are not known but it is assumed this will be about offering information, advice and guidance rather than there being any expectation of continuing financial and/or housing support after 21 years;

- There is no expectation for adoptions to be made in borough. In fact, there may be good reasons for adoptions to not be local. The authority's duty is to ensure that adoptive matches are appropriate. Getting these right has sometimes allowed the Council to subsequently place siblings with the same family and also to avoid adoption breakdown;
- The graph (3.8) on page 15 shows the average time taken between the Council receiving court authority to place a child and this placement happening with an adoptive family. It was noted that this time period has fallen considerably over the last three years although it was also noted the impact proceedings being contested can have on the time taken;
- Service priorities for this year are:
 - Improving the quality and value for money of placements. This includes training staff to be confident in challenging placement providers if care needs are not being met;
 - Integrating the Signs of Safety approach to all areas of service practice;
 - Developing the Care Leavers Hub in partnership with a range of providers to ensure care leavers have access to a range of information, advice and support.
- The service plan contains hard and soft performance measures for all areas of service development with a focus on stretch to achieve the difference between a good and outstanding service. For example, the success of the Care Leavers Hub will be judged by the number of partners involved in supporting provision and the usage the Hub receives. It will also be evaluated through the care leavers survey;
- A service has been commissioned to provide a robust offer to missing children. This focuses on the quality of the return home interview and thereafter weekly meetings to ensure understanding of why a child went missing and reintegration back into the family. The focus is on not giving up and the Council continuing to offer support over an extended period. The Council is also working closely with the police given the link between a child being missing and child sexual exploitation;
- There is an on-going focus on stability of placements although it was noted Merton's smaller cohorts will mean any placement changes will have a disproportionate impact on this performance measure. Placement planning meetings are held to ensure placement decisions are being made correctly. Reasons for placement breakdown are scrutinised and it was noted there has been a recent increase in stability demonstrating the effect of these measures. Older adolescents are at risk of exploitation, going missing or youth offending if placements breakdown. Therefore, 12 week placement assessments are being used to undertaken longer term placement planning. This is reflected in the figures as it is also counted as a placement;
- Immunisation performance is affected by unaccompanied children who are older (16+) and who are choosing not to take up the opportunity for immunisations. LAC health visitors are taking a proactive approach, visiting these young people to discuss and highlight the benefits of immunisation. In contrast, take-up of health and dentist appointments is good;
- The average age of unaccompanied children coming into the authority's care is 16 – 17 years although there has been one aged 12 years;

- The *Staying Put* policy that enables children in care to remain with foster carers is having some effect on provision of foster placements but the time that children in care remain in their placement under this provision is typically fairly short; and
- There has been a dip in the number of unaccompanied young people in the borough, mainly due to young people becoming 18 and transitioning to our care leaver service where numbers continue to rise. There is occasionally also a deportation. Where this happens or is at risk of happening, the authority works hard to support the young person involved. This may involve legal support through to ensuring they are in touch with family or friends, have their papers and some financial support if they return home. It was noted that councils are being asked to meet more of the financial burden involved in this support.

6 UPDATE REPORT: LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY (Agenda Item 6)

Liz Broughton, Head of Access to Resources, introduced the item based on the information available in the officer's report and highlighted the following:

- It is the Council's duty to provide sufficient placements for all children and young people in its care. The resulting sufficiency strategy is based on a needs analysis and service review. In total, 410 places were provided in 2015/16 for 273 children;
- Foster carer provision is increasing. The Council is also working with its existing foster carers to increase their skills;
- The Council is providing an increasing number of supported lodging places with a residential placement panel working to ensure appropriate use of this provision; and
- Work is on-going to develop semi-independent housing. This isn't regulated and therefore is a focus of quality assurance visits, in which young people themselves are getting involved. Additionally, the Council is ensuring that this is delivered by known providers.

