

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 6th November 2013

Agenda item: 6

Wards: All

Subject: Looked After Children – Progress Update

Lead officer: Paul Angeli, Head of Children's Social Care & Youth Inclusion

Lead member: Councillor Maxi Martin

Contact officer: Paul Angeli, Head of Children's Social Care & Youth Inclusion

Recommendations:

- A. That members consider and comment on the developments in the provision for Looked After Children in the Borough.
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Executive Summary

This item is intended to assist Panel in its scrutiny of the effectiveness of arrangements for Looked After Children in Merton.

2. DETAILS

2.1 Looked after children

2.2 The numbers of looked after children has increased from 129 in March 2012 to 165 in March 2013 .This rise has been driven primarily by a greater number of 16 and 17 year old children started to be looked after than in previous years (65% increase on 2012). Gender distributions are similar to the national averages. Merton has lower rates of LAC across age groups 0-9 years than the national rate, but higher rates of older children in care compared to the national figures (based on 2012 data).

2.3 Since the end of March we have continued to see a rise in the number of looked after children and the figure currently stands at 165 (August 2013). Of the 165 Looked after children 38 are aged 5 or under. All 38 children have appropriate care plans in place to ensure that there is no delay in achieving permanence either within or outside of their family.

2.4 There are 42 looked after children in the age cohort 6-13. The majority of these (18 children) are in permanent placements (Care Order). 9 are on

- Interim Care Order's with care proceedings on-going and 7 are accommodated under S20 arrangements.
- 2.5 38% of the current LAC population in Merton are aged 16 and 17 years. Of the 165 looked after children 33 are aged 16 and 29 are aged 17. The young people who are accommodated aged 16 and 17 years are in the majority accommodated under Southwark arrangements (i.e. they present as children in need due to being homeless) or are unaccompanied asylum seekers (Merton is currently part of Pan London rota system which seeks to ensure that the responsibility for UASC is managed across all Borough's).
- 2.6 The area of challenge for Merton at this time is the older cohort of young people who are accommodated on an emergency basis. Work is currently being undertaken to consider the commissioning of a preventative service to work with young people who are on the edge of care
- 2.7 Adoption and Permanency Improvement Plan Update**
- 2.8 The Government has been clear in its drive to improve services and outcomes for Looked after children in all types of permanence care, with revised statutory guidance that clearly sets out the need to address the problem of delays within the adoption system. Merton shares this ambition and commitment which was endorsed in a motion to full Council.
- 2.9 The agency's adoption service was inspected in January 2013. Ofsted found that overall the adoption agency provides an effective service to all affected by adoption and the overall outcome was Good. The report highlighted many areas of good practice;
- the lifelong implications of adoption are fully understood and people's needs are catered for, whatever their age. Adoption is viewed as a positive option for all children needing permanency, whatever their needs of characteristics'.*
- 2.10 Local authorities need to start permanence planning for children at the earliest opportunity. In Merton the process from the day that they enter the care of the local authority is now tracked by senior managers on a monthly basis to ensure that practice processes are followed in line with expected timescales and delays for individual children are minimised.
- 2.11 We also believe that wherever we have decided that adoption is the plan for a child, we should aim to place the child as early as possible with the carers who are likely to become their adoptive parents. Options open to local authorities are concurrency placements (ideally for use with infants) and fostering to adopt. Merton currently has 1 child placed in a fostering to adopt placement.
- 2.12 In order to ensure that adopters are progressed through the assessment process in a timely manner changes have been made to the structure of the assessment. The assessment will now be in 2 stages and will be completed

- in 6 months. There will be a fast track process for those who have adopted before, or who are already approved foster-carers who wish to adopt a child in their care. In Merton the Service Manager LAC, Permanence and Placements is tracking the progress of all adopter assessments to ensure that timescales are met.
- 2.13 In 2012/13 the London Borough Merton had 5 children who had adoption orders made. Of these 5 children 2 took longer than the average time to be matched for adoption once the court had formally decided that adoption was the best option. 2 children did fall outside of the target timescale but they were not significantly delayed (one took an additional 56 days, and the other an additional 32 days) despite both children having additional needs which needed to be catered for in any match.
- 2.14 Despite the challenges of small cohorts and complex cases our position within the national Adoption Scorecard shows a continued improvement over the measured three year rolling average. The 'A1' indicator (average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted (days), shows improvement. For 2010-2013 Merton's A1 performance was 684 days, the national average for 2009-2012 was 636 days.
- 2.15 As of 31 September 2013 there were 5 children with placement orders, all of whom are placed for adoption. The adopters are being supported to make applications for adoption orders at the earliest opportunity. 2 children have had adoption orders made in the year to date.
- 2.16 To ensure that the improvement journey is a continuous one the Adoption Action Plan has been reviewed and updated to reflect the increased need for scrutiny and management oversight to secure timely outcomes for children who have a plan for permanence.
- 2.17 **Fostering Update**
- 2.18 In Merton the tasks of recruitment and assessment of foster carers and the supervision and support of carers is divided between the Access to Resources Team (ART) and the Fostering Supervision Team. The Fostering Service was inspected by Ofsted in November 2012, the overall judgment of the service as "Good". The report highlighted that
'Children and young people are able to make good progress in relation to their starting points across all aspects of their care and effective arrangements are in place to support this. Children and young people have positive views about their care and their relationships with foster carers'
- 2.19 **Fostering Service**

