

Committee: Children and Young People's Scrutiny

Date: 26 June 2019

Wards: All

Subject: Key Challenges and Issues for the Coming Year – Director of Children's Services

Lead officer: Rachael Wardell

Lead member: Cllr Kelly Braund, Cllr Eleanor Stringer

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Recommendations:

- A. To note the Key Challenges and Issues for the Coming Year for the Children, Schools and Families Directorate, from the perspective of the Director of Children's Services.
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. Because the Director is unable to be present for this first scrutiny meeting of the municipal year, the usual verbal account of the key challenges and issues is replaced by this short report.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1. Key challenges and issues for the coming year (2019/20) for the Children, Schools and Families Directorate are:
- 2.1.1 *Hearing children and young people's voice.* We are serious about placing children at the heart of what we do. We will build on our existing children and young people's voice mechanisms to increase the participation of young people in our organisational structures. We are re-designing our Corporate Parenting Board to increase young people's involvement; we will be repeating our successful use of young people's scrutiny, we will be making better use of Symphony – our children in care council, the Youth Parliament and our young inspectors and young advisers. We will also be appointing a young scrutineer to our Safeguarding Partnership (see below).
- 2.1.2 *Keeping Merton's children safe.* In particular, this means ensuring that our Early Help services meet families' needs; that MASH and First Response teams respond promptly and appropriately to contacts and referrals; that assessments are carried out in a timely way and that planning for children in need of help or protection is child- and family-centred, SMART, and makes a positive difference in their lives. Where children can no longer safely remain at home, we must make suitable alternative arrangements for them, prioritising keeping them with their extended family where possible, and if not, placing them within families (foster care) and in borough as a priority, making use of out of borough and residential care only as a last resort, unless this is required as part of a plan to meet the child's specific needs. We must also respond to risks that children and young people face outside

the home, including the increasing threat of serious youth violence, using our opportunity as part of the 'Contextual Safeguarding' expansion to develop our practice in this area. Finally, some of the most vulnerable young people in Merton arrive from overseas as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Our objective will be to ensure that those young people are looked after as 'Merton children' with access to the same care and support to meet their needs as children who have grown up here.

2.1.3 *Closing the gap in outcomes for Merton's more vulnerable children.* Where children are 'in need' (CIN), have a child protection plan (CP), are in our care (LAC), have an education, health and care plan (EHCP) or are more likely to have poor outcomes for any other reason, we must strive to improve their life chances by addressing their educational, health, social and other wellbeing needs. This will include through the provision of support directly to children, young people or their families, and also through support to early years' settings, schools and other partners to help them to take appropriate steps to improve children's outcomes. Our objective will be for these children to do at least as well, across all domains of wellbeing, as their more advantaged peers.

2.1.4 *Developing our practice.* We have a well-established practice model for our social work which includes a systemic culture, 'Signs of Safety' approach and a set of key skills to uphold these ways of working. We will be seeking to embed this more deeply in the social work service and more broadly across all the domains of our work, including early help, so that children, young people and families receive a consistent, family centred response from all our services and practitioners.

2.1.5 *Managing within our budget.* We will seek to achieve our objectives while spending within, or close to, our allocated budget. This is challenging because the growth in funding to the directorate is less each year than the growth in demand, and many new pressures are unfunded. At the end of 2018/19, Children, Schools and Families was overspent both in the general fund and in the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). For the DSG this overspend was significant enough for Merton to be required to provide a 'recovery plan' to the Department for Education. During the course of this year, the department is required to deliver a savings programme of £572k. At the same time, the grant funding to our Transforming Families Programme will be coming to an end. We will be incorporating the work of our Transforming Families service into our early help re-design as part of our strategy to mitigate the impact of this grant cut.

2.1.6 *Adapting to significant staff changes in the directorate.* In March 2019 the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care left Merton to join another local authority. More recently two Heads of Service from Children's Social Care have also left for neighbouring boroughs, and another has a period of maternity leave. Although good appointments have been made to the permanent posts, and a very good acting up arrangement has been established to cover the maternity leave, this is a significant amount of change in a core service in a short period of time. In the Education Service, a new Head of Policy, Planning and Performance has joined us. This is another good appointment, but again leads to some disruption. In parallel, we have been pursuing the establishment of a Regional Adoption Agency

with a number of other south London boroughs. During the course of the year, the adoption service will therefore cease to be part of the directorate. This will lead to a restructure of teams around those service areas that remain. At the same time, a Business Administration redesign will also be implemented across the directorate.

- 2.1.7 *Establishing new systems.* The Children, Schools and Families Directorate continues to embed the MOSAIC system implemented in 2017, with ongoing work to improve performance reporting and also to implement the second phase of the work, which will support our 'Signs of Safety' approach. This year will also see the implementation of an Education Health and Care Plan 'hub' to enable speedier completion of the steps of the EHCP assessment process, and a SEN Case Management System, because this aspect of our work is not covered in the MOSAIC system. In the Youth Justice Team the eCINS system will be implemented.
- 2.1.8 *Responding to changes in legislation policy:* The Merton Safeguarding Board has come to an end, and in accordance with the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and the new Working Together 2018 guidance, we have now implemented a new Safeguarding Partnership, in collaboration with our two statutory partners in the new arrangements, the Metropolitan Police and Merton and Wandsworth CCG. To comply with the new arrangements, we will be appointing a new Independent Person to chair our partnership meetings, an Independent Scrutineer to carry out the scrutiny function required by the legislation, and a Young Scrutineer to work alongside the adult scrutineer with a core purpose of making sure young people's voices are heard throughout our safeguarding arrangements.
- 2.1.9 *Implementing our new Children and Young People's Plan.* Through a process of significant consultation with children and young people and other partners, we have developed a new Children and Young People's Plan, which we hope will be adopted by the Council in September of this year. The ambitious plan covers six domains of children and young people's wellbeing, and will require the Children, Schools and Families directorate not only to make sure the services we deliver to the children and families of Merton are high quality, but also to act as system leaders and champions for children so that our partners and the wider Merton community rise to the challenge of making Merton a great place for children to grow up.
- 2.1.10 *Being 'inspection ready'.* Children's Services are the most heavily inspected area of local government service delivery. In 2019/20 we will be responding to the outcome of our SEND Inspection (which took place between 10 and 14 June 2019), and will also be preparing for an anticipated inspection of our Youth Justice Team, a possible Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) centred on children living with mental health issues (any time from September 2019 onwards) and the full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) which falls due three years after our last inspection under the SIF framework in 2017.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1. None.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

4.1. None.

5 TIMETABLE

5.1. N/a

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. None for the purposes of this report.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1. None for the purposes of this report.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1. None for the purposes of this report.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. None for the purposes of this report.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. None for the purposes of this report.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

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12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1. None.