In response to member questions, officers clarified:

- The recorded increase in use of children's homes is partly driven by a change in Ofsted registration requirements for residential schools. Also, this is due to the Council using assessment placements;
- The provision of 410 placements for 273 children reflects that some will use more than one placement in the year;
- When determining an appropriate placement for a child with SEN needs and/or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), priority is on care needs with access to appropriate education placed around this. Additional support is provided through the Virtual School;
- Care placements are supported with wider support packages; services are nested around looked after children. The emphasis is on placement within 20 miles of Merton in order that this can be achieved successfully;

- Merton can and has successfully attracted new foster carers including those from the independent fostering sector. These are an important addition to Merton's foster carers because they come with valuable prior experience. This has been achieved by the authority having a good reputation for the support it offers its foster carers. This reputation is supported through word of mouth recommendations. Engagement with new foster carers through faith and the LGBT communities has been successful;
- Merton has been successful in securing foster cares for children and young people with SEND needs despite the difficulties involved;
- Decisions about progressing young people to semi-independent living reflect the duty on parents to progress their children to full independence. Determining whether or not a young person is ready for this will depend on individual children and their needs. This is reflected in individual pathway plans. The growing number of care leavers means that there is pressure on provision of appropriate semi-independent living placements; and
- To reflect the changing demographics of Merton's looked after children population, there is a focus on recruiting foster carers who can provide placements for older children. This recruitment campaign is targeted at professionals who may have experience that will make them more qualified for this older age group (for example, the police, prison service and NHS workers). Specific materials are also being developed to support those fostering teenagers. Services are also being commissioned to prevent placement breakdown and provide these foster carers with additional support.

7 PERFORMANCE MONITORING (Agenda Item 7)

Councillor Brunt, the performance lead for the Panel focused on a number of indicators to which officers provided the following clarification:

- Indicator 3 - % of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) issued within statutory 20 week timescale: although only 20% were completed within the 20 week timescale this increased to 30% by 21 weeks, 46% by 23 weeks and 69% in 26 weeks which was the previous statutory timescale for completion. There has been a significant rise in the number of EHCPs issued; up from 110 in 2015 to 184 in 2016. Additionally, there is pressure from the transfer of statements to EHCPs. In 2015, 190 were transferred which increased to 301 in 2016. Forty eight percent of the transfers were completed by January 2017 with 46% of these completed in 20 weeks;
- Indicator 8 - % of quorate attendance at child protection conferences: this figure has been updated since the last meeting and is now accurate and provides a better picture than previously. However, it was noted that performance is still considerably below that achieved at the same point last year. This has been scrutinised by officers and it has been established that this has been caused by two factors: 1) non-attendance of school nurses and 2) inconsistency of recording by conference chairs. Attendance of school nurses has been addressed through Central London Community Healthcare Trust (CLCH) and attendance has already increased. Chairs have also received training to ensure reporting is consistent;

- Indicator 15 – average number of weeks taken to complete care proceedings against a national target of 26 weeks: this is being reported as above the national target but is projected to fall again to 25 weeks;
- Indicator 18 – stability of placements of Looked After Children: figures show a fall in placement stability. Members were reminded that smaller cohort size means any change will have a disproportionate impact on performance measures. However, officers are also looking at this in detail with an analysis due to be presented to the Department Management Team later in the week. **Action:** for officers to update members of any significant factors;
- Indicator 29/30 – surplus school places: acknowledged officers have responded to the request to keep members updated on surplus school place in year; and
- Indicator 33b - % of CYP (16 – 17 yr olds) not in education, employment or training: the fall has been achieved by decreasing the number of young people for which their status is unknown. This has resulted from this being a major focus of activity.

Councillor Holmes commended Councillor Brunt on the role he has played as performance lead for the Panel during the municipal year and for having built his knowledge and understanding of the data to effectively scrutinise the Department's performance.

8 DEPARTMENT UPDATE REPORT (Agenda Item 8)

Officers updated members informing them that St Theresa's and William Morris primary schools mentioned in the report as having been inspected have both received good judgments from Ofsted. Also, that a further four primaries in the borough were inspected last week and a further one this week. Judgements are awaited.

Members robustly questioned officers on why they hadn't previously been informed in advance of the decision to relinquish the Ofsted registration for overnight respite care at Brightwell Short Break Children's Home. Officers explained that this decision was due to operational issues which hadn't been foreseeable and which required urgent action. Officers advised members of the consultation with service users and their families regarding alternatives including commissioned alternative overnight respite and additional day and early evening provision at Brightwell.