- 2.20 In the year 2012-13 the Access to Resources Team completed 11 successful assessments and at the end of March 2013 53 children were placed with in house carers. This number had risen to 62 by the end of July 2013. This is a reflection of the significant amount of recruitment work that has been undertaken by the Access to Resources Team.
- 2.21 The current challenge for the fostering service is to meet the demand for foster placements resulting from the increase in our looked after child population. Analysis of this population has identified a need to target recruitment of carers who are committed to providing accommodation to teenagers who are at increased risk due to gang affiliation and sexual exploitation. The Merton Sufficiency Strategy is currently being updated to reflect the change in demand and to reflect the focus on targeted recruitment.
- 2.22 Merton is part of the South West London Commissioning Group, and this consortium has produced a preferred provider list for local residential units and for independent fostering agencies achieving cost effective pricing for such placements.
- 2.23 Retention of foster carers also remains good based on a strategy of good quality support, including out of hours, a competitive allowance scheme and a varied training programme. Foster carer satisfaction with the service appears to be high. In an independent survey conducted as part of the inspection process, 90% of foster carers said they were pleased with the service being delivered.
- 2.24 The Supervision Team have been keen to develop a learning culture within the service and as a result of this a focus has been placed on reviewing the attendance of carers at training and to improve our understanding of the impact of the training offered. In line with the Fostering National Minimum Standards requirements a quarterly report is produced by the fostering service and this will now incorporate feedback in respect of the training programme.
- 2.25 Wherever possible Merton is committed to placing children and young people with family and friends carers. Connected persons assessments are undertaken by the Access to Resources Team and on-going support is provided by the supervision social workers. In 2012 ART and the central social work teams attended training on the assessment and support of Connected Persons (Friends and Family foster carers) organised by BAAF (British Agency for Adoption and Fostering) to increasing the understanding of the legislation and the department's responsibilities to those families.
- 2.26 **Care Leavers**
- 2.27 60% of our care leavers were in education, employment or training. This is a 10% decrease from 2012 and will be an area of significant focus for the 14+ team who will be working closely with the My Futures/Education Training Employment Team to improve aspirations and outcomes in 2013-14. The 14+ team are currently looking to develop 2 apprenticeship

opportunities to support the participation work being undertaken with looked after children and these apprenticeships will be ring fenced for the care leaver population.

2.28 85% of our care leavers were deemed as living in appropriate accommodation which is a decrease of 3% from our 2012 performance. Over the summer the 14+ team have run independence workshops to assist in sustaining tenancies, and discussion with housing providers are on-going.

2.29 10% of young people aged 19 (who were LAC at 16) were in higher education (this compares well to our statistical neighbours based on 2012 data).

2.30 Health

2.31 The physical and emotional health and well being of children and young people in care has been shown to be worse than that of peers living with birth families. As Corporate Parents of children in care, local authorities have a statutory obligation to maintain a focus on their health and ensure it is regularly assessed.

2.32 All looked after children are referred for regular health assessments. In Merton there has been a year on year improvement of the health of looked after children since 2009 with 98% of children who had been looked after for 12 months or more receiving the Annual Health Assessment within timescale and 99% having a dental check.

2.33 In the year 2012-13 9 young people were identified as having a substance misuse problem during the year, 2 young people received an intervention for their substance misuse problem and 7 young people who were offered an intervention but refused it. The challenge for Merton will be to better understand why young people who are engaging with the health assessment are not going on to engage with the substance misuse service.

2.34 Merton has seen a 45.8% reduction in its under-18 conception rate throughout the time period of the Government's teenage pregnancy strategy. In 1998 the borough had a rate of 51.0 teenage conceptions per 1,000 females aged 15-17 year olds compared to 27.6 in 2011. Merton's LAC nurse based in the 14+ team identify those within the care system who are most at risk of teenage pregnancy through providing intensive support whilst they are in the care system and properly supported once they leave. The 'Check it Out' young people's sexual health service also offer joint home visits with the LAC Nurse or Social Worker to young people to discuss contraception and sexual health concerns and encourage the young people to visit the local 'Check it Out' clinics that provide specialist sexual health advice aimed at young people.

2.35 Education

2.36 In 2012-13 there were 9 looked after children in year 11, and of these 8 children (89%) sat at least one GCSE. The following educational outcomes were achieved:

- 89% of LAC in year 11 obtained 1 GCSE A*-G
- 67% of LAC in year 11 obtained 5+ GCSE's A*-G
- 44% of LAC in year 11 obtained 5+ GCSE's A*-C
- 22% of LAC in year 11 obtained 5+ GCSE's A*-C including English and Maths

2.37 60% of our care leavers were in education, employment or training. This is a 10% decrease from 2012 and will be an area of significant focus for the 14+ team who will be working closely with the ETE Team to improve aspirations and outcomes in 2013-14.

2.38 34% of looked after young people aged 10-15 cohort had a statement of SEN, which rose to 35% at age 16+, on a par and exceeding the national average. Whilst for those in the 0-9 cohort the percentage of children with a statement of SEN was lower than the national average.

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

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

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