

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 24th June 2020

Wards: All

Subject: CSF Covid-19 Response

Lead officer: Rachael Wardell, Director of Children, Schools and Families

Lead member: Cllr Eleanor Stringer

Contact officer: Karl Mittelstadt, Head of Performance, Policy and Partnerships

Recommendations:

A. Members of the Commission to discuss and comment on the contents of the report.

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. This report briefly outlines what impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on vulnerable children and their families, and the Children, Schools and Families directorate's response to these issues.
- 1.2. It also provides an update on the arrangements that have been made for wider re-opening of schools (beyond vulnerable children and children of critical workers).

2 DETAILS

Impact of Covid-19 on Children and Families

- 2.1. Although the direct impact of Covid-19 disease appears to increase with age, the indirect impact of the measures taken to combat the disease is significant for children and families, and impacts more significantly on those who are already vulnerable for other reasons.
- 2.2. The majority of children have been out of school since 23 March 2020, many without access to adequate resources to support their home-based learning. Families have lost income as a result of parents being furloughed or losing their employment altogether. More households are applying for universal credit and more children have become eligible for Free School Meals at a time when access to those meals through school has ceased and the alternative measures established to replace meals received in school have not always been reliable, despite schools' best efforts.
- 2.3. Children in already overcrowded housing have been confined for considerable periods of time in cramped spaces without good access to the outdoors for their physical and mental wellbeing. Some children who were already at risk of harm at home may have been more exposed to harm because of the 'lockdown'; others who have never previously needed support from children's social care may be in need, or at risk of harm for the first time, but because all our children are less visible to the wider

community, their situation is less likely to be referred, and where they are referred, there are fewer community resources available to their families to keep them safe at home.

- 2.4. Some children and families have suffered bereavement, in some cases multiple bereavements and there is reduced access to support for families in these circumstances.
- 2.5. Children in our BAME communities are more likely to have experienced both direct and indirect impact of Covid-19 on themselves and their families.

Changes to service delivery in Children, Schools and Families

- 2.6. From 23 March onwards all Children, Schools and Families functions moved largely to home-based working. Although face-to-face visits to families continued to take place, where the risk was such that it was essential to see children in person, the majority of interactions and 'visits' became virtual, using a range of online tools.
- 2.7. A critical operating model (<https://www.mertonscp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CSC-Staff-Guidance-14-4-2020.pdf>) was implemented in children's social care, anticipating that there might be a significant reduction in staff resources and enabling a risk-based focus on those families where children were most likely to come to harm (those on child protection plans). A duty team was established to cover any visits that a family's own allocated social worker could not undertake. In fact, there has been less impact on our staff availability than we had feared, with much lower levels of sickness absence, and the critical operating model is likely to be withdrawn in the near future, with a return to normal operation, save for a continued reliance on increased remote working.
- 2.8. Settings where children and families had been able to come together for support, such as our youth centres in Pollards Hill and Phipps Bridge, Children's Centres across the borough and the Family Centre at Bond Road all ceased to offer any group work because this could not be managed in a way that was compliant with the social distancing requirements at that time. The Civic Centre closed to drop-ins.
- 2.9. Schools continued to be open to the children of critical workers and vulnerable children (those who have an education, health and care plan, those with a social worker or those the school in discussion with the local authority agrees are vulnerable). Health provision continued to be offered by our community health partners on Children's Centre sites, in special schools and elsewhere, and through virtual mechanisms.
- 2.10. Since 1 June, schools have begun to open more widely to other year groups in addition to those vulnerable children and children of critical workers who have been attending throughout this crisis.

Impact on Vulnerable Children

- 2.11. During the period Monday 23 March to Monday 8 June, numbers of vulnerable children (as defined by DfE) have changed as follows:
- 2.12. Children with an EHCP from 1999 to 2061.
- 2.13. Children with a child in need plan from 213 to 313.

- 2.14. Children on a child protection plan from 94 to 106.
- 2.15. Children looked after from 150 to 157.
- 2.16. Throughout this time, both the children of critical workers and vulnerable children have been entitled to attend school. This is both to sustain their education and to provide a measure of safeguarding assurance by making sure children are seen. All Merton schools have been open throughout this period, though some have chosen to operate through 'hub' arrangements in partnership with other nearby schools. Attendance at schools throughout this period has been reported to DfE who have sent back to LB Merton the aggregated data returns. The numbers of children who have attended school has increased steadily throughout this period, albeit with daily fluctuations and with understandable reductions during the periods which would ordinarily be school holidays (Easter, May half term).
- 2.17. In w/c 23 March up to 390 children attended Merton schools, of which the majority (194) were children of critical workers and no more than 78 were recorded as 'vulnerable'. In the week before the May half term, this number had risen to 830+ children at its height, of which 250+ were classed as vulnerable children and 550+ the children of critical workers.

Wider opening of schools

- 2.18. Since 1 June, schools have begun to open more widely to other year groups in addition to those who have been attending throughout this crisis. Children in year groups Nursery, Yr1, Yr2 and Yr6 have been permitted to attend, and encouraged to do so. We have encouraged and supported schools to develop their arrangements, having regard to government guidance and basing their plans on a good understanding of their individual context (including building capacity and staffing availability) and the preferences of their school community. Schools have therefore had a range of reopening arrangements.
- 2.19. In w/c 1 June, up to 2321 children attended Merton schools. In the week that followed, when more schools were open to more year groups, that number had risen to 2837 at its height, including nearly 600 vulnerable children. As schools and parents grow in confidence about the safety of the wider opening, we expect these numbers to continue to grow.
- 2.20. With effect from 15 June, secondary schools have been expected to make arrangements for face-to-face time for their Year 10 and Year 12 cohorts. This is not expected to be a full curriculum offer and schools are restricted to no more than 25% of these year groups in school at any one time. The secondary schools have made individual arrangements that best fit their own school community. At the time of drafting this report we have not yet received data back from DfE about secondary school attendance.
- 2.21. The government originally intended that all primary school children would return to school for about a month before the end of the summer term. However, this has proven to be practically impossible in the light of ongoing social distancing requirements. On 10 June it was announced that this was no longer the ambition. On 15 June, government issued further guidance about these revised expectations
(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-the-wider->

[opening-of-schools-from-1-june/planning-guide-for-primary-schools#inviting-back-additional-pupils-where-there-is-capacity](#)). There will also be government guidance released in due course to support an increased return to school from September onwards.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

3.1. No specific implications for this report.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

4.1. None for this report.

5 TIMETABLE

5.1. N/a for this report.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. None

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1. None

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1. None

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. None

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. None

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

11.1. None

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1. None