In response to member questions regarding the relocation of the Children's Centre, officers noted that this has been subject to extensive consultation and long term planning mitigating any negative effect.

9 RAPPORTEUR SCRUTINY REVIEW OF USER VOICE: UPDATE (Agenda Item 9)

Councillor Neil reported back on the progress of his review and noted that he would provide a written report structured around the terms of reference for the Panel's June meeting. He highlighted that he has met with and is being supported in his review by

Stuart Barker, the relatively newly appointed participation manager. Also, that he has recently attended a meeting of the *Children in Care Council* which he found very informative. He noted that whilst participants are currently paid to take part (to incentivise as well as cover the costs of participation), there is currently a proposal to accredit this participation.

The Councillor reported to the Panel that the *Children in Care Council* is a place of innovation, with members having lots of ideas and views on children's services. Although he noted that there is a divergence of views amongst members. Also, that the level of participation by individual members of the council is variable and clearly dependent on confidence which at the session he visited could have been affected by there being a number of professionals present. He noted a scheme that has been explored by Leicester Council where Councillors are matched with individual looked after children and remotely shadow their progress. All information is anonymised and Councillors never meet looked after children in person. However, this remote shadowing is used to give Councillors a much better understanding of the issues faced by looked after children and the services supporting them.

Members welcomed the Councillor's update and he reported how much he is enjoying undertaking the review.

10 SCRUTINY TOPIC SUGGESTIONS (Agenda Item 10)

RESOLVED: for the Department's EHCP performance to be subject to a deep dive at the Panel's June meeting.

The Chair thanked officers and Panel members for their hard work and support during the year whilst Panel members thank the Chair for all his efforts.

11 CARE LEAVERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE ACCOMMODATION (Agenda Item 11)

Steve Langley, Head of Housing Need and Strategy, introduced the item based on the information available in the officer's report and highlighted the following:

- There are limited vacancies available for Merton's care leavers. Fifteen are allocated every calendar year. Nominations are made by the Children, Schools and Families Department based on its assessment of readiness for independent living. Nineteen young people have been nominated so far this year with 15 placements already successful filled;
- Merton places no 16 – 17 year olds in bed and breakfast accommodation;
- The Community & Housing and Children, Schools & Families Departments are working together daily to provide for young people coming out of care. This provides robustness and challenge;
- A Private Members Bill is currently going through Parliament focused on Homelessness Reduction. This will place additional duties on local housing authorities to provide accommodation for homeless families and young people facing challenges living at home; and

- The challenges currently facing provision of accommodation for care leavers include:
 - A shortage of supply. Officers are currently considering options to maintain alternative arrangements if our access to social housing supply runs out. This includes exploring the role of the private rented sector to provide accommodation for care leavers; and
 - The housing team receives a high number of personal representations but the authority still has the lowest number of homeless households and where reasonable, provides accommodation within borough.

In response to member questions, officers clarified:

- Existing housing provision isn't sufficient given current and growing numbers of care leavers. Housing needs have been mapped across the Children, Schools and Families Department and the probation service. This has highlighted the need to work with the Community & Housing Department and *futureMerton* to explore how to generate supply including options such as reconfiguring existing stock and larger shared accommodation;
- Acknowledged that housing provision for care leavers is now all taken for this calendar year and that there are four young people currently awaiting a housing offer in alternative provision; and
- Whilst there is acceptance of needing to look at a wider range of housing options, including private rented, it was emphasised that the housing offer must reflect the needs of individual young people. The over-representation of mental health issues, youth offending and homelessness amongst the care leaver population was highlighted.

Councillor Neil reported that he had recently met with the *Children in Care Council* and had discussed accommodation. It had been suggested to him by a care leaver that part of the Council's support for progression into independence should be to facilitate a savings scheme during semi-independent living. This could be used to provide budgeting experience and build up a financial buffer to allow a step into the private rented sector. **Action:** Paul Angeli noted this for discussion at the Corporate Parenting Panel.

RESOLVED: For the Panel to consider accommodation for care leavers in partnership with the Sustainable Communities Panel supported by officers from the Children, Schools & Families, Community & Housing and Environment & Regeneration Departments either as a deep dive session at a Panel meeting or through a task group. Panel members also thanked officers for their support of this item.